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Why global peace needs nation-states

To avoid chaos in a changing world, nation-states must remain the building blocks for a stable world order

The German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, recently declared that 'nationalism is the mother of all political problems'. Such a statement must be understood in the context of Germany's troubled history. However, in the UN Security Council, Germany may face a totally different problem: how to rescue nation-states. Indeed, the future of nation-states has become a central question of our times. In a world of instant communication, of supranational organisations, transnational companies and cross-border capital flows, of international elites, global travel and mass migration, of ballistic missiles and space exploration, is it still desirable – or even feasible – to organise human societies in geographical areas surrounded by borders?

In a word, yes. In fact, nation-states may even become more important, not despite but because of globalisation. Anything else would lead to chaos.

The most compelling argument for nation-states is the mounting number of those that fail. They create 'black holes' in the global order of ungovernable places that affect the survival and wellbeing of tens of millions of people and tend to destabilise entire regions. Virtually all armed conflicts in the world are now within failing nation-states. They have become a global security problem.

Of the 178 countries reviewed in the 2018 Fragile States Index, only 56 were considered stable, whereas 122, or 68 per cent, were listed at various levels of fragility and instability; 32 countries, or 18 per cent, were categorised under alert, high alert and very high alert. These countries' problems are caused not by outside pressures but almost exclusively by internal conflicts – most with deep historical roots. As a result, governments lose control over parts of the country and their populations, be it physically in the form of no-go areas or socially in the form of lack of public services.

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The vacuum this creates is filled by belligerent, mostly armed, non-state actors – never by any global governance. Non-state actors range from Islamist extremist organisations to various ideologically driven, ethnic, religious and/or secessionist movements. These include warlords, militia forces, paramilitary groups and even youth gangs, clan structures and rebel groups. They overlap with criminal syndicates, transnational crime organisations, illicit drug traders and corrupt networks within governments. The aims of these non-state actors are diverse. Some want to topple a government, others to control parts of a country; others again only want space for illegal business.

What they have in common is that they challenge the state's monopoly on the use of force, provoke violence, create instability and prevent development – and kill innocent people. In 2016, well over half a million people were killed violently worldwide. Only 18 per cent of those violent deaths were the result of intra-state armed conflicts; 72 per cent were intentional homicides due to crime, gang wars or racial disturbances. This indicates a huge loss in state authority.

Population increases, global warming and economic backwardness may accelerate intercommunal violence and further contribute to nation-state failures. To prevent this, we must abandon dreams of global governance replacing nation-states and, instead, find a new balance between global governance and nation-states. In fact, effective global governance will need strong nation-states.

Nation-states change over time

Most Western political analysts deride nation-states for being responsible for wars, colonialism and chauvinism. They have a point. However, the irony is that these 'nationalistic' nation-states no longer exist. They died at the end of World War II. The 1945 UN Charter was their death certificate. When UN member states agreed to 'refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state', they ended the militarism on which nationalistic nation-states relied. And when UN member states affirmed 'fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small', they finished 'racist superiority' as a justification to rule over other countries and people.

With the onset of the Cold War, attitudes towards nation-states became ambivalent. The victors of World War II – the Soviet Union and the United States – now promoted competing ideologies they wanted to apply globally. Independent nationalistic policies were no longer possible. Indeed, both ideologies believed their political and economic system would ultimately make nation-states obsolete. This, of course, did not happen. Most of today's UN member states experienced nationalistic nation-states only as colonial masters and were mostly at the margins of East-West confrontations.

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Modern nation-states are rarely, if ever, ethnically homogeneous, and their survival depends on cross-communal integration and not on claims of ethnic superiority. They are increasingly judged by providing security, justice, jobs and social services, and no longer by the strength of their military. This is true not only for democratic countries. Some of the greatest successes in economic development and poverty elimination were during authoritarian regimes, such as those in South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, Chile and, of course, China. Even so-called rogue states make no exception here.

As a result, there are virtually no more wars among nation-states. There is also a decline in military alliances. Many security arrangements are part of regional cooperation agreements such as the African Union, ECOWAS, ZOPCAS, SADC and, for now, even SCO. They are no longer directed against an outside enemy but instead seek mutual support in maintaining security within their regions. NATO is the exception.

Integrating the two sides of nation-states

With the collapse of Communism, it was assumed that liberal democracy would be the answer to failing nation-states. However, this rarely, if ever, worked. The reason that no single political system would fit all countries lies in their dual character: they are not only a 'state', but also a 'nation'. This is what makes them unique.

The 'state' is the tangible side of a country: the government, the national institution, the judiciary, the parliament, the security forces, the legal systems. The 'nation' is the more elusive side: national identities, national

solidarity, common values, a feeling of belonging together. The nation aspect gives the state its legitimacy while the state aspect gives a nation its shape. For a nation-state to be stable and peaceful, the two aspects must be in harmony. Virtually all today's intra-state armed conflicts can be traced back to years of bad governance feeding into divided national loyalties – and vice-versa.

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The nation aspect dominates. Without answering the question of whether people or communities want to live together and, if so, how, it is impossible to build sustainable state institutions. People appear fearing to lose their identity in larger state associations and hence feel more secure in smaller nations. This would explain why in our globalised world the number of nation-states continues to increase, why in the post-Cold War era so many countries disintegrated, and why we see an upsurge in secessionist movements – even in Europe. It would explain why most large nation-states are plagued by secessionist movements and the problems with European integration. Europe still lacks a sufficient common identity and solidarity and to build credible corresponding 'state' institutions that could turn it into a 'supra-nation-state'.

Especially, poorer sections of a population see nation-states as a safeguard of social benefits, affordable health, education systems and justice, and as a protector against misfortunes and the negative impact of globalisation. This would explain why nation-states enjoy so much popular support throughout the world. According to the World Values Survey, an average of more than 80 per cent of citizens are proud or rather proud of their country, even in countries like Zimbabwe that are relatively new and in which the state is largely dysfunctional.

Accepting diverse political systems

Because of their dual character, nation-states are likely to adopt different political systems that are rooted in their historical experiences, local value systems, religious beliefs and existing social organisations. This is bad news for all those who had hoped at the end of the Cold War that liberal democracy would become the unifying global political system. Since 2005, liberal democracy is globally declining and Fukuyama's End of History will not come any time soon.

Western interventions may have contributed to this development. In Afghanistan, with ongoing US peace negotiations, the country may end up with the Taliban in government. In Libya, presidential elections could bring Saif Qaddafi to power and in Syria Assad is likely to hold on to power. Despite billons in foreign support, Iraq is hardly a functioning liberal democracy. We may have to support political solutions that we do not like in other trouble spots around the world among them in Somalia, Yemen, Congo, South Sudan, Mali, Central African Republic, Venezuela and even in the Ukraine.

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We must accept that nation-states adopt different political systems and, for our own good, stop seeing the world being divided in democratic and authoritarian regimes, in good or bad countries. The political landscape of the world is far more complex and the West no longer has the power to change this.

Ironically, it may be the multitude of nation-states that absorbs diverging political views and approaches around the world and prevent them from becoming open conflicts. The political diversity of nation-states provides hence a crucial element of global stability. Global governance without nation-states could never achieve this.

Strengthening the United Nations

Here lies the comparative advantage of the UN, a global governance system that is built on sovereign nation-states and that has developed a normative and institutional framework around which member states with different political systems can be rallied. This is the UN's weakness – but also its strength. Based on its Charter there are now numerous inter-national conventions and agreement to which most governments around the world have agreed to. Two sets of norms are of particular importance for building cooperation among nation-states with different political systems:

Its Human Rights treaties and instruments define relationships between a government and citizens of any member state, irrespective of their political system. They include civil and political rights, economic, social and cultural rights, and rights of the minorities, women, children, migrants and persons with disabilities.

The 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda provides a framework for all member states to work together on the pressing issues facing our planet:

from poverty elimination to food security, health services to education, water security to energy, and from climate change to social and economic justice.

The world will not be a perfect place. But if we build on what unites member states and focus less on what divides them, we could make it a better place. Contrary to what many policy-makers of today may think, the UN still provides the best – and possibly only – forum for this.



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