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THE MONOPOLY OF VIOLENCE IN FRAGILE STATES - THE PROBLEM OR SOLUTION?

Abstract:

This article critically examines the concept of the monopoly on the legitimate use of force in fragile states, investigating whether it constitutes a source of instability or a potential solution. Drawing on postcolonial and liberal theoretical frameworks, the study explores the historical roots of state fragility, the role of extractive institutions, and the legacies of colonialism. It analyses how military power, both direct and indirect, functions as a tool of state-building through peacekeeping, capacity building, and external intervention. Case studies and empirical findings highlight the complex interplay between external security assistance and domestic governance, emphasizing that while military engagement is not a panacea, it is often a prerequisite for effective development and peacebuilding. The paper argues that establishing a legitimate and accountable monopoly of violence is essential for overcoming fragility and enabling broader institutional reform. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at balancing coercive stability with long-term state legitimacy and resilience.

Key words:
liberal interventionism, political instability, monopoly of violence

INTRODUCTION

"A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." (Max Weber, 1918). Most theories of international relations and statecraft agree with Weber's proclamation that the existential reason of a state is the fostering of stability and security. However, while for many

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societies violence, poverty and instability are vestiges of the past, fragile states cluster the world map and fail the core functions they are designed to provide. While definitions differ, the fragile states index characterizes fragile states with: "the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force; the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions; an inability to provide reasonable public services; the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community." (Fragile State Index, 2024). As fragility is a consequence and cause of armed conflict (and vice versa), their correlation is daunting as constant fragility risks restarting a cycle of violence in perpetuity (Dupuy et al., 2016). While not all fragile states are threatened by armed conflict, those states and populations face the greatest risks and are hence exclusive subject to this study. Despite the recent interstate Russo-Ukrainian War or the looming Chinese invasion of Taiwan, the vast majority of today's conflicts are characterized by their intrastate, extrasystemic (conflict between a state and non-state armed group outside the state's territory) or non-state nature (Uppsala University, 2024). While developmental programs identify and combat a vast array of needs such as economic development, societal equality or legal righteousness a key prerequisite is operational safety. However, as many fragile states are embroiled in violent conflicts, they are unable to guarantee the safety of humanitarian assistance and developmental aid, thereby limiting their effectiveness or even existence. Enforcing the monopoly on the legitimate use of force is hence the first step in state building and a key priority for aiding states. Recognizing this necessity, former US Defense Secretary Robert Gates (2010) proclaimed that building partner militaries in fragile states "is in many ways the ideological and security challenge of our time".

In this study military power refers to the means by which an external state takes influence in a host state through military intervention. It will subsequently encompass direct intervention (peacekeeping, deployments, kinetic warfare) as well as indirect intervention (intelligence sharing, capacity building). Plenty of academics and practitioners have laid the groundwork by researching and discussing the merits and

limitations of military power as a tool to state building. With the research question: "What role should military power play in developing fragile states?", this study will attempt to further illuminate the use of military power in assisting fragile states.

This article will be divided into two main parts. Firstly, an analysis of postcolonial and liberal theory will explore where state fragility originates from and why it has historically been addressed by specific global actors. The second part will further the argument that military means should be heavily leaned on in securing fragile states despite significant shortcomings that have to be recognized and countered.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF FRAGILE STATES

While not perfect and critiqued for biased, incomplete and untransparent measurements and analysis, the fragile state index provides a metanalysis of state failure. While this study recognizes the methodological inconsistencies of this index, it is simultaneously acknowledged that the project provides an accurate enough depiction of real-world issues and is hence used without further disclaimer. In analyzing the geographical distribution of fragile states in 2024 a clear picture emerges (Fragile States Index, 2024). While Western states are classified as stable, many ex-colonies, chiefly in Africa and the Middle East, are embroiled in turmoil. By relying on postcolonial theory this clear division will be investigated in the first part of this section. The second part will use liberal philosophy to explain why many Western liberal actors intervene in fragile states.

At its core postcolonial theory argues that the legacies of colonialism and imperialism reverberate in our society to this day never having fully ceased to exist. Contrary to the mainstream theories of realism and liberalism, post colonialist views the international system not as anarchic but hierarchic. This hierarchy originated in the Western domination during the imperial era and created distance between the ruling Western states and the "other", often classified in the "North-South" divide (Nair, 2017). Many events and practices that originated during that time permeated throughout history and

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contributed to the current fragility of non-western states. The mere act of colonialism led to the arbitrary delineation of borders, most of which constitutes today's state boundaries. Devoid from any practicality and logic, colonial borders were often drawn without regard for geography, ethnicity or cultural divisions. This at-will division of territory between occupying powers, has led to fragmented societies with deep internal divisions. In one of the most diabolical examples to date, the Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek borders were deliberately drawn vague and cross-ethnic and geographic. With the aim to ensure instability, ethnic tensions and thereby dependencies on the UDSSR, the border region has been the source of continued conflict for more than 30 years after their independence (Rahimov & Urazaeva, 2005). Historic borders, and the resulting demographic and resource availability, suggest a certain path dependency for ex-colonial states. This claim is further accentuated by Robinson & Acemoğlu (2012) who found institutions to be the ultimate indicator of state failure. Institutions are classified as either inclusive, which creates opportunities for participation, protects private property, upholds the rule of law, and encourages innovation and investment or extractive which exploit resources for the benefit of the ruling class, discourage innovation, and fail to provide incentives for broader societal participation. Colonization has locked states onto a path of extractive institutional development as the ex-colonies were used as a labor and resource pool for consumers and markets in the West. While the types of institution and social hierarchy that were enacted differed between the colonial overlords, they all contributed to the creation of systems that prioritized the extraction of wealth over the development of inclusive governance and economic systems Tusalem (2016). These institutions often entrenched inequality, with power concentrated in the hands of local elites thereby contributing to an urban-rural developmental divide. This legacy left many postcolonial states with weak institutional frameworks, lacking mechanisms for accountability, representation, or equitable resource distribution. Upon independence, these extractive institutions, reliant on violent coercion and designed to control the masses, were easily usurped thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty,

corruption, and inequality (Schneider & Wiesehomeier, 2008; Robinson & Acemoğlu, 2012).

While global actors ostensibly recognize the plight of fragile states, they continue their practices of domination and exploitation through unfavorable trade systems, dubious military interventions and selective developmental aid (refusals). Specifically, military power is used to project continued dependencies on more powerful nations as seen in French, Russian or American deployments across Africa and the Middle East. Nominally under the prerogative of fighting terrorism and building native security capacities, these deployments can also be seen as projecting power in international rivalries while simultaneously safeguarding domestic capitalist business ventures in the host state. However, it would not be prudent to classify the deployment and intervention of external military forces in fragile states solely as self-interested. Many capacity building programs, donations and deployments are requested by the host nation and put immense financial and material burden onto benefactors. To delve deeper into the motivation of states that lend and transfer military power, liberalism offers an interesting perspective.

Unlike realists' philosophy, liberals argue that material power is not the sole determinant of international relations. While the notion of an anarchic international system is accepted by both sides, liberals maintain that international institutions and cooperation can promote and enforce peace, thereby mitigating the system's worst effects (Terriff et al., 1999). Even in matters of national security, states have recognized that it is possible to increase security through other means than military and economic hard power. Through coordination and cooperation, mutual interests can be meaningfully pursued as seen in the success of international organizations like NATO or OPEC. While liberal state building emphasizes democratization, rule of law, human rights, and market economies, it should not be perceived as pacifistic, indeed it is often realists that try to prevent a liberal military intervention (Wallis, 2017).

There are three liberal arguments and reasons why foreign states exercise military power in fragile states: they try

to 1) protect human rights, 2) promote democracy, and 3) increase global and regional security.

Firstly, the United Nations is the pinnacle of liberal institutionalism and was chiefly designed to prevent armed conflict while fostering cooperation and globalization. In the wake of two genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica, the United Nations members unanimously agreed that states have a responsibility to protect (R2P) populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (R2P, 2024). Primarily, the R2P doctrine reiterates sovereign states individual responsibility to protect human rights. However, it also maintains that the international community has the responsibility to assist UN member states in this mission and is mandated to intervene if a state is incapable to do so. While direct military intervention is always meant to be the last resort, the International Community has accepted its potential necessity in order to prevent future genocides. Critics have voiced concern over the effectiveness of the R2P doctrine as its most prominent invocation, 2011 in Libya, was a disaster that is directly responsible for the current fragility of the Libyan state as well as violent regional spillover effects in the Sahel (Peta, 2017). Critics lament the Western intervention as an exclusive mission of regime change, which can be argued to be the second reason for liberal interventions.

Democratic Peace Theory maintains that democratic states don't go to war against each other, which means world peace is possible in a purely democratic state system. The argument rests on structural and normative notions. Firstly, unlike autocracies, democracies possess strong domestic political institutions with checks and balances. Since citizens are directly impacted by the costs of war, democratically elected leaders should be less inclined to violent intervention (Placek, 2012). Although this does not guarantee that citizens in democracies will never support war, they tend to be more cautious about electing leaders with aggressive tendencies, understanding the potential risks to themselves. The normative argument maintains that due to the shared values of democracies, peaceful means of domestic conflict resolution extend in the international realm. The realization that differences can be addressed through non-violent means, leads

democratic states to refuse to act violently against another democracy (Placek, 2012). However, on the flipside this also means that democratic states are thus more likely to go to war with non-democratic states as mutual values and trust is non-existent. As Doyle (1983) found, democracies often escalate conflicts of interests into interventions as their revulsion at autocracies' human rights records can lead to moral crusades against them. In the context of failed states, the Democratic Peace Theory provides Western states with a moral argument to intervene in favor of democratic movements or provide a lifeline to failing democracies to prevent them from democratic backsliding. A weak allied democratic state is viewed as a better guarantor of international security than a strong hostile autocratic state.

This objective of increasing global and regional security is the last liberal argument for military interventions in fragile states. Fragile states, characterized by weak institutional frameworks and a lack of professionalized militaries, are fertile grounds for transnational threats that undermine international stability (Craft, 2021). The international community attempts to address this issue through peacekeeping operations and military capacity building. Military capacity-building initiatives aim to develop foreign militaries' ability to produce or effectively deploy military hardware and tactics to strengthen domestic defense capabilities. They empower legitimate state actors to establish a monopoly of violence within their territories and address the root causes of insecurity while diminishing the risk posed by non- state actors to the international system (Karlin, 2018). From a realist perspective, these actions would primarily be interpreted as mechanisms for shifting balances of power and advancing national interests. However, liberal theorists view these measures as contributions to the broader goal of fostering global stability as these efforts align with the liberal emphasis on cooperation and the interdependence of states in achieving collective security. Similarly, peacekeeping operations are designed to stabilize post-conflict regions, support political transitions, and prevent the recurrence of violence, thereby reinforcing the international community's commitment to peace and stability (Dunton et al., 2023). In this sense, both capacity building and peacekeeping reflect the

liberal aspiration to construct a cooperative and secure international order through institutional frameworks and shared norms.

THE NECESSITY OF MILITARY POWER

Military intervention is by no means the panacea that magically pulls fragile states out of their debilitating state. It is however the single most important factor in creating the stability necessary for subsequent humanitarian assistance, development and peace processes (Forsberg, 2020). Military interventions should not outrightly be dismissed as imperialistic or inherently selfish. While many past interventions had illicit objectives and dubious justifications, military interventions can help enforce peace, prevent conflict and as a result lead to prosperity.

Direct intervention can bring existing conflicts to an end and prevent conflict (re-) emergence. Much of liberal state building theory emphasizes the importance of good governance and the hearts-and-mind strategy to win over civilians in conflict-ridden areas. In her study of counter-insurgency campaigns, Hazelton (2021) critiques this approach as idealistic and inefficient, as recently visualized by the US evacuation of Afghanistan. Hazelton finds that hostile interstate actors are more often brought down through brute force and coercion of elites rather than popular reforms. Her compellence theory explains that successful offensive military interventions against hostile actors succeed through violence, while liberal reforms such as democratization or market liberalization only occur after the successful defeat of insurgencies. Her findings reveal the centrality of hard power to secure territorial integrity and a monopoly on violence, which is central in the longevity of peace. While this is by no means an invitation or excuse for unlawful or violent military campaigns, academics and policymakers should realize that the defeat of adversaries might not always be possible through more legal, passive and liberal COIN strategies. Miklaucic (2022) recognizes this and maintains that democracy is not a means to an end and should only be pursued after establishing stable

and native- driven governance. Simultaneously in cases where conflicts are ongoing or risk reigniting and offensive military interventions are unfeasible, the deployment of UN peacekeepers is found to reduce the likelihood of violence by 75% (Guterres, 2018). This is due to traditional peacekeeping operations, like DDR programs, creating the basic conditions needed for addressing the underlying causes of conflicts through monitoring borders, implementing ceasefires and assisting with peace agreements. The countering of insurgencies and establishment of government control contribute positively to stability and proves essential for long lasting peace processes (Forsberg, 2020).

Indirect military interventions legitimize the government by enforcing the prerogative of native security actors in their fight against illegitimate actors and in the creation of stability. Such interventions often take the form of intelligence sharing and capacity building measures. Capacity building refers to training and equipment programs that transfer military hardware and tactics to host countries and make local security actors familiar in their use. Actors like the US and EU use capacity building as a cost-effective way of increasing partner states internal and external deterrence capability to defend themselves without direct intervention (Karlin, 2018). The underlying issue of fragile states lack of military professionalism is directly addressed however significant shortcomings need to be mentioned. As found by Travis (2023) military capacity building measures in Afghanistan were inconsistent and created dependencies onto US logistical and material support. A fallacy of many capacity building measures is the focus on conventional western military doctrines and the focus on material support. Furthermore, Sullivan et al. (2018) shows that a focus on material donations strengthens the security sector relative to other state institutions and therefore encourages the government to become more restrictive. Weapon shipments increase the state's capacity for repression while lowering the cost of it. Hence it is of existential importance to not limit capacity building measures to material aid but actively monitor and influence organizational structures and personnel appointments. Fragile states often

affected by interethnic rivalry show deficiencies and therefore require fundamental structural reforms (Karlin, 2018).

Especially in fragile states affected by terrorism or criminal enterprises, intelligence sharing is used to bolster legitimate forces' ability to counter those threats. This can involve sharing satellite imagery, drone surveillance data, or human intelligence to improve operational planning. While intelligence sharing is limited to actors capable of acting on it, it is nonetheless an important and indirect practice that more capable external forces can provide to prevent threats from materializing (OECD, 2009).

As a result of the greater stability after successful direct or indirect military interventions sustainable humanitarian assistance, developmental aid and peace processes can begin. It is paramount that security measures have to be integrated with civilian interventions to assist fragile states. Without adequate humanitarian and developmental aid, security operations risk being isolated and can thereby prolong or even worsen a state of fragility (Forsberg, 2020).

Military and civilian operations have to work in unison in order to create meaningful change, however the establishment of a secure operational environment is the first step in this process. Military combat operations and deployments that create stability can improve access for developmental workers to insecure areas, facilitate the movement of humanitarian personnel and materials and induce private sector investment (Forsberg, 2020). As evidenced by the case of the MONUSCO mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, UN deployments prevented the expansion of the illicit economy, allowed local manufactures and services to expand and attracted valuable foreign capital investment (Scott, 2020). While economic growth based on consumption by foreign peacekeepers was witnessed, it has to be acknowledged that this can create a localized and unsustainable economic boom that creates dependencies on foreign powers. Hence to discourage nascent dependencies on foreign actors, wherever possible direct intervention should be limited to the establishment of stability to start locally led peace processes.

CONCLUSION

Fragile states are states in crises due to unique, case-specific circumstances that often face a loss of control and ability to guarantee security to their population. A postcolonial theoretical analysis of the origin of fragile states and subsequent liberal interventions, ostensibly for their betterment, reveals the centrality of Western actors as both perpetrators and guardians. The fragility of many struggling states today can be traced back to oppressive colonial and imperial practices. Yet those same actors are often involved in attempts to reform extractive institutions and halt violent conflicts that continue to erode fragile states' social and economic foundations. Western liberal states intervene under the banner of human rights, democracy promotion, and global security—often with noble intentions. However, the results of such interventions have been deeply mixed. Civilian casualties, institutional degradation, and prolonged instability remain common outcomes, particularly when interventions lack long-term commitment, local legitimacy, or coordination with civilian efforts. Cases like Afghanistan, Libya, or Somalia reveal that even interventions pursued in the name of stability can unintentionally entrench fragility. It is therefore essential to recognize that military intervention alone cannot build states, it can only open the political and security space necessary for meaningful, locally-driven reform. When misused, the monopoly of violence risks reproducing cycles of repression, but when carefully structured and aligned with inclusive governance, it can create the conditions for peace and sovereignty.

The future of fragile states lies not in the hands of external actors alone but in the ability of these societies to reclaim and redefine legitimate authority. International support must be strategic, restrained, and rooted in partnership, not paternalism. Only by marrying short-term security with long-term institutional development can the international community help fragile states transform from subjects of intervention to authors of their own stability.

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