

THE CHANGING ATTITUDE TOWARDS STATE FRAGILITY

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Summary

The aim of the article is to trace the changes in the views of scholars on state fragility in recent decades. The paper marks the milestones of discourse changes on fragile states. The basic models and gaps in state functioning are covered, as well as the main aspects that have brought about changes in the attitude towards state fragility. The latest trends such as the usage of the resilient state term are also described. The article mentions the main poles of opinions towards the subject and mentions a range of existing debates in this regard. The greater context of international security is being taken into account. The view from the representatives of so-called fragile states is presented by the example of g7+ group. The article analyses the changes in the usage of the term, in the view of the core of the state functions and existing gaps as well as the latest trends in the discourse on state fragility.

Keywords: fragile states, international security, transnational threats, state-building discourse.

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Introduction

What is known today as the discourse of state fragility has taken a few decades in the making. From a catchy phrase constituted by the word combination “failed states” introduced by Helman & Ratner (1992) it has transformed into an argued upon yet frequently used definition of fragile states and further derivatives such as situations of fragility or fragile contexts.

This article aims at tracing the milestones that mark shaping of the current understanding of the notion. The concept of a fragile state is inherently connected with more notions such as “statehood”, “state effectiveness”, “sovereignty”, “governance” and more. The changes in the discourse on state fragility coincided with a few significant shifts in the world’s history, the main one being the 9/11 terrorist act. Until 2001, the main field where the term has been used widely was development-related areas. Later on, the security-development nexus has gotten the spotlight in the researchers’ circles, as well as the issue of transnational threats.

The organizations that have shown the primary interest in the concept of failed (later – fragile) states were USAID, World Bank Group, OECD and some of the developed countries, such as the US, UK, Germany, etc. Post-2001 times have seen the rise in the usage of the concept (Rotberg, 2011). Around these time the academia circles have been divided into the proponents of the usage of the term and those who viewed it as diminishing and/or even unnecessary.

The proposed changes and critique of the term has led to its transformation. The usage of the adjective “failed” has been widely seen as derogative and even offensive. An illustrative example of the shift in the attitude is changing the name of one of the most cited indexes measuring state fragility. Published from 2005 by the Fund for Peace in cooperation with Foreign Policy journal, FIS was known till 2014 as “Failed States Index” and as of now is known as “Fragile States Index.”

To trace the changing attitude towards state fragility, the following aspects will be taken into account for the purposes of this article:

- the changes in the usage of the term itself;
- the changes in the view of the core of the state functions and existing gaps;
- the latest trends in the discourse on state fragility.

The differing poles of opinion

One of the ways to trace back the changes in the terms that have been used to describe ineffective fragile states is by mentioning the differentiation proposed by Newman (2009). The analysts are divided into three groups depending on their attitude toward the concept. The poles of opinion are as follows:

1. Uncritically accepting scholars who recognize state fragility as a shift in paradigm and the fundamental threat to the international order;
2. Skeptical analysts who research the notion yet have many reservations in terms of epistemology, objective definition, measuring fragility and other points;
3. Those researchers who reject the idea of using the term failed states and seeing it as negative concept offered by those with interventionist connotations.

As some kind of a response to the third pole of opinion outlined above the presence of g7+ group is worth mentioning. Describing themselves as a voluntary association of countries that are or have been affected by conflict and remain in transition to the next stage of development, the members of g7+ group acknowledge the existing issue of fragility and have little problem with being known as such.

Though officially the group was formed in 2010, it is acknowledged by the members that the roots go back to signed in 2005 in France Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2005). The document described by OECD as a “practical, action-oriented roadmap to improve the quality of aid and its impact on development” was based around five crucial elements of advancing aid in terms of effectiveness (ownership; alignment; harmonisation; results; mutual accountability)

In three years’ time, the Accra Agenda for Action (AAA) was accepted at the high level (OECD, 2008). This document outlined four main areas where improvement is needed towards achievement of the Paris goals (ownership; partnerships that are to be inclusive; orientation at delivering results; capacity development)

Around that time the talks on the g7+ group have already been taking place within informal meetings and in two years the 2010 Dili declaration was signed in Timor-Leste. As of now, there are twenty member countries presented at the ministerial level forming the Secretariat (Afghanistan, Burundi, CAR, Chad, Comoros, Côte d'Ivoire, DRC, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Liberia, Papua New Guinea, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, South Sudan, Timor-Leste, Togo, Yemen)

Going back to the changes in the usage of the term itself, Bartenev (2017) traces the changes according to Google Scholar database mentions of the term between 2000 and 2015. The graph of largely interchangeable usage of word combinations “failed state” and “fragile state” is on the rise up to 2015, when the novelties such as “situations of fragility” becomes more preferable. There are also such notions as “fragile contexts” and “conflict-affected areas”, which is the result of the reigning security-development nexus consensus in developmental studies of the first decade of 2000s.

The functions, gaps and security

Getting back to the core of the term and the changes in the view of state functions and existing gaps, it is important to first give the overview of state functions and reflect the changing attitude to state fragility with the examples.

One of the first organizations focused on the research of fragile states was the US State Failure Task Force established in 1994. It was later renamed into Political Instability Task Force (PITF). The main research of this entity is Polity data series, of which the fifth part is the most up-to-date one. POLITY project was initiated at the end of 1960s by late Ted R. Gurr, and his former student Monty D. Marshall is in charge now (*Marshall, Gurr & Jaggers, 2016*). Up until early 2020, the research was supported by PITF.

The data for the Polity research covers all independent states with the population of 500000 or more (currently there are 167 countries analyzed for the period of 1800–2018). Though the POLITY project is more focused on the regime type, supplemental research on such issues as civil wars, genocide, politicides etc. has been of immense importance for state fragility discourse, among other fields and subjects. For instance, the key document Phase III Findings by Goldstone et al. (2000) advanced the research on state effectiveness and existing gaps, in particular the one on state capacity.

The gaps, of which there were many proposed variations, in state operation are the shaping drivers of the whole state fragility discourse. Thus, it should come as no surprise that dozens of scholars pay attention to this issue. One of the most comprehensive widely cited models was proposed by Carment, Prest & Samy (2010) and elaborated on by Grävingsholt et al. (2015) is known as ACL abbreviation.

The model in question describes fragile states as such countries where the gaps in authority, capacity and/or legitimacy are present. Any of the proposed gaps can be subject to debating for both the definition and measuring. C. T. Call, for instance, offers the perspective on capacity-security-legitimacy, where the previously mentioned state authority aspect goes as a part of the first element (*Call, 2008*).

In order to proceed with highlighting the changes in the attitude towards state fragility, the gaps need to be elaborated on. Borrowing the definition from the User's Guide on Measuring Fragility (*Mata & Ziaja, 2009*), the model of the triquetra of gaps may be presented as follows:

- 1) How effective are countries in terms of performing their functions;
- 2) Whether the state possesses the monopoly on the legitimate use of force;
- 3) Whether there is the accepted legitimacy (the state is accepted by all parties)

Though some pose questions to the first two points (*Call, 2010*), the part with legitimacy seem to have unanimous consent from a majority of scholars engaged in state fragility studies. The state needs to be legitimate both in the eyes of the population and other international actors.

The main question about the first gap of state's capacity to perform core functions lies in the attitude towards the gap. Most indexes and research projects on state fragility counter the issue of state functions at the preliminary phases as no further discussion on whether state is or is not effective depend on the core of its performance.

In this regard, the definition of core state functions provided by the Institute for State Effectiveness (ISE) is of interest. Having Dr. Ashraf Ghani as the co-founder, the institution has worked in 21 countries that were mostly fragile contexts and conflict-affected areas. The ten functions as outline, among others, by Ghani & Lockhart (2007), are:

1. Governance and Public Sector Management that involves decision-making, guiding relationships between organizations and individuals and vice versa as well as providing opportunities to the population;
2. Market Engagement that covers citizens' involvement in the market and capitalizing on the economic advantages;
3. Security function encompasses the monopoly of the state on the legitimate use of force and security guarantees to the population;
4. Infrastructure as the basics of any societal community and all kinds of institutions;
5. Rule of Law relates to the presence and adherence to set standards and rules by all members of the society;
6. Human Capital function of the state highlights such spheres as healthcare and education, leaving some room to "Other Social Services";
7. Public Financial Management which is of extreme importance in fragile states due to lack of transparency and corruption;
8. Citizen Engagement & Participation function is based on state being able to provide equal opportunities and full inclusion of the society representatives;
9. Asset Management Function;
10. Disaster Readiness & Resilience may be called the opposite to fragility as numerously stated in OECD documents (*Lemay-Hébert & Mathieu, 2014*), in particular.

Many existing indexes and research projects focused on fragile states operate with similar definitions of state functions and the lack thereof in fragile contexts. The incorporation of the security aspect into the ACL triad is evident, for instance, from CAST (Conflict Assessment System Tool) Framework methodology used by the Fund for Peace in Fragile State Index.

A more recent example of an attempt to assess state fragility and offer an empirical typology is Constellations of Fragility project led by J. Grävingsholt. (*Grävingsholt et al., 2018; Ziaja et al., 2019*) Having ACL model of state fragility at the core, it offers a brand-new look at ten indicators on how to score states. One of the aspects related to security is taken from BTI (Bertelsmann Transformation Index, a separate project that also regards state fragility), namely, monopoly of violence indicator (*Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016*).

An evident change in the attitude towards state fragility is stemming from the rising threat of transnational terrorism, in particular. Among other documents, it is evident from different issues of the US National Security Strategy. Often cited line from 2002 US NSS issue that is actually the opening one¹ seems to have sparked the ever-growing interest in whether there is an evident link between fragile states and transnational terrorism threat to the global security (*United States, 2002*).

Some scholars even argue that such a shift was hardly substantiated as wealthy countries are more likely to suffer terrorist attacks and that economic performance is not a statistically significant predictor of which countries terrorists emerge from (*Krueger & Laitin, 2008*). As M. Khan (2017) puts it, such a focus on security dimension is a reductionist framework to the fragile state problematique.

Yet, considering the period between 2001–2014 with regard to the discourse of security threats coming from fragile states, Barry Buzan (2006) contends that the event of 9/11 solved the threat deficit problem for the US.

One of the main latest trends in the attitude of the academic community that can be mentioned in this context is the term of a resilient state. Starting with the latest one, it is usually mentioned in the research on fragile state as the antonymous term.

¹"America is now threatened less by conquering states than we are by failing ones" (*United States, 2002*)

The notion of a resilient state was introduced by the OECD DAC documents of 2000s (*OECD DAC, 2008*) as well as in the documents of the European Union (*Council of the European Union, 2007*).

The term stands for such states that are capable of absorbing shocks and transforming and channeling radical change or challenges while maintaining political stability and preventing violence (*OECD DAC, 2008*). Basically, resilient are the states that have little to no capacity, authority and legitimacy gaps. Thus, advancing resilience is the response to fragility of the states and is accepted by some scholars as the fourth generation of the state-building policy (*Pospisil & Kühn, 2016*). Choosing this term instead of weak may be called a response to the growing complexity and hybridity of the processes taking place on the international agenda.

In the ever-changing world of shocks, the states are presented by many as those that seek resilience – at times even more than power which is arguably the most contested notion in IR.

Conclusions

The academic discourse and scholars' attitude towards state fragility has had its ups and downs in recent decades. From being cautiously accepted in early 1990s, when such states were mostly labeled as failed, it has grown into popularity among researchers. With the growing concern over security issues, the term has been widely contested and argued upon.

Notwithstanding the differing views on the presence and relevance of transnational threats to international security coming from fragile contexts, the term is still being widely used in the documents of governmental institutions, international organization and research. Moreover, it has sparked the creation of many indexes that with differing level of success and recognition from scholars' cycles strive to measure fragility and provide some typology of the states depending on how fragile – or resilient – they are.

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