

The Two-Level Game of Failing States: Internal and External Sources of State Failure

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Article abstract

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by
David A. Reilly

ABSTRACT

In this article I make three main arguments. First, failing and failed states must be understood from a two-level game perspective. Their domestic conditions shape their international behavior, and their international circumstances exacerbate their internal failings. Second, established states and failing/failed states engage in different functions. Established states are focused on state expansion activities, while failing and failed states are attempting to undergo the process of state-building. Finally, I argue that this problem of failing states is not going away; more to the point, a collision course between these two types of states is inevitable.

INTRODUCTION

In the post-Cold War world, the United States has struggled to identify — and to develop a strategy for addressing — the key threats to global security. This struggle is most evident in the changing security strategies following the 9/11 attacks of September 2001. With the strong emphasis on failing and failed states in the 2002 US National Security Strategy¹ and the Strategy for Combating Terrorism, the Bush administration has determined that “America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones.”² Because of innovations in technology, mobility, and communication, calculations of risk have changed: “Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America. Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering for less than it costs to purchase a single tank.” As a result, “weak states, like Afghanistan, can pose as great a danger to our national interests as strong states.”³

The changes to US strategy, which in turn have the potential to change international norms of intervention, reflect three important transformations in international relations. First, with the end of the Cold War, the distribution of resources (and attention) in the world has changed. Second, globalization and interdependence are modifying interactions between states. Third, the potential

for catastrophic attacks through the use of improved technology or small arms is greater than ever before.

Illegitimate regimes were sponsored (legitimized) by the competing alliances throughout the Cold War. Because of this support, governments were less concerned about taxation and, as a result, lost penetration of their societies. Often, these governments were not concerned about segments of their populations that lacked economic or military resources. This neglect became disastrous when foreign support ended.

During the Cold War, small arms poured into “shatterbelt regions” — areas that served as the dividing line between hegemonic powers. The states that populate these regions are prone to political and economic underdevelopment, and because they are inwardly divisive and exploited from the outside, they tend to be locations where violence is prevalent. The weapons provided by great power states remain in many of these countries, and with the loss of external legitimacy and foreign protection, challenger groups have been able to quickly militarize and fight for resources and control. In conjunction with this, weapons are increasingly in the hands of transnational non-state actors, posing a threat to neighboring states and populations.

In an attempt to gain the limited external resources that remain, or to establish legitimacy from within, many of these states have made rapid attempts to democratize. Often, these efforts are made without adequate infrastructure or the cultural norms to facilitate democratic processes. In the long run, these efforts can be destabilizing and counterproductive.⁴

Moreover, the lack of oversight of weapons of mass destruction has led to the fear that large-scale violence is a possibility. With the second phase of decolonization following the break-up of the Soviet Union, weapons diffusion became a major problem. David Carment highlights the perceptions of insecurity within these countries: “The borders they had to defend were arbitrary; their societies were usually diverse in composition; and few leaders had experience in building inclusive civic and democratic cultures. In essence, the security threats of these states were and are as much internal as external.”⁵ Compounding these issues was the fact that weapons of mass destruction were housed in some of these countries, and the resources to maintain them dwindled. As a result, limited oversight of installations created the potential for technology or weapons to fall into the wrong hands.

Each of these transformations has modified how failing and failed states are perceived — and how they behave — in the international system. In this essay I make three main arguments. First, failing and failed states must be understood from a two-level game perspective. Their domestic conditions shape their international behavior, and their international circumstances exacerbate their internal failings. Second, established states and failing/failed states engage in dif-

ferent functions. Established states are focused on state expansion activities, while failing and failed states are attempting to undergo the process of state-building. Finally, I argue that this problem of failing states is not going away; more to the point, a collision course between these two types of states is inevitable.

Why the Concern About Failing States?

The inability of states to function effectively is not new; however, it is increasingly prevalent and, accordingly, is subject to greater scrutiny and research. Among a growing set of analyses, research by the *Project on Leadership and Building State Capacity* uses a “Fragility Matrix” to highlight high risk states and emphasizes the continued attention to international conflict prevention and post-conflict reconstruction.⁶ Work by the *Fund for Peace* includes a “Failed State Index” that identifies risk of conflict: thirty-five countries fall into the high risk category for 2008.⁷ The *State Failure Project* examines the propensity for political transformation in states, and more recently has begun to assess relationships between governments and international terrorist organizations.⁸ These types of attempts to quantify risk and to identify trouble spots are progressively linked to policy decisions and to recognition of the importance of failing states.

That said, one implication of the failing state’s dysfunction is that it is less likely to pose a direct threat to other states. In fact, research has indicated that failing states engage in interstate violence less frequently than established, stable states.⁹ However, some argue that failing states can serve as a breeding ground for terrorist activity. Violent organizations can seek to create bases within the borders of failing and failed states, free from oversight and interference. The ability of *al-Qaeda* to operate within Afghanistan’s territory prior to 11 September 2001 offered an example of how a failed state, wittingly or unwittingly, may harbor terrorists. This link has been challenged in research by Ken Menkhaus, who argues that the relationship between terrorism and failed states has been misdiagnosed. Accordingly, we do not have a clear sense of the kind of operating environment a terrorist network needs, or the resulting understanding of how to combat the terrorist threat as it relates to state failure.¹⁰

Traditionally, because failing states are unlikely to challenge the international status quo, they have been ignored and overlooked. With the 9/11 attacks, however, the inability of these states to manage their borders was perceived by many as a threat to established state security. As a result, United States security strategy was modified, and in conjunction with these changes, international norms were challenged. The argument for pre-emptive war was made by the Bush administration, and used as a justification for the subsequent attack of Iraq in 2003.

In the 2006 *U.S. Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, the Bush administra-

tion's strategy on addressing failing and failed states is detailed:

Physical sanctuaries can stretch across an entire sovereign state, be limited to specific ungoverned or ill-governed areas in an otherwise functioning state, or cross national borders. In some cases the government wants to exercise greater effective sovereignty over its lands and maintain control within its borders but lacks the necessary capacity. We will strengthen the capacity of such War on Terror partners to reclaim full control of their territory through effective police, border, and other security forces as well as functioning systems of justice. To further counter terrorist exploitation of under-governed lands, we will promote effective economic development to help ensure long-term stability and prosperity.

It continues:

In failing states or states emerging from conflict, the risks are significant. Spoilers can take advantage of instability to create conditions terrorists can exploit. We will continue to work with foreign partners and international organizations to help prevent conflict and respond to state failure by building foreign capacity for peace operations, reconstruction, and stabilization so that countries in transition can reach a sustainable path to peace, democracy, and prosperity. Where physical havens cross national boundaries, we will continue to work with the affected countries to help establish effective cross-border control. Yet some countries will be reluctant to fulfill their sovereign responsibilities to combat terrorist-related activities within their borders. In addition to cooperation and sustained diplomacy, we will continue to partner with the international community to persuade states to meet their obligations to combat terrorism and deny safe haven under U.N. Security Council Resolution 1373.

These policies have broad-reaching implications that affect the notion of state rights. To understand the effects of the failing state, and how it is addressed, it is necessary to define it, to clarify its behavior, and to speculate on how it will be affected by new norms of international interaction.

What is a Failing State?

The literature on failing states defines them by describing the process of state failure, or by comparing or analogizing to collapsed states, rogue states, fragile states, weak states, and quasi-states. Rotberg takes a more basic approach: rather than defining it, he argues that, "You know it when you see it."¹¹ This typifies analytical problems inherent in the literature: cause and effect are often conflated in such a way that the explanation becomes tautological. As Carment argues,

Many analyses point to fundamentally different causes of state failure; others rely on the monitoring of background factors and enabling conditions that are associated with the risk of conflict but do not themselves provide accurate information on the probability of specific events leading to failure. Still others do not distinguish between causality and correlation, while others are engrossed in issue-specific problems that are symptomatic of state weakness and human insecurity — e.g. illicit gun flows, child soldiers, black market activity and AIDS — problems that are by themselves significant and important but not necessarily associated with or causes of failure.¹²

In short, in the literature there is a failure to distinguish clearly between cause and effect and a failure to distinguish between what failing states *are* and what they *do*.

Using behavior to explain failing, violent states would be an exercise in tautology. The “shatterbelt” literature¹³ comes dangerously close to this result by defining a shatterbelt region as an area of high violence. The prediction of future violence is then predicated on past behavior. This research is useful insofar as it begins to identify the conditions that lead to this violence, but the theory and logic are underdeveloped.

Colonialism is frequently used as a criterion for “high risk propensity,”¹⁴ and there is good reason for its use. States that suffered from colonialism are said to have been left legacies of institutional underdevelopment, country borders that do not correspond with national ones, and traditions of domination that inhibit political and economic growth. However, the fates that all states were cast as colonies are not the same. Colonial legacies had mixed results in terms of subsequent political and economic growth, and their post-colonial behavior reflects this.¹⁵

The designation of ‘Third World’ or ‘developing world’ uses the attribute of economic level to offer insight into state behavior. But this convention does not begin with a clearly established criterion — some cutoff point, for example, that would *logically* affect state processes. There is certainly promise in this approach, however. Many studies find that Third World state behavior can be grouped together in ways that reveal interesting dynamics.¹⁶ The reason for limiting the criteria to one attribute, however, is unclear. Unless there is some theoretical link between economic level and the particular behavior, such a criterion is arbitrary and unnecessary.¹⁷

As an alternative, we might differentiate the failing state from established states by recognizing that the basic function of the failing state is different from other states: its leaders are engaging in state-building rather than state expansion activities. The need to create the state institutions, processes, and legitimacy

affects failing state leaders' motivations, fears, and decision-making constraints. They suffer from an "insecurity dilemma" where state security takes precedence over national security. In other words, the leader is more concerned with preserving his own life and position than with developing the resources of the state.

The repressive behavior of failing and failed states is a result of what has been termed the *insecurity dilemma*.¹⁸ The anarchy of the domestic environment leads the ruling regime to employ a "self-help" strategy of domestic coercion in response to threats from domestic challengers and neighboring states. Cooperation is not expected to endure because the state cannot reinforce agreements with economic incentives, appeals to national unity, or through a reliance on widely accepted "rules of the game." All of the actors involved — domestic opposition groups, external challengers, and the state itself — recognize this circumstance. As a result, the state has the incentive to first, signal to others that it is willing to use force, second, be preemptive in reducing threats or potential threats, and finally, to take risks given that the status quo is a condition of insecurity.

The insecurity dilemma is unique to these states. It also shapes their conflict behavior. According to this perspective, failing and failed states should be considered as uniquely inclined toward aggression against their own populations. Failing and failed states are not the only states that resort to violent repression in the world but they are the only states that are trapped in a cycle of violence. For this reason, they deserve special attention.

The failing state lacks other sources of power/legitimacy beyond force, what Alexander Dallin and George Breslauer refer to as normative, material, and coercive power (coercive including legal/institutional as well as regulatory).¹⁹ They have no community of feeling based on self-consciousness of a common nationality. They have no established rules of law and governance. They have no ability or right to extract from the population and, as a result, develop its infrastructure. And, if the state fails, it also lacks a monopoly of coercion.

To consider the difference between what a state is and what it does, we can consider the difference between juridical and empirical sovereignty. A state cannot fail the criteria of juridical sovereignty. State sovereignty was to be afforded to each UN member and defined in the following manner: "1) that states are juridically equal, 2) that each state enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty, 3) that the personality of the state is respected, as well as its territorial integrity and political independence, and 4) that they should, under international order, comply faithfully with its international duties and obligations."²⁰

In contrast, empirical sovereignty refers to the ability of the state to function. It presupposes the establishment of legitimate political order, the fostering and cultivation of national unity, facilitation of economic development, and that the state monopolizes coercion. A state can fail in each of these criteria, and the

failure of these reflects the inability of that state to function effectively on both the domestic and international levels.

Failing states lack assets of state capacity — national unity, political stability, and economic resources — which translate into state power. Their deficiency of material, normative, and legal/institutional power necessitates the use of force within the domestic environment during times of crises. Coercive power is the one asset remaining for these states: when turmoil surfaces, coercion becomes their only solution.

A second category of states lacks even the monopolization over coercion. Failed states are instances where the regime cannot lay claim to rule based on a preponderance of power — even that asset is contested. Examples include Afghanistan, Burma, Chad, Somalia, and Sudan. These countries are steeped in civil war with no clear ruling authority.

As a result, failing and failed states dominate the headlines of international news. Domestic problems in the form of challenges to state unity, to political regimes, and to leaders themselves frequently result in conflict within borders as well as across them. In these instances, conditions of political instability, cultural fragmentation, and economic hardship combine to generate domestic volatility. The result is often violence between groups struggling for power and authority. Leaders attempt to reduce domestic challenges by employing state terror and repressing specific opposition groups.

For failing and established states alike, violence often stems from the attempt to gain control. What is different about circumstances for failing and established states, however, is the level of uncertainty they face. The failing state's control over its own country — population, resources, and territory — is precarious. Threats to the regime in power stem from, and are exacerbated by, the fact that its legitimacy is in doubt. This is a result of the inability of government to satisfy the basic needs of the population. It is a result of ethnic or religious divides within the population and the fact that certain groups feel underrepresented, ignored, or even attacked by government. It is a result of the fact that political institutions and practices are either new or rejected as illegitimate, and elements of society have not accepted the "rules of the game." The decision-makers within the ruling regime are faced with the task of building the state while simultaneously dealing with challenges from domestic opposition.

In contrast, the fact of domestic legitimacy and authority enables the established state to expand its sphere of influence and control. The growth of the state leads to greater interdependence in the international system through trade and interaction. This is not to say that established states never experience domestic strife; rather, even when strife does occur, the unity of a culturally homogenous society, the pacifying effects of wealth and prosperity, and faith in the tradition of a (relatively) long-standing political system serve to reduce the threats to decision-makers.

Leaders of established states are most concerned about threats to national security — threats that are usually externally based. These may not necessarily take the form of armed aggressors: changing alliances, trade blocs, and the rise and decline of other powerful countries may compromise the interests of the state and generate uncertainty in the international system. As a result, much established-state conflict involves coalitions of countries joining forces to preserve the status quo, promoting widely accepted norms such as democracy and human rights, or keeping the peace where there is turmoil that threatens their interests. Given that powerful states tend to cast their nets widely, their interests are many, and therefore their scope of concern is global. Interventions in areas where their interests are at stake often necessitate the use of force to stabilize and regulate the situation. For failing state leaders, however, the greatest concern is for the persistence of the regime or even for their own survival. The integrity of territorial borders and the independence of the country — once established — are virtually assured by international norms and practices. The most proximate threats, then, are generated by their own domestic environment, in the form of challenges to authority.

How Does the *Insecurity Dilemma* Result in Failure?

The lack of state capacity shapes the behavior of the failing state. Research on state capacity usually begins with the expectation that states have some combination of the following characteristics: a territory within which an authority makes decisions — if necessary, by force;²¹ a community of feeling based on self-consciousness of a common nationality;²² established rules of law and governance;²³ and the right to extract from its population and thus develop its infrastructure.²⁴ Those states at highest risk of failure lack all but the first of these. That is, there is no feeling of unity, no established “rules of the game,” and no resources from which to build an infrastructure. That leaves the monopolization of coercion, which when used overtly and regularly is evidence of illegitimacy.²⁵

State power is comprised of components of force, cultural unity, political rule of law, and resources. Dallin and Breslauer suggest that social and political control is developed through a system of sanctions that consists of three types: normative power, which includes socialization and education; material power, manifested in incentives; and coercive power, which includes fines, penalties, terror, and regulatory and police power.²⁶ I argue that coercive power is actually two forms of power — legal/institutional (legal disincentives, fines, penalties) and repressive (terror, regulatory and police repression). Dallin and Breslauer themselves hint at this distinction by distinguishing terror from other forms of coercion, and noting that, “Of all the instruments in the arsenal of the state, terror is the ultimate weapon, to be applied when all else has failed.”²⁷

When states lack cultural, political, and resource capacity, they must necessarily fall back on the use of force during times of turmoil. Accordingly, the

failing state dilemma can be conceptualized as one in which the deficiency of power in other areas necessitates the use of force as a strategy for control. This distinguishes the aggression by failing states from aggression by established states in that failing states have virtually no other course of action. Their lack of alternatives to resolve conflict puts them at high risk of violence whenever domestic or international unrest develops. Established states, in contrast, have options such as appealing to nationalist sentiment, “buying off” disgruntled groups with social programs or tax incentives, or relying on the due process of law and the judicial process as the legitimate course of action for those with grievances. They also feel less of a need on the international front to take risks in order to achieve short-term gains and domestic support.

The failed state suffers greater uncertainty than even the insecurity dilemma that consumes failing states. It is in the throes of civil war, where even the monopolization of coercion is challenged. That failed states, engaged in civil wars, should be more violent than other states is not a novel concept. However, the idea that states on the verge of failure are more likely to resort to violence — and to be motivated to violence for different reasons than for other states — is an untested proposition.

The conflict-generating scenario within the failing state mirrors the international scenario described by neo-realists.²⁸ Given a lack of legitimacy and an absence of alternative means for addressing domestic dissent, the internal dynamics of the state are essentially anarchic. There are no generally accepted legal or institutional frameworks that provide systematic, orderly responses to grievances. There is no sense of nationalism that offers the potential to unify the population. There are no discretionary resources available as incentives for coalition building or for buying-off disgruntled groups. In short, there is an absence of established authority that can mitigate challenges to the state.

As a result, the ruling regime is concerned, first and foremost, with survival. There is no guarantee of cooperation on the part of domestic factions. Leaders expect that coalitions are transitory and therefore they are concerned with “self-help”: they are responsive to threats, attempt to build their military might in order to be capable of responding to domestic challenges, and they assume an aggressive posture toward dissent.

The concern for survival leads the ruling regime to focus on its security environment, which involves domestic opposition groups and potentially aggressive neighboring states. This is where the insecurity dilemma differs from the neo-realist view; it is the anarchy of the immediate security environment, not the anarchy of the international system, which motivates the failing state to become aggressive. Given that the failing state’s only power is that of coercion, it will attempt to guarantee its survival through the use of force against its neighbors and its own population.

In contrast, neo-realists argue that decisions regarding international conflict behavior stem from the concern for national security. The anarchic international environment provides no protection or guarantee of security for individual states. As a result, states are motivated to ensure their own survival through military means. States attempt to enhance their power and press their advantages against weaker states to improve their safety and are assumed to act unitarily in the interest of the country at large. In short, conflict behavior is about power relations *between* states and the threats that are generated from these.

The Effects of Globalization

The process of globalization can be thought of as a reinforcing cycle in which:

1. Innovations in transportation and communication technologies lead to new public demands;
2. Government is pressured to identify new solutions to public demands, many of which have transnational facets;
3. Governments must either engage in interdependent action such as trade or exchange in order to serve the public needs, or engage in some form of conflict. It may repress the demands of the public, or it may engage in imperialistic violence abroad to meet the public demands; and
4. If the state chooses the interdependent route, there are new technological innovations that result and the cycle repeats.

This cycle contributes to the process of state failure in three ways. First, it leads to a greater diffusion of information and ideas. Neighbors matter more, and states are held to a higher standard than ever before. Public awareness resulting from media, the efforts of non-governmental organizations, and the presence of international organizations, is improved. Second, there is greater pressure on ruling regimes, especially those that lack legitimacy. State building is a time-intensive process. The insecurity dilemma is becoming more pronounced because states do not have the luxury of time to develop capacity. There is more international pressure and greater expectations for citizen rights and inclusion. Whereas Western states had the ability to address cultural divides, extraction, and centralization before mass participation, failing states are increasingly pressured to include their citizenry in an open process of governmental transformation. Third, there are changing international norms of human rights protections and democratic governance that limit the strategies of failing state governments, or that cost them legitimacy should they choose to violate these.

Robert Kaplan suggests that current conflicts are a harbinger for “The Coming Anarchy”: a world divided between chaos and order.²⁹ Although the industrialized world is not likely to be threatened in the near future, the Third

World is already suffering from a number of societal dilemmas, four of which are directly related to the diffusion of conflict across state boundaries and exacerbated by state failure. The first — illogical boundaries — results from the historical process of colonization. Imperial powers divided up the Third World according to their own needs and interests rather than on the basis of any ethnic, religious, or historical lines of demarcation. Most of these borders were retained during the process of decolonization, and as a result, incompatible populations are fenced within the territorial boundaries of these countries.

A second argument presented by Kaplan is based on Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* thesis. With the inability of governments to organize their populations, citizens are affiliating with cultural groupings that are not confined by state borders. As the loyalties of individuals turn from the state to some other type of community, their tolerance for others within their state decreases. The result is conflict that escalates within and across states without regard for traditional boundaries.

The third problem stems from the scarcity of resources and is based on Tad Homer-Dixon's work on environmental degradation and conflict.³⁰ He suggests that poor countries are likely to be less capable of dealing with the pressures of environmental scarcity, and hence "environmentally induced conflicts" are likely to grow in the developing world in coming years. Cross-border violence is predicted as a result of scarcity disputes, population displacement in the form of environmental refugees, and group-identity conflicts brought on by environmental change. These issues are more likely to be acute in failing or failed states because of the inability of these governments to manage the social conflicts that emerge.

The fourth — the transformation of war — reveals the extent to which states have lost their monopoly over coercion. Events of violent conflict in the modern era, according to Martin van Creveld, are likely to occur on a smaller scale because of advancements in technology.³¹ The ability to place nuclear warheads in suitcase-sized casings, to attack large numbers of people with easily transportable (and relatively easily manufactured) nerve gasses and chemical weapons, and to produce bombs that can destroy crowded buses and buildings all reflect the fact that technology has enabled individuals to possess weapons of significance. Whereas the state needed to mobilize its entire population and resources for warfare during the time of the *levée en masse*,³² much smaller groups are now able to wreak havoc on populations. As a result, terrorist groups are able to mobilize, organize, and challenge states more effectively than ever before. They do not require the state apparatus to make war; in many ways they are effective and elusive because they originate from no single location.

As if Kaplan's depiction of the future were not dire enough, many would add that the effects of globalization are likely to exacerbate the problem of state failure. As improvements in communication and transportation technologies lead

to increases in flows of information and resources, researchers have begun to examine the effects of globalization and integration on a variety of state behaviors. From these studies, a fundamental disagreement has emerged: globalization is argued by some to lead inevitably to a consensus on social and political order that will signify the “End of History,”³³ while others contend that increased interaction between cultures and nationalist groups will result in conflict and a “Clash of Civilizations.”³⁴ The two sides of this dispute have been characterized as “Jihad vs. McWorld” and the “Lexus and the Olive Tree,” a tug-of-war between the assimilationist nature of capitalism and the fundamentalist tendencies of religious and tribal groups.³⁵ In either case, there is general agreement that these changes will have implications for global peace and security. Whether international order or terrorism and violence is the likely result of globalization — and whether policies can be enacted to mitigate this process — will have a profound effect on international relations in coming years.

Regardless of how one views the process of globalization, it is clear that populations are more aware of what is going on in the surrounding world. The relative gains, discontents, and strategies of neighbors are observed and evaluated. Threats to the well being, prosperity, and way of life of communities are perceived at all levels, not just by leaders. Governments are increasingly being held accountable for their ability to protect and provide for their citizens.³⁶ The result, if the ruling regime does not meet these growing expectations, is domestic strife. The regime, in turn, may be forced to repress internal challenges or to divert the attention of a dissatisfied public through international conflict.

A second issue of debate within the globalization literature involves the importance of location within a globalized world. Liberals such as Thomas Friedman suggest that the importance of local context will be diminished as international ties are extended: “In the Cold War system, the most likely threat . . . was from your neighbor coming over . . . That threat has not been eliminated today, but, for the moment, it has been diminished in many parts of the world.”³⁷ A recent study assessing the process of transition for post-communist states, however, indicates just the opposite: location is one of the most important determinants of political and economic change.³⁸ Such findings have fueled speculation that regional dynamics and neighbor-effects will continue to provide the clearest indicators of interstate conflict.

One area of research that assumes that location is of critical importance examines the possibility of “shatterbelts.” These are backward and fragmented regions; the states that comprise them suffer from depressed political and economic systems. Because these states are inwardly divisive and exploited from the outside, they are characterized as hostile and violent. It is suggested that their temperaments leave these countries displaced from their neighbors, their regions, and the system at large. In addition, there is assumed to be a regional dynamic

whereby the aggressiveness of individual states is contagious, leading to violence that spills over borders. The probability of conflict within shatterbelts, for all of these reasons, is assumed to be significantly greater than in non-shatterbelt areas. In essence, the problem of state failure and collapse may be growing into a regional, rather than state-based, problem.

In what may be the only rigorous, systematic investigation of shatterbelts to date, Paul Hensel and Paul Diehl describe a number of important characteristics of these “at risk” states. Their study provides empirical support for the proposition that shatterbelts generate a disproportionate number of militarized disputes, and it reveals that internal conflicts are more common in shatterbelt regions. In fact, shatterbelts are twice as likely as other regions to experience militarized disputes. The intensity and duration of conflicts in these areas are also significantly greater than in non-shatterbelt regions.³⁹

The violent behavior attributed to shatterbelt states may not correspond with failing and failed states. Even though states within shatterbelts are assumed to be more conflict-prone because of their domestic shortcomings, others have argued that failing states are not likely to be threatened by their surrounding environment because norms of international sovereignty guarantee their persistence. As Robert Jackson argues, even though theories of international relations assume that states must fend for themselves, the current international system dictates that “[t]o be a sovereign state today one needs only to have been a formal colony yesterday. All other considerations are irrelevant.”⁴⁰ The implication is that all states, whether failing or established, have very little to fear in terms of external challenges because they are protected by international convention. In contrast with the past, when “small and weak states had to survive as best they could by their own efforts,”⁴¹ the current system is much different. In today’s world, “weak, marginal, or insubstantial states are now exempted from the power contest at least in part and treated as international protectorates. . . . The weakness or backwardness of countries is no longer a justification for conquest or colonialism.”⁴²

This norm of non-intervention has changed with the Bush administration’s response to failing states. The US has made it clear that it will be pre-emptive in addressing perceived threats as a result of dysfunctional states. In recent years, its airstrikes across the Afghani-Pakistani border provide evidence of a willingness to operate unilaterally and without regard for the concerns of other states. But the US is not alone in taking this stance. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty concluded in 2001 that, “States . . . had a ‘responsibility to protect’ their citizens and others living in their territory. If they failed that responsibility, the international community had both a right and an obligation to intervene and reverse the consequences.”⁴³

Where does this leave failing states? The additional external pressure of the threat of intervention exacerbates the insecurity dilemma. This in turn will

undoubtedly affect the external behavior of these states. Although there is a limit, given the lack of resources, on the extent to which failing states can turn their violence outward, their coercive behavior may spike as a result of external threats. More likely, we will see a higher number of these states collapse under the additional pressure and lack of legitimacy. This in turn will affect refugee flows, the stability of neighboring states, and the need for established states (or international organizations) to engage in peace-building efforts. Finally, state collapse may empower and embolden non-state actors as challengers to the status quo. The recent rise of pirate attacks, corrupt mafia-type organizations, and international terrorists may be further spurred by the continued failure of states.

Without a doubt, the problem of failing states is not going away. As established states modify the Westphalian notion of sovereignty to protect against the limitations of failing states, the unintended consequence may be a rise in the importance of state failure to how states interact. The process of globalization has increased interactions and heightened interdependence; this in turn increases the relevance of failing states to their neighbors, their region, and to the stability of the system at large. Failing states are engaged in fundamentally different activities from established states, so we must consider the difference between the two as one of sequence or type rather than degree. As established states continue to expand, and as globalization reduces the distance between states, networks and communities will interact with the failing state environment, and the individuals within them. Because of the differences between these and established states, friction will result.

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Endnotes

1. The 2006 National Security Study places less of an emphasis on failing and failed states, however, it does highlight the importance of “improving our capability to plan for and respond to post-conflict and failed-state situations.” See: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/>.
2. The National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2002, pp. iv, 1, found at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf>.
3. *Ibid.*, p. v.
4. Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflicts* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
5. David Carment, “Assessing State Failure: Implications for Theory and Policy,” *Third World Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (2003), p. 411.
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14. See, for example, Caroline Thomas, *In Search of Security: The Third World in International Relations* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1987), p. 10; K.J. Holsti, *The State, War, and the State of War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
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