

# WILL THE STATE WITHER AWAY?

THROUGHOUT the twentieth century the nature and role of the nation-state has provoked fierce debate: critics have vilified it as the primary source of war and insecurity in the international system; supporters have claimed that the state at the very least provides the benefits of order and stable government. Without its protective net, men would rapidly return to a state of nature where life is “nasty, brutish, and short”.

The persistence of the nation-state is perhaps the most remarkable feature: those who are stateless because of alien rule or incorporation into multi-national empires such as the Soviet Union have — with varying degrees of success — struggled to create nation-states in which the principle of national self-determination can find expression.

In the aftermath of the First World War, new states emerged in Central and Southern Europe and the Middle East as old empires disintegrated. A similar process occurred after 1945 as the great European empires conceded — in some cases after violent struggle — independence to their former colonies.

Today, some 150 states belong to the United Nations, but many of the newcomers are artificial creations, uneasily embracing a variety of ethnic groups and lack of any profound sense of national identity. Thus, the dream of nineteenth-century liberals that state and new-born nation would happily fuse to produce democratic self-government has, in many instances, proved an illusion.

Relatively few of the world's new states (and certainly several of the old) pass that test as polyglot empires jostle with Third World autocracies and the minority of mature democracies of Western Europe and North America in the international arena.

Yet today there is a challenge to the overarching sovereignty of the state from three very different sources, the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and Ethiopia, for example, contain suppressed nationalities seeking autonomy, if not independence, from hegemonic and repressive control from the centre.

This trend is reversed in Western Europe however, where a gradual process of political and economic integration offers a long-term prospect of a continent united under supranational institutions of government.

Similar developments are under way elsewhere in West Africa and Southern Africa, for example, where transnational structures exist to promote common interests — especially in the realm of economic development.

Finally, the inviolability of state sovereignty appears under threat as international organisations such as the UN debate the utility and legality of intervention in states where human rights are most flagrantly abused.

There is a fourth challenge to the continued utility of state sovereignty: the increasing difficulty that governments face in co-ordinating policies to cope with environmental degradation. Acid rain, after all, does not acknowledge the barrier of state boundaries, but this is a subject which requires separate and discreet analysis.

What are the implications of these developments for the traditional role of the state as the exclusive guarantor of domestic order, a focus for the political aspirations of a people and the provider of security in a hostile world?

At first sight, the internal challenge to the sovereignty of states such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia seems the most acute: Western attitudes are an uneasy combination of liberal concern

for the plight of, for example, suppressed peoples subject to forceable repression and conservative fears that the disintegration of any state — however authoritarian — threatens the principle and utility of statehood as defined above. Thus — if all claims to independence were met — the result would be division and sub-division to match ethnic particularity to appropriate boundaries. The result would be a bewildering mosaic of statelets lacking economic viability and prone to quarrel over the political future of minorities left outside the new dispensation.

Thus the price of freedom might be greater impoverishment, but — asks the conservative — is that what people *really* want? The nationalist always says yes, obeying the injunction to seek ye first the political kingdom, but that answer rings increasingly hollow as the ills affecting the Third World amply demonstrate.

Of course, supporters of self-determination at all costs must expect to pay a high price in terms of redefinition of boundaries and transfers of populations. But who would supervise the process? There are few — if any encouraging precedents in the realm of international organization, the ethos of which is profoundly conservative. In Africa, for example, the Organisation of African Unity remains adamant on the principle of frontier inviolability. True, transfers of population — refugees — do take place; but they are enforced by famine and brutal dictatorship.

Furthermore, argue the conservative defenders of the status quo, the existing states-system offers at least a semblance of international order. Ultimately order and justice for those who languish under repressive government cannot be easily reconciled. After all, the primacy given to order during the Cold War — reflected

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in the spheres of interest doctrine — produced a relatively stable peace in Europe at the cost of Western connivance of Soviet repression at home and in the satellites.

European Community involvement in the Yugoslavia crisis demonstrates the ambivalence of Western policy: tough action against Belgrade involving military intervention on the side of Croats and Slovenes is ruled out on the legitimate ground that the political objective cannot be defined in sensibly limited terms.

The fear of an extended commitment is real: occupation and the reconstruction of the Yugoslav state — a task for which the EC is not equipped and in any case lacks the political will required to mount so massive an enterprise.

On the other hand, the diplomatic initiatives taken so far can — if successful — only produce short term palliatives — ceasefires and round table conferences.

In any case, EC ideology is directed at integrating states into a larger whole rather than supervising the deliberate fragmentation of a state into smaller, independent units. In the last analysis, constitutional solutions cannot be imposed or negotiated from the outside — whether for Yugoslavia or — for that matter — South Africa. Local actors have to find local solutions.

The growth of community-style institutions *a la* the European Community has been seen as the most potent attack

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state will further stimulate integration between the member states.

But the parallels with European integration are not exact, indeed are positively unhelpful: the six states which signed the Treaty of Rome in 1957 had much in common — parliamentary politics; a commitment to a free market; a common external enemy in the form of the Soviet Union. Furthermore, no one member state of the EC could dominate the rest.

Is this true of the states of Southern Africa?

Further economic — let alone political — integration in Southern Africa has to face the obstacle posed by South Africa's hegemonic role in terms of economic power and military strength. And the notion that South Africa would exercise self-restraint in its relations with its weaker neighbours for the sake of the benefits accruing to the region as a whole is credible only on the assumption that the impersonal operations of the marketplace would be curbed by the deliberate exercise of state power.

That may happen; but the cost in purely economic terms might be high.

math of the Gulf War. There was much talk of 'safe havens' for displaced Kurds in Iraq; but is the principle of UN intervention generally applicable across the board? The inroads into Iraq's sovereignty were the product of special circumstances:

(a) the prior achievement of swift victory against the chief culprit, Saddam Hussein, with coalition forces, therefore, available to protect the Kurds;

(b) a concentrated media campaign on the plight of the Kurds overcame an initial Western reluctance to act at all;

(c) the Soviet Union and China backed Western intervention on this occasion, but with no commitment to establish a precedent which could be turned against their internal policies at a later stage.

Finally, it is one thing to get well-nigh universal agreement on the case of expelling Iraq from Kuwait. Much was at stake for all the parties, not least oil. But the combination of moral principle, calculated national interest and near universal consensus which inspired the coalition against Iraq will be far more difficult to generate in other cases.

Repressed minorities elsewhere would, therefore, be ill-advised to look for succour to the UN. After all, consider how long it took for the Kurdish issue to force itself on to the international agenda and that was a by-product of orthodox balance of power politics.

Thus the notion of a new international order sanctified and enforced by the UN will apply — if at all — to deterring and defending against straightforward infringement of sovereignty by one state against another i.e. invasion and occupation.

And even that proposition will only hold selectively depending on the national interests of the great powers concerned.

Indeed, the refusal to take steps to topple Saddam Hussein and the reluctance to protect the Kurds and the Shi'ite Muslims over the long term suggests that the quest for universal justice — as distinct from the pragmatic maintenance of an imperfect international order based on the primacy of the state — will be as elusive as ever. ●

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on the principle of state sovereignty. Bit by bit sovereignty has been whittled away as Brussels has assumed responsibility for particular functions of the state. The outcome is, of course, still uncertain and a federal Europe — a new super state — is years away. Nevertheless, the European model of political and economic integration is regarded as having relevance to other regions — especially in the Third World. The future of SADCC (Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference) in particular, is cited in this context on the assumption that a post-apartheid Southern African

The historical record suggests instead that hegemonic powers behave accordingly and the question remains: why should a post apartheid South African state behave differently?

Finally, we turn to the argument that the post-Gulf War 'new international order' means a greatly expanded role for the Security Council of the United Nations — a superpower condominium to police the vile spots of the world in the name of justice for the deprived.

This proposition and its adverse implications for the maintenance of state sovereignty gained credence in the after-