



## Failing and Failed States The Global Discourse

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*America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones... weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states.*

- The US National Security Strategy, 2002

While the discourse on failed states has been around since the end of the Cold War, it gathered momentum after the events of 9/11, in the aftermath of which the US identified states like Afghanistan and Somalia as potential terrorist havens that it believed would be used to train, arm, and attack the developed world – a fear reflected in its 2002 and 2006 National Security Strategy.

If the latest 'Failed States Index', brought out jointly by the US think tank Fund for Peace and Foreign Policy magazine is to be believed; sub-Saharan Africa, Central Asia, parts of Latin America, and almost the whole of South Asia are becoming severely unstable due to these 'failed' or 'failing' states. The 2008 index ranks countries in terms of the most to the least vulnerable/failing states. Of the 177 countries ranked, five from the South Asian region, namely, Pakistan (9th), Bangladesh and Myanmar (12th), Nepal (23rd), and Sri Lanka (20th), have been placed in the top 25. Bhutan, Maldives, and India seem to have 'fared better' than their regional neighbours gaining the 50th, 67th and 98th positions respectively; although India's position has worsened since 2007, when it ranked 110th.

While the first murmurs about these so-called failed states began to be heard around the time of the Clinton administration, this notion was popularized by Robert Kaplan's influential 1994 article *The Coming Anarchy* which sought to warn Western governments of the impending

'threats' to global security from the 'regressive' developments in West Africa and most of the developing world – "the withering away of central governments, the rise of tribal and regional domains, the unchecked spread of disease, and the growing pervasiveness of war."

This brief attempts to provide an overview of the global discourse on failed states, and its critique, which has emanated within the 'Third World'.

### I DEFINING FAILED STATES

Euphemistically called failing, fragile, weak, quasi, or crisis states, these are states whose governments are believed to have weakened to such an extent that they are unable to provide basic public goods like territorial control, education and healthcare, and legitimate institutions to their people. Most accounts of failed states center on the 'erosion of state capacity' or their inability to perform the basic functions of state responsibility like ensuring peace and stability, effective governance, territorial control, and economic sustainability (Wyler: 3).

The conception of the state is central to understanding 'state failure'. This is because the discourse on failed states largely rests on the idea of 'statehood'; it juxtaposes 'successful' (without ever explicitly using that term) and 'failed' states, bringing the two into sharp contrast, thereby highlighting the defining characteristics of the latter. While there is no single definition of failed states, an assessment of the current literature reveals certain common assertions in all the available definitions.

These states are seen as those that are mired in or at a risk of conflict and instability; where the persistence of violence causes state structures to

become ineffectual. Says Wyler, "countries can also be hampered by poor governance, corruption, and inadequate provisions of fundamental public services to its citizens; may lack effective control of their territory, military, or law enforcement – providing space where instability can fester (for instance the Pakistan-Afghanistan border); and are usually also among the poorest countries in the world, including Bangladesh and many in Sub-Saharan Africa." (Ibid.)

The USAID, OECD, US Commission on Weak States, and the National Security Council in the US, for instance, broadly define these states as those that are unable to assert effective control over their territory or legitimacy over the means of coercion; unable or unwilling to provide basic public services to their citizens; and are characterized by ongoing violent conflict, or the likelihood of its occurrence. Additionally, these states are faced with a legitimacy crisis, that is, according to the citizens' perception, these governments lack the legitimate authority to rule.

The World Bank uses an additional criterion to judge the fragility of states, that is, their economic stability. It labels such countries 'Low-Income Countries Under Stress' (LICUS) – those with a 2006 gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$905 or less. The worsening poverty of these fragile countries, the World Bank believes, places them at risk from terrorist networks, increases the likelihood of internal armed conflict, and the outbreak and spread of disease and epidemics.

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## II

### FAILED STATES: THE PROBLEMATIQUE

In 2005, in an article in the Washington Post, Condoleezza Rice stated that the US faced an unparalleled threat from "weak and failing states that serve as global pathways that facilitate the spread of pandemics, the movement of criminals and terrorists, and the proliferation of the world's

most dangerous weapons". The growing concern with failed states is predicated on the idea that states today, face threats not only from other state actors (that is, traditional security threats), but are more importantly, faced with a multitude of transnational threats that emanate from both state and non-state actors having their roots in state failure. The threats that are believed to emanate from failed states are broadly – terrorism, transnational crime, weapons proliferation, regional instability, and the spread of disease and epidemics.

The US initiated its Global War on Terror (GWOT) after the events of 11 September, 2001, when it invaded Afghanistan. 'Terrorism', now at the centre stage of world politics, has become the primary international concern, especially for the developed world, which believes it is increasingly being targeted by international terrorist networks. As mentioned earlier, in the immediate aftermath of the WTC attacks, the US identified Afghanistan (and other such 'failed states') as safe havens that provide fertile breeding grounds for terror networks, since they are seen to provide ideal "settings for training and indoctrination, access to weapons and equipment, financial resources and pools of recruits". It is commonly argued that weak and failing states are the primary bases for operations for most 'US-designated foreign terrorist organizations', including the al-Qaeda, since states that are not in control of their own territories and people, are seen as suffering from a 'vacuum' that terrorists, criminal groups or insurgents can fill up (Wyler: 5).

As with terrorist groups, transnational organized crime, involving the production and/or trafficking of drugs, weapons, people, and other illicit goods, is also believed to thrive in failed states. According to the US Interagency Working Group Report on international crime, weak states can be "useful sites through which criminals can move illicit contraband and launder their proceeds, due to un-enforced laws and high levels of official corruption". The White House recently released its annual 'Presidential Determination on Major Drug Transit or Major Illicit Drug Producing Countries for Fiscal Year 2008', which identified about twenty countries as 'major' actors in the illicit global drug network. The list includes among others, Afghanistan, Brazil, Burma, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Jamaica, Laos, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, and

Venezuela. Countries with poor economic and political institutions and structures are considered most vulnerable for the development of illicit trade. "Nearly 90 per cent of global heroin comes from Afghanistan and is trafficked to Europe via poorly governed states in Central Asia or along the "Balkan route". (Patrick: 39)

In addition to the threats of terrorism and transnational crime, there is growing concern with regard to the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs). According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, between 1993 and 2006, member states reported 1,080 confirmed cases of nuclear and radiological material trafficking, across porous international borders, due to weak international controls (Wylar: 7). Additionally, there is also concern about the spread of conventional weapons that pose a grave threat to human security. It is argued that weak or crisis states are important actors in the proliferation of small arms and light weapons globally. According to a Geneva-based survey on small arms (2003) over "640 million such weapons circulate globally, many among private hands and for illicit purposes" (Patrick: 37).

Countries ravaged by violent conflict are also believed to engender regional instability. This is because with weak states and porous borders it becomes difficult to contain humanitarian emergencies or violence within the territorial limits of a state. A spillover of instability is a natural corollary of conflict in failed states, and ends up destabilizing neighbouring countries and regions at large. As governance and political structures weaken and decay in these states, their territorial borders become permeable; thereby causing a huge outflow of refugees into neighbouring areas, in addition to the spread of violence and instability.

Weak and failed states are also vulnerable to the outbreak of diseases and epidemics, since their governments invest little in public sanitation and primary healthcare. Such states, argues Patrick, "may serve as important breeding grounds for new pandemics and, lacking adequate capacity to respond to these diseases, endanger global health".

It is broadly for the above stated reasons that governments in the West are expressing increasing concern about failed states and also devising policy instruments to deal with state failure

### III A THIRD WORLD CRITIQUE

The discourse on failed states has come in for criticism from various countries in the South, which is seen by many as another of the several pretexts employed by the West, particularly the US, to

*interven*e (militarily or otherwise) in the affairs of the Third World. These pretexts, they argue, have changed from 'rogue states', 'spreading democracy', 'regime change', and the 'war against narcotics', to the current discourse on 'failed states'.

The idea underpinning most of these discourses, according to leaders and theorists in the South, is that states in the developing world are incompetent and, therefore, incapable of governing themselves.

The conflicts in these countries are not seen as conflicts between legitimate actors in the political realm, but regarded as chaos that 'impartial' third parties, namely western states, can 'fix' with their policies (Gourevitch: 5). The following are some of the criticisms leveled against the dominant failed states discourse:

One of the major failings of the discourse on failed states, according to theorists in the Third World, is that it offers an ahistorical account of the weakening of states. That is, by focusing exclusively on the 'failure' of states, the discourse glosses over the historical processes that might have led to their weakening like, for instance, their colonial legacy, great power intervention during the Cold War, and so on. It places the responsibility for state failure squarely on the shoulders of the state itself and ignores any external responsibility. Many of them point out that Afghanistan is a classic example of how external meddling by great powers has led to the destabilization of the state, which now ranks among the top ten failed states in the Fund for Peace index.

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Further, they point out that it is incorrect to treat states as isolated entities that alone are responsible for what goes on within their boundaries. In today's globalized world, states increasingly find themselves enmeshed in transnational structures that include among others, foreign economic actors and the aid system, to whom they become accountable. Decisions in these states are not made by state governments, but a host of other transnational actors also.

Mohammed Ayoob, in an attempt to explain the security predicament of the Third World, focuses his attention on the evolution of the modern nation-state. He argues that while European states developed into nation states over a period of four to seven centuries; countries in the global South are expected to complete this 'nation-building' process in the course of a few decades, "that too, by simultaneously undertaking all the stages of nation-building i.e. standardization, penetration, participation and distribution with all its inherently contradictory pulls and pressures. As a result, many Third World states with highly plural and diverse societies, are not yet politically and socially cohesive units" (Behera: 19).

Many have also pointed out that the concept is not a very useful analytical tool since it is vague and imprecise and tends to place a wide range of dissimilar political crises into the same investigative category (Gourevitch: 4). It is also described as a sort of catch-all framework. Practically every problem of governance that faces the developing world today is included in these criteria, including uneven economic development, deterioration of public services, demographic pressures, and human flight, among others.

States in the developing world are relatively new entrants into the international system, and it is only natural that they face challenges in the process of state building. The present discourse on failed states is an attempt by the West to make sense of the challenges that states in the South are grappling with. While state weakness is a reality in the South; we need a debate and a set of criteria that are more holistic than existing ones – recognizing that ground realities in the 'Third World' are vastly different from those in the West; and that are willing to take into account the disparate histories and socio-economic backgrounds of these states to develop more

apposite policy solutions to deal with state weakness

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