Human Rights & Human Welfare

Volume 11
Issue 7 *August Roundtable: Re-Thinking State Failure and Human Rights*
Article 4

8-1-2011

Immobilizing Conceptual Debates

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Abstract

In “Think Again: Failed States,” James Traub argues that “state failure” is a failed concept. Prioritizing efforts to prevent or address state fragility, weakness, or failure may seem impractical given the conceptual breadth of this systemic challenge. Like globalization, human security, or climate change, state failure contains so many aspects that it becomes analytically useless. But the need to rethink this garbage-can concept—everything can be thrown in—does not keep us from addressing the litany of well-understood challenges subsumed within.

Keywords

Human rights, Failed states, Policy, Causation, Security, Foreign policy

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In "Think Again: Failed States," James Traub argues that "state failure" is a failed concept. Prioritizing efforts to prevent or address state fragility, weakness, or failure may seem impractical given the conceptual breadth of this systemic challenge. Like globalization, human security, or climate change, state failure contains so many aspects that it becomes analytically useless. But the need to rethink this garbage-can concept—everything can be thrown in—does not keep us from addressing the litany of well-understood challenges subsumed within.

Rankings like the Fund for Peace's Failed States Index or the State Fragility Index, developed by Monty Marshall and Jack Goldstone, incorporate dozens of variables at the root of state failure, including illegitimate or abusive state authorities, economic decline, and the lacking provision of public goods. Despite its widespread use, the state failure concept has been widely criticized. Using the state failure label assumes the previous existence of a functioning state, an ideal image usually based on Western notions of a polity. According to Charles Call, the indicators of failed states are so broad that it becomes an unhelpful definition. For those reasons, Adam Merriam is convinced "there are perilous traps for policymakers if they base decisions within the failed state paradigm." Both Traub and Merriam imply that conceptual homogeneity necessarily leads to monolithical policy approaches. I am not convinced that the Obama administration adopts a one-size-fits-all policy towards Haiti, Somalia, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), the same way it is capable of developing distinct approaches to address desertification, Arctic shrinkage, ozone depletion, or other manifestations of climate change.

Stewart Patrick tries to disentangle state failure by distinguishing between weak and anarchic states, arguing more stable states may pose greater risks to US security than anarchic ones. More useful, I find, is a categorical divide Traub describes, between those weak regimes *unable* to comply with their part of the social contract, and those repressive "weak states" *unwilling* to improve their provision of basic services, despite their ability to do so. The former group is receptive to external assistance complementing its meager capacity, whereas in the latter category,the regime is the key source of the problem. As Traub notes, "Somali violence is a symptom of state failure; Sudanese violence is a consequence of state policy." Evidently, all these distinct states require different policy approaches. But this conceptual clustering does not obstruct the formulation of a multifaceted strategy to counter the diverse challenges fragile states pose.

Since those states labeled "fragile," "failing," or "failed" are generally more prone to conflict, and since the prevention of violent conflict is widely considered a strategic priority for the United States, it seems opportune to develop a comprehensive policy aimed at preventing or addressing state failure. This policy would support effective governance, stimulate equitable economic growth, promote social well-being, and work towards other structural prevention objectives. Addressing state failure is not only in the national interest of the United States, but also a moral imperative that supports the very core value system the US government claims to uphold.

Jonas Claes is program specialist at the U.S. Institute of Peace's Center for Conflict Management, where he conducts research on conflict prevention, the Responsibility to Protect, and security issues in Central Asia. Claes is also co-author of a book chapter entitled 'Leadership and R2P: From Principle to Practice' in the forthcoming Routledge Handbook on 'The Responsibility to Protect', and a chapter on "Responsibility to Protect and Peacemaking" in a Praeger Volume on "Peacemaking: From Practice to Theory". He holds an M.A. in Security Studies from Georgetown University, an M.A. in International Relations from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (Belgium).