The Failed-State Paradigm and Implications for Politics and Practices of International Security

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I. Introduction

From the 1940s to the 1970s, the world witnessed considerable and tumultuous change. This change was, on the one hand, based on the independence realized by the territories that European empires had controlled during the colonial era. On the other hand, just as the struggle against colonial rule ended, new conflicts erupted in many of these newly independent nations. In contrast to the colonial era, after the culmination of the Cold War, which reshaped the world order, the number of newly independent states unable to fulfill their obligations to their citizens increased. Such failures became apparent as states failed to provide a certain level of functions that would ensure both the security and the well-being of their respective populations. Although such crises of statehood are often depicted as mainly internal in nature,[1] their roots and ramifications transcend the intrastate and are often ignored in the literature.

While there was an increase in violence, some scholars attempted to identify the reasons underlying the failure of such states to perform key functions. In doing so, the debate was joined by a body of literature that offered the common assumption that these conflicts usually come under a state's failure.[2] The "failed state" notion became prominent among people in diplomatic, political, and academic circles, as it gradually became rooted in the literature. While in the beginning it concentrated on states within Africa, the label was embraced as an international concern in the aftermath of the "9/11" terror attacks on

the twin towers in New York City. As a result, failed states were seen as a threat to international security since such states could potentially offer a safe haven to terrorist organizations.

Although virtually no one disagrees that the majority of supposed failed states suffer many severe political, security, and socioeconomic challenges, the failed-state thesis has come up short in sufficiently elucidating the development of such obstacles. Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity and much disagreement, often governed by subjective interpretations, in the academic and policy discourse over how to define the concept and when and how it should be used.

This brief essay acts as a beginning critique of the failed-states discourse and thought. The intention is to highlight the problems associated with the current debates. It is not the aim here to present a new approach. The essay will begin with a quick analysis of the theoretical-cum-policy debates underpinning state failure. Thereafter, observation will be made on the apparent growing international security and political interest in the state-failure thesis, with particular reference to the recently emerging pathology of terrorism and its implications for those countries labelled as failed.

II. Failed States

A. Defining Failure

The so-called "failed state" as an approach became prominent at the beginning of the 1990s, in both academic and policy discourses. From this period onward, the work published by Helman and Ratner, entitled *Saving Failed States*, which emerged from a paradox during the Cold War, reflects this.[3] As noted by Pedersen and colleagues, the failed-state concept still continues to enjoy widespread popularity for denoting a situation in which the governmental infrastructure of the state has collapsed to a serious extent.[4] Although there is no single or commonly agreed upon definition of what constitutes a failed state, the prevailing literature indicates a certain consensus among existing definitions. Those nations that are perceived to comprise such a category are viewed as suffering from, or facing the risk of, acute instability. The increasing focus on the failed-state concept revolves around the notion that states currently face certain threats, not solely from other nations, but also from manifold transatlantic threats which stem from states as well as less powerful actors who have their origins in state failure.

Most of the failed-state discourses are centered on the lack of a state's capacity to carry out the basic services for which it is responsible, such as ensuring peace and stability, the rule of law, good governance, effective border control against external threats, and economic growth and sustainability. According to Zartman, state failure goes beyond revolt, coup, or protest. It refers to a situation in which a state's structure, authority, law, and political order have collapsed and need to be reconstituted in some way.[5] Therefore, failure at the state level occurs if various structures, authority, power, laws, and the political order collapse. The political vacuum that occurs after state failure encourages non-state actors to take charge of the different roles of the state, leaving behind the actors (i.e., civil society) that are unable to rebound or fill the vacuum.[6] The concept is associated not only with collapse, but also as a process in which the state fails to meet its responsibilities due to a gradual decline in its capacity. As Rotberg delineates it, the failing and lack of capacity are rooted in the rational choices made by politicians over time.[7]

B. Contradictory Interpretations

The literature focusing on failed states has a number of serious flaws. According to Doornbos, not only does it have too many unclear definitions, but also the perceived causes as well as outcomes of the label seem to be blurred.[8] As stated by Woodward, there are additional complications due to the fact that the state-failure concept attempts to represent the convergence of humanitarian, human rights, development, and security issues, though the label holds different interpretations with regard to these terms.[9] Such problems can perhaps be attributed to the fact that a major part of the existing literature on this issue comes from government-financed research institutions as well as think tanks. In most cases, these entities work separately from academic institutions. As noted by Hameiri, with regard to their interpretation or understanding of this approach, not all these perspectives share common ground, and additionally they seem to be talking over each other.[10]

According to Woodward, a clear definition of this concept is absent, which could open up the possibility to analyze it empirically.[11] The way the term is defined in the literature is not only vague but also offers a range of characteristics as well as assumed consequences. Numerous observers, as well as projects which are to some extent politically ori-

ented within the literature, have focused on formulating indicators that are perceived to be logical and supposed to be broadly shared by failed states. The assumption is that one or more such indicators can be seen in those states. The suggestion is that the label *failed state* is self-evident and applied to particular cases. The condition of one state compared to the next among such states, however diverse they might be, is considered to be evidence of what is left relatively unexplained. As identified by Call, researchers have frequently focused on applying a single solution to states where "symptoms" range from poverty to internal conflict, expecting that such a solution would be able to resolve all problems.[12]

Rotberg has identified various political variables that influence the level of weakness or failure in a state.[13] The main defining characteristic typifying state failure is deeply rooted politicized conflict, which is broadly aimed at the political center or some form of governmental authority. The argument is that prolonged political conflict occurs over a prolonged period of time. Hence, during this period, the state cannot entirely secure its territory and thus conflict becomes the only form of acceptable interaction among and between armed belligerents. Somalia, for instance, has broadly been a continuous theatre of politically orchestrated tensions and conflicts, particularly for the past thirty years.

The different forms of political conflict that have afflicted south Somalia, for example, over the past twenty years are not problems that are unique to the region. Rather, they are a reflection of the wider dimensions of political conflict and the serious obstacles to rehabilitating and reconstructing a brutally battered and fragile state which has repeatedly failed its society.[14] Given that various political and theoretical debates have evidently been closely linked to this concept, it is important to remember at this point that this way of depicting states is politically driven, rather than being objectively and empirically driven.

C. External Actors

The biggest problem with the failed-states thesis is that it completely ignores any external factors that might have contributed to the supposed failure and does not view conflict within these states as conflicts between legitimate factions in the political sphere. Rather, it sees these as turmoil that impartial third-party actors can solve with their poli-

cies. For instance, the constant pressure to rebuild central state institutions has been labelled as perpetuating the "sickness" in countries like Somalia. It is said that such a tendency towards central state-building is a clear result of the myopia induced by the state-failure discourse. There is an inherent aura of finality with regard to "failure." It assumes that a state has reached its nadir and lies at its lowest ebb.[15]

It similarly depicts countries like Somalia as a blank canvas, whereupon new institutions can be imposed because of the absence of existing governance structures. However, current and past situations in countries like Somalia have never been static, as there is a persistent oscillation between worse and better, contrary to what a "failed state" suggests. Likewise, Somalia is not in a state of blankness, but rather of political absence. It has a vibrant communications network. Its people exist within an inter-subjectivity in which society is present.

The problem with the failed-states discourse is that it presents a narrow historical account of the fragility of such states. It does this by concentrating entirely on the state's failure, and hence glosses over the historical processes that may have brought about such failure. According to Gourevitch, these processes include the inheritance from colonial rulers, interventions by powerful states after the Cold War, and the legacy of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in relation to their economic interventions (i.e., the structural adjustment programmes).[16] The failed-states thesis primarily sidelines all external stakeholders and places the responsibility of failure entirely on the shoulders of the domestic environment.

It assumes that the state is completely responsible for its own failure and thus disregards all external entities that may be party responsible. Arguably, this would be misleading, because the idea of assuming the state to be a remote entity that is entirely responsible for what takes place within its borders is very simplistic. Consider the degree of globalization in today's world and how nations are gradually finding themselves entangled in intercontinental structures, which include, among others, foreign economic agents and the aid systems to which they become accountable.[17] In other words, the choices that such states make are not solely finalized by their regimes, but also by a wide range of other transoceanic actors.

Comprehending the external influences by questioning who currently uses the language of failed states and who it actually serves is crucial. The state-failure discourse goes back to the Westphalian ideal of statehood.[18] In other words, as noted by Haldén, it has its roots

in the Global North and has been utilized in Western academic and political discourse in order to influence the affairs of state in the Global South.[19] Since this concept has its roots in Western academic, security, and policy discourses, the language used might be significant when it comes to understanding Western ideas of "failed others" and "successful us." The study *Orientalism*, by Edward Saïd, a pioneering effort in the making of Post-Colonial Studies, suggests that failure could be expanded in order to reinforce the misleading cultural assumptions of the "Western world," facilitating the misrepresentation and distancing of the "oriental other."[20]

As a foundation for policy, the concept might have some serious limitations, specifically due to the fact that it reflects the interests of those who adopt it. Such interests may conflict with the interests of those to whom it refers.[21] Certainly, exclusive locally based connotations of responsibility exonerate Western countries, multinational organizations, and the international financial institutions they control, with regard to whatever actions these actors may have carried out that contributed to the so-called failure by the state concerned. Likewise, such actors do not face the prospect of intrusive policy institutions that strive to stop whatever policies they may prosecute that could lead to state collapse.

The failed-states thesis has much to do with expectations based on modern statehood and the various functions that a state is expected to fulfill.[22] While these scholars are right to identify the ideological facets related to the representation of state failure, the problem with their interpretation is that they fail to recognize that the expectations or functions have in fact changed dramatically over time, consistent with the role of the state, which has changed in the context of international economy and security. The failed-state literature is flawed simply because it usually paints an image of a state that has apparently failed in a uniform fashion,[23] as such failure will be extremely uneven in a state the size of Somalia. In spite of the fragility of this state, political conflict in the south-central part of the country means something completely different compared to the northern part, Somaliland. Hence, the levels or degrees of violence are very different. Furthermore, those who are responsible for such violence, and their motives, are also different.

According to Coyne and Leeson, the collapse of governments, such as the one in Somalia, are not only the result of how poorly they were designed and run, but also due to the fact that existing informal insti-

tutions, known in Somalia as "*Xeer*," have been at odds with the formal institutions that were adopted.[24] The consequence became an inherent dysfunction across a wide arc of governance. This amplifies the reasons why there have been unsuccessful interventions carried out by foreign powers to create new formal institutions with a central government.

III. Security and Political Implications

A. The Politics/Security Nature of Failed States

At the core, intellectual penury is linguistic in nature. The propensity of traditional policymakers is to separate politics from security, thus depriving themselves of the vocabulary needed to analyze the terms and the problems faced. The consequences are flawed assumptions: that conflict has taken a considerable leap into anarchy and that the source of the supposed threats come from tates that are labelled failed. These breed confusion over operational and strategic concepts. The idea that conflicts in today's world are profoundly more complex and dangerous has been frequently echoed by international security experts and has become received wisdom.[25] Thus, it is hard to reject the claim that decisive change has occurred.

For instance, the growth of globalization, urbanization, technological improvement, the increase of global threats, and the empowerment of non-state actors are certainly complex issues that have changed the international policy and security environments.[26] It is befitting and just that many policymakers and researchers have labored to conceptualize changes in the international system and their implications for international security. However, though the world has become more complex, violence and uncertainties have at all times been significant features of the subjective often associated with the failed-state paradigm.

In the United States, the international security policy of 2002 seems to indicate two differing security conditions, which developed along with the ever-expanding issue of globalization since the culmination of the Cold War. The 2002 policy of the U.S. in relation to international security states that the attacks carried out by terrorist groups prompted the U.S. to focus sharply on its position as the only world superpower, the threats from extremists, and the simmering violence that has erupted since the peaceful end to the Cold War.[27]

The view that weak or failing states are a key threat in today's world indicates an ideational shift in the development of threats in two ways.

First, it identifies a change in terms of what is seen as an international security threat. From a realist perspective, states gain security from striking a balance with other more powerful ones, just as America did during the Cold War and European states did prior to World War I. According to Sørensen, for a powerful state to view a weak state as a threat to its security is vague in terms of a realist view.[28] Hence, the diminishment of security dilemmas has led insecurity dilemmas to become the new core concern. As stated by Manjikian, this can be observed in the institutionalization of so-called failing states.[29] Terrorism or extremism is diagnosed as a mental disorder, in which failed states are the bodies and the U.S. is the cure.

Therefore, states whose condition is deteriorating have no sovereignty as they are not part of the decision-making process, just as patients do not make their own diagnosis or prescribe their own medication. Such top-down (often expressed through medical analogy) approaches often ignore the target beneficiaries' real needs and the absence of ownership, which is crucial for the long-term stability of these countries. Second, broader change comes from the fact that the threat from failed states does not derive from the government or political leaders, but rather from actors who operate freely within such states.[30]

These non-state actors are not included in the classical theories of International Relations. The threats from failed states do not mean an end to the differences among domestic and international affairs that have been significant since the Peace of Westphalia and the idea of sovereignty. From a Westphalian perspective, a threat is perceived from a state-centric military standpoint. Internationally, security respects territorial sovereignty as well as the integrity of legitimately independent and supposedly equal nation-states—a milieu characterized by cooperation and conflicts among such nations in an anarchic environment.[31] This may perhaps reflect the pluralist norms of interactions in diplomatic and multilateral terms. In spite of the differences in interpretation among, for instance, liberal and realist visionaries of the international system, the way in which threats to security have been perceived and tackled has largely relied on such statist, pluralist ontology. In today's world, the idea that international security risks stem from failed states is widely adopted. Numerous researchers and political observers have focused on the risks that are inherent in such states. In accordance with such arguments, from a conventional Westphalian perspective of international security, threats arise from powerful aggressive states.

B. The Securitization of the Ungoverned: An Interventionist Mechanism

There is a strong belief that the label *failed state* is used primarily to legitimize potential military and other interventions, which largely benefit those who are doing the intervening. Today, the new ideological feature of "humanitarian intervention" has had an impact on international relations theory. Even staunch pacifists who are not in favor of foreign interventions often support such activities, with the caveat that all forces applied are humanitarian in their focus.[32] Apparently, in this post-Cold War period, world powers make use of their military force not as an expression of realpolitik, but as a technology to reinstate good governance, eradicate famine, and safeguard vulnerable communities.[33]

Human security presently requires comprehension of a global environment in which the strategic concern of states in the Global North have been overlaid with more diffuse threats that are linked to the collapse and insurgency stemming from the marginalized people of the Global South.[34] The possibility for people in the northern hemisphere to enjoy their lives is no longer exclusively a local matter since becoming part of the international political agenda. Securing life for citizens, for their benefit, has in recent times become an objective of policy interest. Human security, in this context, appears to require an enlightened perspective which expands security concerns outside the state-to-state war to include such threats to life as pandemics, displacement, and pollution.[35]

Despite this, the grounds on which there is intervention in the affairs of so-called failed states is often based on the pretext that their lawless condition threatens international security. As stated by Akpinarli, this label has been adopted and developed by external actors, presumably to fix the problems of these countries.[36] Hence, such actors advocate and justify military intervention in order to safeguard the supposed security.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the failed-state label actually brings more problems than it fixes—not only with regard to military intervention but also by keeping such states on the margins of international relationships. In fact, it is not misleading to suggest that the term *failed state* is a clear case of what is called *securitization, which is based on the assumptions of the* Copenhagen School of Security. As stated by Buzan and colleagues, those who developed this approach suggest

that a discourse that adopts a way of offering something to deal with an existential threat to the referent object does not produce securitization.[37] They state that an issue is securitized if, and only if, the audience, who are the ordinary citizens in the North, accept the label of *failed state*. In this instance, the mainstream media and large corporations who work with, in, or for failed states act as agents for securitizing actors.

1. Failed States and Terrorism Nexus

According to authors such as Helman and Ratner[38] and Raeymakers,[39] the strategic impact of a failed state has shifted from being a local to an international threat. The United States sees such a state as a real security threat. A proliferation of weapons of mass destructions, expansion of networks used by criminals, along with those offering a safe haven to terror groups,[40] creates a source of serious threats. The result is that spheres of international security have become entwined and political policies are constructed to implement security policy. This securitization of failed states has come under growing criticism since the assumption that failed states breed extremism is disputed. Thus, the situation is deemed not as simple as construed by policy gurus and general assumptions by Western powers. On the other hand, traditionalists claim that the term *security* has gradually become stretched too far by including all political matters, in the process becoming devoid of all meaning and analytical significance through indiscriminate application.[41]

The observation that failed states pose a threat to international security is an eminently reasonable one; however, this must be qualified by the secondary observation that failed states in themselves do not necessarily generate threats. Connecting the concept to extremism is easy to do as it clusters all such states together and puts them under the failed-states discourse umbrella.[42] Therefore, the association between state weakness or failure with international terrorism is very complex and more tenuous than is generally assumed. The idea that all the states that have been labelled as failures are characterized and afflicted by terrorism is unsubstantiated. In fact, the majority of states dubbed as the least developed by the United Nations do not have any terrorism activities.[43]

Current challenges relating to insurgents and terrorism have also broken the carefully constructed, but unsustainable, binary between

international security and politics. It is tempting to assign this cognitive dissonance to the maxim that insurgence and terror are prodigious and political forms of warfare.[44] However, this often-held perception ignores the immensely political character of conventional engagements. It might be more accurate to suggest that conflicts against non-state powers put the political dimensions of conflicts into a clearer perspective, and in doing so reveal some of the flaws of the techno-scientific rationale. Due to the underdevelopment of political vocabulary, the main emphasis is on the capabilities and crimes of international terrorist and insurgent groups, but little on their goals, beliefs, strategic cultures, and motives.[45] Although capabilities are significant, the aims and motives determine the contexts in which they are called upon. For example, the consensus about states labelled as failed is confined to the observation that terror groups occupy ungoverned regions and use them to plan their attacks.

But none of the powerful countries, especially the United States, have the resources to project power into every ungoverned region. In fact, doing so would not be effective in an environment in which such groups can successfully plan and organize attacks while living in orderly, Western, urban environments.[46] The fact is that many such terrorist acts are internal in nature, driven by grievances stemming from political or national struggles. A clear example of this is Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers.[47] As Bilgin and Morton state, the state-failure discourse permits particular political agendas that only help the political and security benefits of the ones who use it. Hence, the label *failed state*, and the discourses related to it, is not neutral but developed by certain governments to forward their own political agendas. Furthermore, researchers like Von Hippel have suggested that some states that come under this label will be deemed to be Orwell's *Animal Farm*.[48] For instance, if authoritarian regimes maintain their grip over the mechanisms of their states, they will not fail. An example of this is perhaps Saudi Arabia. Other cases, such as Pakistan, do however attract terrorism, as stated by Patrick, who suggests that the failed-state discourse is specifically applied to states that powerful Northern governments think should be labelled in this way.[49] The results of categorizing some states as failed can currently be seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. However, such labelling is itself not always accurate. But this inaccuracy can allow those Northern powers to justify a democratization drive in the guise of humanitarian interventions and countering and preventing terror. According to Patrick, the democratic peace concept

is promoted by those who justify democratization in the context of the so-called war on terror.[50] Others, such as Logan and Preble, consider that states in the Global North, particularly the United States, often arbitrarily link terrorist actions to a very broad and generalized definition of state failure so as to justify the war on terror.[51]

Empirical data on failed states are said to have shown that state failure rarely translates into a security threat to the international community. Hence, this is the reason why some have suggested that states in the North are guilty of "strategic overkill" in terms of the way the international security threat arising from failed states is exaggerated. This strategic overkill depends on a generalized definition of failed states instead of an in-depth assessment of the unique dynamics based on politics, culture, and economics that exist in such environments.[52] Nevertheless, it would be wrong to suggest that theorists on this issue are entirely responsible for the obvious ideological misuse of this analytical implementation by Northern politicians, just as it would be unreasonable to hold Karl Marx's ideas responsible for the wrongdoing of Joseph Stalin. However, in spite of this, many conceptual weaknesses have been recognized by critics of the failed-states framework.

IV. Concluding Remarks

This article has briefly pointed out some of the complexities of the failed-state paradigm and the diverse debates surrounding its use in the academic, political, policy, and security spheres. The article affirms that states labelled as failed display a number of pathologies which have a major detrimental effect on the well-being of their peoples and on international security. Despite this, the securitization of failed states in political as well as academic discourse depicts a subjectively Western-driven development of international security. This has a range of consequences for political security. In contradistinction, this article identifies an important difference between the notion of a failed state, as epitomized in political and academic discourses, and the realities of state failure, which are wildly disputed. Thus, the subjective interpretation and construction of a threat and a challenge can and does have a significant material impact on funding, over legitimacy of the conversation, diplomatic focus, and, most probably, even military intervention.

The securitization of such states strengthens the tendency to externalize threats in the southern hemisphere or even to demonize the

Global South as an excuse for domination and intervention. The result here is a lack of understanding and respect for the difficulties and problems existing elsewhere. Furthermore, there is a failure to appreciate the idea that such obstacles are to an extent the result of pathologies intrinsic to the international system.

That is not to say that the label of failed state, with all its complexities and problems, should be abandoned. Given that this approach has gained in popularity over the years, it suggests a genuine need to contemplate more deeply the nature of international political and security issues. Researchers who focus on security policy should re-evaluate and question some of the fundamental assumptions of their work with regard to the forces as well as the ontologies of politics and security from an international perspective. A critical approach to defining and measuring such states is required. Conventional methods have to develop and become more nuanced and distinguished in their understanding of such states so as to establish a more credible and less politically prejudiced empirical examination as part of this approach.

Consecutively, conceptually critical concepts that seem to disapprove of this approach out of hand, as an ambiguous hegemonic method, should attempt to engage more with this approach and make more of an effort to go beyond the failure-or-success binary thinking that is suggested by the failed-state approach. Collectively, more innovative concepts may assist in broadening the understanding of the nature of international security and politics, and possibly help to create policies that address the epochal obstacles faced by the most brittle states.

Notes

1. Copson 1994; Zartman 1995.

2. Brooks 2005.

3. Helman and Ratner, *Saving Failed States* 1992.

4. Pedersen et al. 2008.

5. Zartman 1995.

6. Lyons and Samatar 1995.

7. Rotberg 2003.

8. Doornbos 2002.

9. Woodward 2004.

10. Hameiri 2007.

11. Woodward 2004.

12. Call 2006.

13. Rotberg 2003.

14. Bilgin and Morton 2002.

15. Gourevitch 2005; Rotberg 2003; Woodward 2006.

16. Gourevitch 2005.

17. Sen 2008.

18. Newman 2009.

19. Haldén 2008.

20. Saïd 1978.

21. Gourevitch 2005.

22. Milliken 2003.

23. Jayasuriya 2005.

24. Coyne and Leeson 2010.

25. Hollander 2009.

26. Stephen and Pascual 2005.

27. Wyler 2008.

28. Sørensen 2007.

29. Manjikian 2008.

30. Kabutaulaka 2004.

31. Newman 2009.

32. Gibb 2002.

33. Ibid.

34. Duffield 2007.

35. Ibid.

36. Akpinarli 2009.

37. Buzan et al. 1998.

38. Helman and Ratner 1992.

39. Raeymakers 2005.

40. Zakaria 2010.

41. Duffield and Waddell 2006.

42. Logan and Preble 2006.

43. Patrick 2006.

44. Abrahms 2008.

45. Lisanti 2010.

46. Piazza 2008.

47. Patrick 2006.

48. Von Hippel 2002.

49. Patrick 2006.

50. Ibid.

51. Logan and Preble 2006.

52. Piazza 2006; 2008.

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