

Remarks at the 2004 Peder Sather Symposium, University of Berkeley

Shaping Global Order

The US and Europe:

What do we do about failed states and rogue states and how do we do it?

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What makes the topic of our Symposium particularly challenging is that there are as many good reasons to emphasize differences between the US and Europe (as did Ambassador Pierre Schori and, even more, Professor Stephen Krasner) as there are equally solid arguments (provided by Anders Mellbourne) for demonstrating the similarity between their basic approaches to security disasters and humanitarian catastrophes often labeled 'failed states'. We might conclude that the political discrepancies are never as big as we fear but never as small as we hope. A different way to formulate would be: the gap between the US and the European approach may be quite deep but it is not so wide as to prevent a common action plan.

There is no technical possibility to compress a full-blown argument on this issue into a five-minute presentation, so I will limit it to just two points in explaining the depth of the gap and two points in explaining its narrowness.

The first point involves Europe's vast and recent first-hand experience with state failure. Most of Europe's senior citizens have clear memories about the inability of their respective states to deliver on their basic functions; it is not only the WWII that is the issue here, but the wide variety of local brands of Nazism and fascism. By no means are these memories the thing of the past: state failure in Europe continues as we speak. Typically, if you ask about the first associations with the term 'failed states', Europeans would reflect not on Rwanda and 'The Black Hawk Down', but on Mitrovica and Srebrenica. And, conceptualizing this problem, many Europeans would start with a pre-conception that no state is too big (the USSR was as big as it gets) or too small (Moldova is indeed tiny) to fail.

The second point in examining the differences would come clear when the question is raised about the main driving forces behind state failure phenomenon. Typically, it is very easy to agree on the 'poverty factor', since a similar 'guilt complex' of being 'too rich' applies. However, in Europe, there is plenty of evidence that differences in income (or GDP per capita) provide no satisfactory explanation: SFRY was quite rich by East European standards, and Georgia was one of the richest places in the USSR. In operational terms, the US focuses on dictatorship (or, more generally, mismanagement) as a key problem, while recent (and too numerous for comfort) European experiences point in a different direction – secessionism. It is not only an acute problem but also a delicate topic, since many if not most present-day European states (Including Norway) are products of successful secessionist projects. The pressure of the unresolved conflicts and this historic legacy explain why the Europeans have no clue whatsoever about how to handle the Kosovo issue ('constructive ambiguity' is the word).

The first point in explaining the compatibility of the US and the European positions is that there is no Europe. Indeed, the European integration has advanced beyond expectations in some areas – but it is lagging quite dramatically behind in others. And every advance in integrations creates a burning desire to re-confirm the residual state sovereignty. For most European states the proposition that together they might be able to make big difference is much less attractive than the chance to make some sort of difference on its own. International visibility is particularly important for small states (and most state in Europe certainly are in this group), and the best way to achieve it quite often is not to go to Brussels, but to go to Washington (as was the case with the war in Iraq). The EU enlargement may be an important political victory but it is also a vast organizational disaster that is certain to aggravate these multiple splits.

The second point is related to this lack of unity and involves the capabilities (or, more precisely, the lack of thereof) to deal with failed states. The EU's inability to build a meaningful military arm is a separate sad story, but generally it does not take a crystal ball to foresee that internal tensions and conflicts would be consuming more and more attention in the years to come. Therefore, the political and economic resources available for helping out the failed states that are of no immediate concerns for European security will be diminishing. From the point of view of a 'failing state' in urgent need of attention and aid, the war in Iraq is certainly a disaster (as it consumes enormous amount of both) but the EU failure to adopt a Constitution is also a serious setback.

Instead of drawing a bottom-line (and the points taken are too disjointed to make it a useful exercise), an abbreviated argument could be taken with Kofi Annan, who 'allegedly' (speaking at Berkeley) expressed his hope that by the end of this decade the focus of academic and political debates would shift to 'big issues', like global warming, pandemics, shortage of key resources, including water. In my opinion, these issues could massively increase in their impact – but we will still be debating their immediate political consequences, like state failure.