
30 The Role of the State in the Age of Globalisation

Kofi Annan

[...] The United Nations was founded in 1945 as the centrepiece of a new international order, in which it was taken for granted that nation-states were the main actors. It was assumed that the main threat to world order would come from the aggression of one State against another. And the international economy was made up of separate national economies trading with each other.

The world of today is very different. In recent decades, far more people have been killed in civil wars, ethnic cleansing and acts of genocide than in conventional war between States. Even in the relatively prosperous and orderly parts of the world, what keeps people awake at night is less the threat of armed attack by another State than the fear of what might be done by a handful of fanatics – perhaps armed only with box-cutters, like those who attacked the United States last September, or, even more frighteningly, armed with weapons of mass destruction, purchased in an illicit arms bazaar that largely ignores State frontiers.

Similarly, the word “international” is no longer the best one to describe today’s world economy. While international trade has increased spectacularly since 1945, it has been far outstripped by the growth of cross-border investment. As a result there are many companies, and a vast number of products, on which it is now hard to stick a meaningful national label. There really is a global economy.

And the speed and ubiquity of modern communications – with the same images appearing simultaneously on TV and computer screens throughout the world – have also given us the beginnings of a global society and culture.

All these phenomena are largely unimpeded by national frontiers. They challenge the authority, or even the relevance, of nation states. That means that they also present new challenges to the United Nations.

Some people imagine that the UN, as a global institution, is itself one of those global forces that are eroding the authority of States. But that is a misunderstanding. The United Nations, as its name implies, is primarily an association of nation states.

There is therefore no contradiction between my office and the thesis I wish to put before you today, which is that – in spite or even because of all the globalising forces I have mentioned – the sovereign State remains a highly relevant and necessary institution; indeed, the very linchpin of human security.

Look around you at this city of Geneva, which is so calm and prosperous. Do any of us imagine that it could be like that without the rule of law, enforced by a strong and effective State?

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You may think I have chosen the wrong or a bad example, since in Geneva many state powers belong to the city or the Canton, while the strictly national authority of the Swiss Confederation has rather limited power. Moreover Switzerland, with its multiplicity of national languages, may seem an untypical nation State.

But I would argue the opposite. The only thing that makes Switzerland untypical is that it is unusually strong and successful. Over the centuries, the Swiss have forged a national identity that does not depend on sharing a single language or religion. And the confederal form of the State, which leaves so much power in the hands of the Cantons, is itself a central feature of that identity.

Whether they speak German, French, Italian or Romansch, whether they are Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, or of any other religion, the Swiss are proud to be Swiss and to belong to a Swiss state. Like the United States of America, they have found strength and unity through diversity. It is entirely fitting that they have now decided to join the United Nations, and I am sure they will feel at home there.

Now consider which people in the world are most unlike the citizens of Geneva, in the sense of being deprived of the advantages those citizens enjoy.

Are they not the people who live in the weakest States, where order has completely broken down and even the most rudimentary social services, such as primary health-care and education, are lacking - like Somalia, for instance, which, despite having a single language and culture, has sadly become the textbook example of a "failed State"?

Or are they, perhaps, the people who have been completely deprived of their own State's protection and driven into exile in other States, where they are not citizens - and which therefore recognise few if any of their obligations towards them?

Whichever is the most unfortunate group - those who have fled their own country and become effectively stateless, or those who remain trapped in a country without an effective State - I do not think the citizens of Switzerland, or any other well-organized State, would wish to change places with them.

Indeed, those who are most cheerful about globalisation are invariably people who themselves enjoy the security of citizenship and the rule of law in a well organized and effective State. They may perhaps be living outside that State, and they may congratulate themselves on the freedom to roam the world that globalisation has brought them. But they do so with a national passport in their pocket, and the knowledge that if things get rough, they have a State of their own to go back to or to go home to.

I say that, not as a critic of such people, but rather as one of them myself. I do believe that globalisation represents a great opportunity for the whole human race, and I have said so to many audiences who are less ready to accept that message than you here today.

But I always say in the next breath that at present the benefits of globalisation are far from being equitably shared. There are many, many people in the world who are not enjoying them, and one reason for that is that they do not live in well-organized States that are capable of managing the process.

Globalisation makes well-organized States if anything more necessary, not less. But even the best-organized States are not finding globalisation easy to manage. That is because globalisation challenges their ability to perform their historic function of providing security to their citizens, in all three of its aspects - physical security, economic security, and psychological security.

This is most obvious in the case of economic security.

Globalisation is only partly the result of technological change. Equally important have been decisions, taken by States, to reduce the controls and restrictions they formerly imposed on the economic life of their citizens.

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On balance, and in the long term, I have no doubt that this move away from State control is beneficial. But its immediate effect is to deprive States of many of their traditional instruments for protecting vulnerable groups. It has become more difficult to finance social expenditure by raising taxes, or to enforce standards in such areas as environmental protection, working conditions, and even basic human rights, without being accused either of obstructing the free flow of trade, or of imposing unfair conditions on your own exporters, in a highly competitive global market.

But globalisation now challenges the ability of States to protect and provide the physical security of their citizens, too.

Weak States in the developing world – especially in Africa – find that they are no longer able to monopolise and control the flow of weapons in their societies, because groups within those societies are able to by-pass the State, financing weapons purchases on the global market through sales, on the same global market, of illicit crops or illicitly mined natural resources. For these countries, globalisation represents a return to some of the worst features of the pre-colonial or early colonial era.

But the same phenomena, or related ones, are also undermining security in developed countries. Neither crime nor terrorism is a new problem. But increasingly they are global problems, from which no country can feel safe.

In addition, few States can fully protect either the economic or the physical security of their citizens against environmental problems, which increasingly cut across frontiers – from acid rain and other forms of pollution to climate change, not to mention competition for water and other scarce resources, as population pressures increase and cultivable land shrinks.

As if these threats were not bad enough in themselves, their effects are magnified by a loss of psychological security. In many countries people feel that their traditional way of life, even their identity, is threatened.

Transmitted around the world, images of the ease and plenty enjoyed by a few societies can stimulate new appetites and temptations, new patterns of consumption, and new relationships. They can become a siren song, undermining family structures and challenging religious authorities.

And in many countries – especially, perhaps, those of the developed world – population movements bring people of different cultural backgrounds into formerly stable communities, prompting questions about how inclusive a nation should be, and what its identity is based on.

I believe all these different types of insecurity were reflected in recent election results in several European countries, where many voters supported fringe groups of right or left, or failed to vote at all. These voters were expressing their disillusionment with the failure of those in power to protect them against new threats.

Even the strongest States look weak, to many of their citizens, because they seem unable to respond to the challenges of unemployment, deteriorating services, rising crime levels, and intrusive social change. And so those citizens voice their nostalgia for what they remember, or imagine, as the good old days of the nation State.

Yet following the programmes of the fringe parties, or reverting to traditional methods of control, will not bring those good old days back.

One of the lessons of the twentieth century is that a strong State is not the same thing as a coercive State. States that were extremely coercive, like Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, looked terrifyingly strong for a time, while liberal democracies appeared weak and decadent. But at the end of the century it was the liberal democracies that proved resilient.

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So it would be a tragic mistake if, as the new century begins, States tried to assert themselves mainly by coercive methods.

Please understand: I am not advocating a passive approach. It was not through laissez-faire policies, nor yet by unilateral disarmament, that the liberal democracies

States need robust policies. They must have the capacity to resist aggression, to detect and punish crime, to protect their citizens against terrorism, and also to provide basic services and safety nets. And for all these things they need to raise revenue through taxation.

But they must reassess themselves by tapping new sources of legitimacy and strength. They need to broaden the base of their support.

Many of their objectives today can be achieved only by engaging other actors, not unwillingly but as true partners. The private sector, voluntary agencies and pressure groups, universities, research institutes, think tanks, foundations, and individuals: all will do much more to deliver what the community needs if they are inspired, cajoled, negotiated with – and, of course, listened to – than if governments attempt to coerce them.

The same applies even more clearly on the international level. There too, States need to work with all these various non-state actors, and also with each other. [. . .]

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