

## STATE FRAGILITY AND INTERVENTIONS: THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DISCOURSE

## СЛАБКІСТЬ ДЕРЖАВ ТА ІНТЕРВЕНЦІЇ: ЗЛЕТ І ПАДІННЯ ДИСКУРСУ

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**Abstract.** *The article is focused on the issue of state fragility in connection with such an instrument of foreign policy as interventions. It offers a comprehensive overview of academic thought on two matters. The chronological framework is between 1992 and 2021, the year of the deployment of US forces from Afghanistan. The changes in the discourse on state fragility and intervention as a means are traced in detail. Finally, the main objectives and the content of the Global Fragility Act of 2019 and 2020 United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability are taken into consideration.*

**Keywords:** *state fragility; intervention; prevention of conflict; US foreign policy; international security.*

**Анотація.** *У статті розглядаються питання слабкості держав у зв'язку з таким інструментом зовнішньої політики, як інтервенції. Пропонується всебічний огляд еволюції академічної думки та політичної практики з обох питань. Хронологічні рамки охоплюють період з 1992 по 2021, рік виведення військ США з Афганістану. Детально простежуються зміни в дискурсі про слабкість держав та інтервенції як засіб подолання слабкості. Здійснено огляд Акту подолання слабкості 2019 року та Стратегії США з попередження конфліктів та сприяння стабільності 2020 року*

**Ключові слова:** *слабкість держав; інтервенції; попередження конфліктів; зовнішня політика США; міжнародна безпека.*

**Introduction.** The International Relations system called postbipolar for the lack of a better term has proved to be as tumultuous and anarchic as any preceding one. The times characterized by the overall lack of understanding of the conditions and undercurrents are not new either to academic circles or general society. The turbulent times serve as a breeding ground for the emergence and popularization of new lingo, and one such example is the concept of failed (later fragile) states (later contexts)

Studying the evolution of this particular term is an endearing pastime, considering the twists and turns of its rise and fall, both in academic and policy papers. What started as trying new approaches to the growing number of emerging threats turned into implemented - and failed - foreign policy of the biggest actors in the international relations system.

**The purpose of the article** is to trace the changes in the attitude towards the problem posed by so-called fragile states and the ways these changes informed both the US foreign policy and the international security system in general. To this end, the starting point will be the very beginning of the post-Cold War world order up to the final stages of the US military presence in Afghanistan in 2021.

**Literature review.** If one takes the article by Helman & Ratner (1992) as a starting point for a deep dive into the topic of failed states, this would prove to be a prudent approach. The following nations were identified as most ineffective for varying reasons more than 30 years ago:

1. Haiti, surviving yet another coup d'etat in 1991;
2. the remnants of what was known nearly a year before the publishing of the article as a more or less wholesome Yugoslavia;
3. Somalia was mentioned as “a dismaying example” of the following fact: “Western aid cannot reach its intended recipients because of violence, irreconcilable political divisions, or the absence of an economic infrastructure”
4. Liberia suffered from a prolonged civil war known later as the First (1989-1997) followed by the Second (1999-2003)
5. Sudan (at a time comprising the territory and sovereignty of what will be declared as South Sudan in 2011)
6. Cambodia was left in ruins after a disastrous regime and over two decades of violent conflict.

In contrast, three states were mentioned as failing - those with a prospect of becoming a failed one. These were Ethiopia, Georgia, and Zaire (since 1997 - Democratic Republic of Congo.)

In many instances of future research on the topic, the differentiation of state fragility will only take root, sprouting dozens of indices, measurements, research programs, etc. For the definition of the term it is most convenient for the purposes of this article to take up the ACL (authority-capacity-legitimacy) model proposed by Carment & Samy (2012), Carment, D. et. al (2017) and further elaborated by Grävingsholt, J. et al. (2012, 2018). This model characterizes fragile states as those exhibiting gaps in authority, capacity, and/or legitimacy. Each of these gaps is subject to debate in terms of definition and measurement.

For example, Call, C. T. (2008, 2016) offers a perspective on capacity-security-legitimacy, incorporating state authority within the first element. To highlight changes in attitudes toward state fragility, it is necessary to elaborate on these gaps. According to the User's Guide on Measuring Fragility (Mata & Ziaja, 2009), the model of the triquetra of gaps can be described as follows: 1) The effectiveness of countries in performing their functions; 2) Whether the state holds a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; 3) Whether the state is accepted as legitimate by all parties of the international community.

Evidently, there is not so much new under the sun as the model is a reverse of the one offered by Max Weber in the early 20th century. His view of a state is of a social mechanism with a monopoly on violence (authority) that regulates and ensures citizens' needs (capacity) over established territory (legitimacy) (Weber, M., Henderson, A. M., & Parsons, T., 2012)

**Main results of the research.** While the early attempts to identify failed states were proposed as a critique of traditional approaches (mainly international aid), the international community seems to have taken the term but not a novelty from Helman and Ratner's article in the Foreign Policy (1992). A seasoned diplomat and International Law professor were arguing in favour of United Nations Conservatorship, suggesting three models for a U.N. guardianship role. The proposed approaches included governance assistance, delegation of governmental authority, and direct U.N. trusteeship.

Such an attitude towards solving all the world's problems in one go is not uncommon for 1990s texts on foreign policy issues. In some capacity, the concept has been galvanized politically - and immensely so. The proof is its presence in different versions of the US National Security Strategy under different administrations (as early as 1997) as well as the existence of the Global Fragility Act (2019) (United States, 1997)

A short answer to an unposed “why” question can easily be linked to the process of securitization, the gift to the international relations scholars from the Copenhagen school of IR thought, known mostly for the names of Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. (Buzan B, Wæver O., & Wilde J., 1998) Making any matter a security concern has been made even easier since the 1990s, prompting heatedly discussed “development-security” nexus.

A deep connection between media coverage and presenting particular cases as the most failed states was evident in the late 1990s. Taking the article with the catchy title "On videocameristics: The geopolitics of failed states, the CNN International and (UN)governmentality" as an example will be beneficial. It appears hardly translatable due to a word play ("UNgovernmentality") and the coined

term "videocameristics." The researchers claimed to be inspired by the ideas of M. Foucault and his followers. (Luke, T., & Tuathail, G., 1997) The authors focused on how the so-called "Second" (Communist) and Third Worlds fragmented into the following three groups after 1991 through the media:

1. "Rogue states" - pariah states, unreliable states. As of 1997, this group included Iraq, Iran, North Korea, and Libya.
2. Emerging markets - countries with developing market economies/transition economies, such as Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, and China;
3. "Failed states" - countries like Rwanda, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Colombia, which were considered representatives of the "impoverished South."

Year 2024 and 2020s in general prove how swiftly the views may change, considering current approaches to terms like Global South or "not-West." Today they seem to mingle different, often incomprehensibly grouped states.

In the 1990s, it was popular to compare failed states to potential sources of chaos (the term "instability" would later be used more frequently). Some scholars characterized chaos as a "virus of disorder," where problems such as environmental issues, overpopulation, poverty, migrant flows, and ethnic conflicts spread, leading to state failure. (Rosner, J., 1994; Rotberg, R. & Weiss, T., 1996)

These negative effects of state weakening to the point of incapacity became the basis for labeling them as "black holes of geopolitics." As early as 1997, researchers noted that while there are many weak countries in the world, the general public is familiar only with high-profile cases broadcasted through media channels. Examples included the Kurdish refugee crisis following the Gulf War, the 1992 famine in Somalia, and events in Rwanda between 1994-1996. This selective coverage is a fitting illustration of processes related to state weakness as a phenomenon of the post-Cold War era.

Firstly, there was a certain chaos in international politics associated with social, political, and environmental issues. The period of transformation of the international relations system as well as the change in polarity, always brings a range of challenges and threats, with fragile states being one of them.

Secondly, the significant role of global media and technologies was already noted, influencing various aspects, from political projects in individual countries to the status of a global hegemon or "leader of the free world." The continued technological progress, the emergence of social networks, and the dependence of large groups of the population on algorithms and neural networks only intensify this aspect.

The third aspect continues to remain relevant today - the requirements and regulatory regimes faced by countries are at least nominally the same for all, both effective states and the most fragile ones. This aspect was also popular in the literature of the 1990s when the very concept of fragile states was labeled as "neo-colonialist." (Gordon, R., 1997)

Many researchers recognize that weak and failed states are not isolated cases on the world map. States where the jurisdiction of power becomes increasingly decentralized, order and sometimes even government is absent, have always existed and are likely to continue to exist. In some cases, power vacuums are taken over by criminal syndicates, drug cartels, and even religious formations. As of the mid-1990s, only individual cases of failed states appeared in the media space. According to Luke and Toal, such selectivity, particularly by the US media, contributed to the spread of the concept and conditioned the public to the idea that intervention in such countries by the USA or the UN is entirely justified or even necessary.

Examples included Lebanon, Cambodia, Somalia, and Haiti. The key argument is that "videocameristics" serves as a tool in promoting intervention strategies. The authors argue that the diplomatic duo of fragile states and a superpower (USA) is the result of a policy of panic aimed at maintaining the existing system (Luke, T., & Tuathail, G., 1997) In it, sovereignty played a key role (or its simulation through the support of loyal regimes, as was the case during the Cold War).

In 1996, D. Thürer wrote about failing states as a phenomenon that arises when the power structures responsible for political and legal order collapse. The researcher noted that such processes are usually caused and/or accompanied by "anarchic" forms of violence within countries. This type of violence is illustrated by a quote from former UN Secretary-General B. Ghali: such forms of

violence and conflict stem from the decay of state institutions, particularly the police and judiciary bodies. This, in turn, leads to government paralysis, the decline of law and order, banditry, and chaos in such countries. Both individuals concluded that international interventions must fulfill not only military and humanitarian tasks but also the important aspect of promoting peace and restoring effective governments in these countries. (Thürer, D., 1996) Again, we see the focus on the intervention part from the more “effective” representatives of the international community.

Thürer (1996) also analyzed the popular concepts at the time, such as "failed state" and "Etats sans gouvernement" (states without government), and considered both to be insufficiently accurate and too narrow, since such cases are not just about the absence or ineffectiveness of governments or political regimes. Given that this study was written at the end of the 20th century, it is not surprising that the author viewed weak states as those Third World countries affected by the following geopolitical factors:

- The end of the Cold War, during which superpowers repeatedly supported otherwise ineffective regimes in power, using them as potential allies, arms markets, or ideological platforms. As a result, such regimes retained power solely through force, sometimes not even their own;
- The legacy of colonial regimes, especially in territories that were colonies long enough for traditional social ties and power structures to fall, but not long enough to form stable Western-style governance structures or a sense of self as a separate independent state;
- General modernization processes accelerated mobility (both social and geographical) but did not influence the processes of building the state as a stable and effective structure.

Regarding the third element, although the term "globalization" is not mentioned by the author, it is implied in the description of "accelerated mobility." Simultaneously, Thürer (1996) poses important rhetorical questions about state fragility: Is this process or condition not a "chronic pathological trend" capable of negatively impacting stable constitutional formations—the Western states? Will disintegration processes, individualization, and desolidarization [of citizens], under the influence of economic crises and environmental disasters, lead to enmity and anarchy worldwide? Some earlier researchers who examined the role of states in the 1990s like Schreuer, C. (1993) warned that the new era—presumably referring to the post-bipolar international relations system—would be characterized by the loss of the weight of state sovereignty in the traditional, Westphalian sense.

The conclusions of many studies of the earlier period of the study of the phenomenon of failed states lead to the need for intervention in such countries from a force with more power. This theoretical approach has had its share of practical implementation in foreign affairs and global politics.

The most significant ones with relation to the US foreign policy will undoubtedly be US-led interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As per the situation report by Zamikula, M. from NISS (2021) the main objectives of the US operation in Afghanistan were as follows:

- achieving rapid military success to calm down American society shocked by the 9/11 attacks;
- proving the resilience of US global leadership to the world;
- destroying an international terror base created under the patronage of the Taliban regime;
- improving the security climate in the region through the creation of a loyal (controlled) government in Kabul;
- restraining the spread of Islamic terrorism in Central Asia.

The situation in the country since 2021, aptly called in the report "Taliban 2.0" proves a range of strategic mistakes and the unavoidable fact: Washington failed to ensure the transformation of Afghanistan from a ‘failed’ into an effective state. Despite the billions of dollars invested in this project, the changes were only cosmetic. (Zamikula, 2021)

The costs of this intervention are of particular interest in connection to the perceived sums that were calculated pre and post the operation. The original assessment was provided by one of the most renowned researchers of state fragility - Rotberg, R. in 2002. That year he identified seven failed states (read: worth considering intervention to): Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Sudan, without providing a clear mechanism for defining or measuring weakness.

According to Rotberg (2002), the cost of rebuilding these states was estimated at \$15 billion over the next decade. As is often the case with spending forecasts, this figure turned out to be

insufficient, and state-building efforts proved ineffective. The research project *Costs of War* by the Watson Institute at Brown University, as of April 2021, reported that the cost of the war in Afghanistan amounted to \$2.261 trillion spent by the United States over the past twenty years. (*Costs of War*, 2021)

In the case of Iraq, Crawford (2020) estimated that the bill of war to the U.S. in \$1.922 trillion in current dollars. This figure includes not only funding appropriated to the Pentagon explicitly for the war, but spending on Iraq by the State Department, the care of Iraq War veterans and interest on debt incurred to fund 16 years of U.S. military involvement in the country.

The implicit - yet prevalent - idea of the need to intervene was posed, at least in the eyes of the public, by the notorious terrorism act of 9/11. It was later described by B. Buzan as the event that solved the US threat deficit (Buzan, B., 2006) Another, in some cases notoriously yet widely known IR thinker, F. Fukuyama stated in his 2004 book that fragile states have become the main threat to an international world order. History tends to prove different thinkers wrong and does so repeatedly.

A decade and a half after the 9/11 terrorist attack and subsequent steps taken in the international security system by the main actors were characterized by a growing interest in the academic circles to both state fragility and its consequences. Among those, the primary concern was in relation to transnational terrorism. Such a focus made way for the establishment of - no more and no less - scientific journals. A prominent example is the *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, a cross-disciplinary journal dedicated to the critical analysis of international interventions with a focus on the actions and practices that shape, influence, and transform states and societies. The first issue was published in 2007.

In the editors' preface, the aim is stated to make the journal a forum for scholars and practitioners to analyze international interventions with the goal of enhancing the capacity of countries. (Chandler, D., Chesterman, S. & Laakso, L., 2007) The proposed vision of state-building is the construction or reconstruction of governance and institutions capable of providing security and welfare guarantees to the population. The editors argued that external intervention in the governance of individual states is viewed by many as a panacea for a wide range of social, economic, and political problems. Examples include post-conflict resolution in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as international support for fragile states, particularly through state capacity-building programs implemented by organizations such as the Millennium Challenge Corporation (USA), the World Bank, and the IMF through poverty reduction strategies. (Chandler, D., Chesterman, S. & Laakso, L., 2007)

This particular journal is still in operation, however, the very sense of the original aim seems to have seriously changed over the years. This can be proven by the titles of the latest articles as of spring 2024 such as *A Queer Response to 'the Moral Untouchability of the Responsibility to Protect'* (Gifkins, J. & Cooper-Cunningham, D.), *The Home Stay Exhibitions: The Home and the Image as Hyperlocal Sites of Peacebuilding* (Fairey, T.) There is even a piece on something along the lines of *Statebuilding and the Modernisation of Welfare Governance in Russia* that does not deserve proper citation due to its perceived inadequacy in 2024.

Another example of a short-lived journal exploring similar topics is "*Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*", established in 2013 [then under the title "*Resilience*"). In the introductory statement by editor D. Chandler, who was one of the founders of the aforementioned "*Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*," a wide range of issues were outlined. These included practices of conflict prevention, state capacity-building, and other social, political, environmental, and geographical aspects that are less related to state fragility consequences. (Chandler, D., 2013)

However, in 2019, the last issue of the journal was published, indicating a shift in attention to this issue among both scholars and practitioners in the political arena.

These two concepts—resilience and statebuilding—are interconnected, as the emergence of resilient institutions is a direct result of successful statebuilding operations. Moreover, the very concept of resilience was spearheaded by international organizations such as DAC OECD, and financial institutions (IMF, World Bank) as an antonym to state fragility.

The lack of eagerness to intervene directly in what OECD since recently calls fragile contexts (OECD, 2020) is translated into the US foreign policy by the whole legal ordeal with the *Global Fragility Act* (2019) The researchers from CSIS call it a landmark piece of legislation to reform the

way the U.S. government conducts conflict prevention and stabilization operations. Its very preparation and adoption mark a significant shift in the US foreign affairs perspective. The act seeks to harness the full spectrum of U.S. diplomacy, assistance, and engagement over a 10-year horizon, with the overarching goal to help countries move from fragility to stability and from conflict to peace. (Christianson, J., Herdt, C., & Nadolny, G., 2023)

This document is usually considered in tandem with the 2020 United States Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (US State Department, 2020). The consistency of the politics towards fragile states is later reiterated in NSS under the Biden administration. (United States, 2022)

**Conclusions.** The discourse on state fragility was sparked by the disruptions in the international relations system post-1991. Since then, the term has survived different iterations, categorizations, and approaches from varying parties.

Securitization of many international political issues was a characteristic feature in the speeches of politicians and the works of scholars of international relations after the terrorist attack of 2001. Indeed, this event demonstrated the fact that the absence of stability and order in one region of the world crosses state borders, and is transnational. Such an examination of key international relations issues, i.e. growing instability in various regions and state fragility quickly led to the usage of the concept of "intervention" in the rhetoric of many officials.

Later such an approach was further ardently supported with Afghanistan and Iraq interventions by those in favor of such actions. At the same time, the view that existing and future international security challenges would stem from fragile states rather than global players seems to have been an exaggeration influenced by the context of that time.

Later the discourse of development-security nexus was transformed into the conflict prevention mechanism, characterized particularly by the militarization of relationships between key donors and different fragile states.

The failing attempts to establish effective, and, most importantly, Western-type states in different regions turned into failed, prolonged and costly interventions. After two decades of trying to solve fragility with force, the international community has finally come to the conclusion that state fragility might not pose existential threats to security. Therefore, the argument can be made that intervention as a method of solving the issue of state fragility proved too costly and ineffective in chosen cases. Reassessment of such approaches led to a change in foreign policy vision in the United States. Currently, the prevention of conflict is of higher importance and serves as a first priority policy - at least as declared.

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