

# A BANNER FOR THE NATIONS: PRESERVING INTERNATIONAL ORDER & THE NATION-STATE SYSTEM

ALAN W. DOWD

For the better part of four centuries, the world has been organized and governed by sovereign nation-states. Indeed, sovereignty—the notion that a country has the responsibility, authority, capacity, and will to govern itself—has served as the very foundation of international order. But today, this centuries-old order is under assault from four divergent movements: post-nationalism, supra-nationalism, trans-nationalism, and non-nationalism.

Just glance at the headlines: Islamic State (ISIS) is trying to maim and murder its way toward a borderless caliphate enfolding the Middle East and North Africa. In Libya, Yemen, and Somalia, jihadist groups and sectarian armies have declared competing zones of authority. Afghanistan is increasingly a figment of cartographers' imaginations. Russia has deployed troops scrubbed of insignia to wage anonymous warfare against Ukraine. After decades of deferring their borders and finances to the European Union (EU), many European nations have awoken to realize they have

control over neither. Disparate governments and groups are using cyberspace to delete the very notion of nationhood.

This multi-pronged assault on the nation-state system represents a serious threat to U.S. interests and to the liberal international order the United States forged after World War II.

## BROKEN

Let's start where nation-states effectively don't exist, where what might be called "non-nationalism" has supplanted the writ of government authority. We don't have to look far for an example: Drug cartels control 12 percent of Mexico's territory.<sup>1</sup> The problem of weak or non-existent government authority is worse in Yemen and Libya, Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan. It's no coincidence that the pirate plague has raged in the waters between the failed states of Somalia and Yemen, or that al Qaeda's most dangerous branch is based in lawless Yemen, or that ISIS seized 34,000 square-miles of Iraq and Syria.

These failed and failing states are places where government has lost the ability to perform basic functions like maintaining public order, controlling borders, and ensuring that what happens within their borders does not adversely impact neighboring states. The Failed States/Fragile States Index indicates that the failed-state problem is worsening, as once-stable countries enter the failed-state ranks and unstable countries register some of the worst declines on the index since it was first published a decade ago.<sup>2</sup>

By my count, the United States has engaged in military operations in 10 of the bottom 15 countries on the Failed States/Fragile States Index in the past 20 years: Somalia, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Haiti, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Sudan.<sup>3</sup> These countries are not failing or broken because the United States intervened. Rather, the United States intervened because these countries were failing or broken—and as a consequence were either threatening America's



*The Avenue in the Rain* by Childe Hassam, 1917. This image is displayed in the Oval Office. Source: White House Collection and The Athenaeum, via Wikimedia Commons.

interests, shocking America's collective conscience, or both.

## BELOW

Next, let's consider transnational groups. Transnationalism differs from non-nationalism in that, while both thrive on chaos, transnational groups are cohesive and have a clear objective: to erode the nation-state system from below.

As then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld concluded in 2004, jihadist groups have a simple but sweeping goal: "to end the state system, using terrorism to drive the non-radicals from the world."<sup>4</sup> Love him or hate him, Rumsfeld was right about this. Consider the words of al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, who wants to create a geopolitical power that "does not recognize nation-state, national links or the borders imposed by occupiers." ISIS leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi calls on his followers to "trample the idol of nationalism" and "destroy the idol of democracy."

In a sense, the war on terror is an outgrowth of nation-states failing or refusing to live up to the responsibilities of sovereignty, thus allowing transnational movements like ISIS and al Qaeda to exploit the resulting openings. For example:

- In the 1990s, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan allowed al Qaeda to create a terrorist campus in the lawless borderlands near Pakistan. Osama bin Laden used this territory as a launching pad for his global guerilla war against the United States.
- On the other hand, today's Afghanistan and Iraq want to control what happens inside their borders but are too



weak to hold back transnational movements. Thus, ISIS is laying waste to Iraq and Syria, destabilizing once-stable nation-states, and spreading into Europe, Africa, and Afghanistan. A resurgent Taliban and a reconstituted al Qaeda are taking aim at Afghanistan's Western-oriented government. This explains why the Obama administration grudgingly returned to Iraq in 2014 and reluctantly reversed plans to withdraw from Afghanistan in 2015.

- Pakistan plays games with sovereignty, claiming it is too weak to control its territory with one breath but then invoking its sovereign and inviolable borders with the next. SEAL Team 6 exposed this duplicity—and Islamabad's complicity in transnational terrorism.

## ABOVE

If transnationalism erodes the nation-state system from below, supra-nationalism whittles away at it from above. Examples of supra-nationalism are organizations like the United Nations, EU and International Criminal Court (ICC).

Rumsfeld worried that the decline of sovereignty in the West “gives states an excuse to take the easy way out by...punting problems to supra-national bodies, instead of taking responsibility.”<sup>5</sup> Again, whatever your view of Rumsfeld, he was correct about this. Writing about the Yugoslav civil war, William Pfaff argues that the UN and European Community (forerunner to the EU) “proved an obstacle to action by inhibiting individual national action and rationalizing the refusal to act nationally.” Something similar

happened in Syria and Libya. The resulting vacuum fueled the rise of ISIS.

The irony is that while UN bodies seem reluctant to constrain the enemies of international order, they are eager to constrain legitimate, sovereign nation-states: According to a *Wall Street Journal* report, the ICC has investigated “whether NATO troops, including American soldiers, fighting the Taliban may have to be put in the dock.”<sup>6</sup> The ICC has no authority to take such action since the U.S. is not party to the ICC treaty, but that didn't stop ICC prosecutors from lunging at U.S. sovereignty.

Moreover, the UN has watered down the principle of sovereignty by not holding nation-states accountable for their actions. In 2003, the UN Security Council took eight weeks to approve a resolution requiring Saddam Hussein to comply with existing resolutions—and then failed to enforce it. In 2010, North Korea torpedoed a South Korean ship in international waters. All the UN mustered in response was a pathetic report condemning the attack without mentioning—let alone punishing—the attacker.<sup>7</sup> In 2012, the Syrian government reopened the Pandora's Box of chemical warfare. The UN responded with a farcical disarmament deal that not only failed to disarm Bashar Assad, but ensconced him as essential to carrying out the deal.

## BEYOND

Post-nationalism envisions a world after or beyond the nation-state. One of the main drivers of post-nationalism is globalization, the term used to describe today's highly integrated global economic system. A National Intelligence

Council report warns that in the “hyper-globalized” world likely to emerge in the coming decades—a world where power has devolved to nongovernment organizations and multinational corporations—countries “wedded to the notion of sovereignty and independence” will “find it difficult to operate successfully.”<sup>8</sup> That sounds like a warning for Americans. After all, few nation-states exercise their sovereignty and independence with more gusto than the United States.

To be sure, the United States has benefitted from globalization. In fact, some contend globalization is just another word for Americanization, and they may be right. After all, President Harry Truman advocated that “the whole world adopt the American system.”<sup>9</sup> The Truman administration declared in NSC-68 that the goal of America's post-World War II foreign policy would be “to foster a world environment in which the American system can survive and flourish” and “to develop a healthy international community.”<sup>10</sup> The operative word here is “international”—*between* nations, not *beyond* nations.

What post-nationalists overlook is that there are regimes that don't share their vision of a world where rules rather than force determine behavior—and that there are vast swaths of earth where globalization's lower transaction costs, just-in-time commerce, and melting-away of nationalities has no appeal whatsoever. Disinterested in the responsibilities of nation-statehood, post-nationalists trust that globalization's economic and commercial connections will do what the nation-state used to do: enforce norms of behavior, promote stability, and protect individuals and interests

from threat. Regrettably, this doesn't work in practice. After all, when ISIS tears through western Iraq and central Paris, Beijing tries to poach international waterways, Putin's unmarked armies dismember Ukraine, or al Qaeda maims Manhattan, the victims don't turn to multinational corporations for help. They turn to nation-states—usually the most powerful nation-state.

## RESISTANCE

The United States defended the nation-state system by resisting these movements throughout its history.

For example, the Congressional Research Service maintains a tally of U.S. military interventions abroad. Of the hundreds of examples of interventions before this century, at least 60 involved failed states—what we have labeled “non-nationalism.”<sup>11</sup> U.S. willingness to intervene in failed states dates to 1816, when U.S. troops entered Spanish Florida to bring some semblance of order.<sup>12</sup> In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt argued that the United States has a right to exercise “international police power” and intervene in places where “chronic wrongdoing” or “impotence” results in “a general loosening of the ties of civilized society.”<sup>13</sup>

As to post-nationalism and supra-nationalism, consider our founding documents. The Founders announced their independence by declaring it was time for “one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another” and wrote a constitution expressly for “the people of the United States.” *The Federalist Papers* speak of “our country,” “dangers from abroad,” and nations with “opposite interests.” In short, the Founders believed

in sovereignty, independence, and borders.

Yes, Americans have looked beyond borders to pursue close bonds with people of goodwill—witness America's friendships with such diverse places as Israel and India, Germany and Japan, France and the Philippines, Canada and Korea, the UK and the UAE—but always in a state-to-state context. And yes, the United States helped found the United Nations. But according to the UN Charter, the main goal of its founders was not to encroach upon the sovereignty of members-in-good-standing or to create a supra-national government, but rather to protect the “sovereign equality,” “territorial integrity,” and “political independence” of nation-states.

Finally, the United States has always resisted transnational movements that threaten the nation-state system. Yesterday, it was the “long, twilight struggle” against communism. Today, it's the generational struggle against jihadism.

What may be unique about this moment in history is that the United States is being asked to confront all of these challenges to the nation-state at the same time.

## SOLUTIONS

The United States was born into the nation-state system, raised in it, grew to master and shape it, and today benefits from and thrives in it. If the nation-state ceases to be the main organizing structure for the world, there is no guarantee the United States will have the same position it enjoys today. And so, the United States must respond to this multi-pronged assault on the nation-state.

First, nation-states should be held accountable for their actions. As the Obama administration concluded in its 2010 National Security Strategy, the U.S. is best suited “to pursue our interests through an international system in which all nations have certain rights and responsibilities.”<sup>14</sup> The strategy argued the U.S. needs to provide incentives for nation-states to act responsibly and needs to enforce consequences when they don't. The administration's 2015 strategy calls for “growing the ranks of responsible, capable states.”<sup>15</sup> So, what consequences have North Korea, Iran, and Syria faced for their actions? What incentives are there for Nigerians, Libyans, and Iraqis to hold their nation-states together? Did withdrawing from Iraq and pulling back from Afghanistan help them become more responsible and more capable?

Second, the West must strengthen at-risk nation-states. The natural order of the world is not that orderly. The nation-state system has brought a measure of order, but it takes hard work to maintain it. To shore up this foundering international order, the U.S. and its partners should help nation-states control borders, defend borders, respect borders, and assert their sovereignty.

This is not to suggest that sovereignty can be used to justify barbaric behavior. The idea that what happens within a nation-state is unimportant to other nation-states is as pernicious as the idea that borders are irrelevant. Consider an example from close to home: If my neighbor harms someone on his property, encroaches on my property, or through action or inaction negatively impacts me and my property, he is misusing his sphere of sovereignty

and inviting external intervention. In the same way, what happens inside nation-states becomes a concern when governments harm their citizens, negatively impact neighboring nation-states, or simply stop governing—thus inviting what TR called “international police power.”<sup>16</sup> This can take many forms: embargoes, sanctions, military strikes, even regime change (the nation-state equivalent of the death penalty). This is a drastic step. However, nation-states can forfeit their sovereignty. That’s what happened to Germany and Japan as a result of their behavior before and during World War II. After allowing bin Laden to use Afghanistan as a training ground and launching pad for his jihad, the Taliban regime of Afghanistan fell into the same category. After decades of supporting international terrorism,<sup>17</sup> deploying chemical weapons externally and internally, using mass-murder to control its subjects, and waging aggressive war against four of its neighbors, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq arguably did as well. To use TR’s term, both were guilty of “chronic wrongdoing.”

However, Afghanistan and Iraq serve as reminders that solutions can create their own problems. For example, President George W. Bush’s critics blame him for invading Afghanistan and Iraq, and thus upending what passed for stability. President Barack Obama’s critics blame him for withdrawing from Iraq, disengaging from Afghanistan, and thus opening the door to the emergence of ISIS and the reemergence of the Taliban.<sup>18</sup> Realists use Iraq’s sectarian war to explain why Saddam Hussein was so ruthless and why regime change is so risky. Yet idealists argue that it wasn’t post-9/11 regime

change that spawned the tragedy of Iraq, but rather pre-9/11 *realpolitik*. Isolationists view the 2003 invasion of Iraq (and consequent civil war) as proof that America should never go “abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” Yet interventionists view the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq (and consequent rise of ISIS) as proof that U.S. engagement is the key ingredient to international stability—and point to the connective tissue between



Afghanistan and Manhattan, Yemen and Ft. Hood, Syria and Paris and San Bernardino, as evidence that if America fails to go in search of the monsters, they will come searching for us.

This debate over what Simon Serfaty calls “the wars of 9/11” will go on for decades. But this much we know: Iraq and Afghanistan have vexed U.S. policymakers for the better part of 40 years. In Afghanistan, Washington waged a proxy war in the 1980s; then abandoned the country in the early 1990s; then watched, in a kind of self-imposed helplessness, as it became a spawning ground for jihadism in the late 1990s; then launched a light-footprint invasion after 9/11, which evolved into nation-building and counterinsurgency in the first two

decades of the 2000s. In Iraq, Washington tried cooperation and *realpolitik* in the 1980s; a police-action war in the early 1990s; no-fly zones and containment in the late 1990s; regime change and waist-deep engagement after 9/11; benign neglect and hands-off disengagement after 2011; and pinprick airstrikes after the ISIS blitzkrieg. Put another way, perhaps the problem isn’t Washington’s approach to failed states like Iraq and Afghanistan; perhaps the problem is failed states.

Third, the United States and its allies should promote liberal democracy and the institutions that support it—the rule of law, political and religious pluralism, free markets, majority rule with minority rights. It is not the EU, UN, or ICC—well-intentioned as they may be—that guarantee individual freedom and international order, but rather liberal democratic nation-states. This doesn’t mean the West should spread liberal democracy by force. As noted, regime change is a drastic step, and transition from autocracy to liberal democracy requires many difficult steps. However, it does mean the United States and its allies should promote democratic values, reward regimes that move toward democratic governance, and practice what FDR called “armed defense of democratic existence.” Washington in recent years has done the very opposite—scaling back democracy-promotion initiatives; averting its gaze when pro-democracy movements come under assault; leaving nascent democracies to fend for themselves; and shrinking the reach, role, and resources of democracy’s greatest defender: the U.S. military.<sup>19</sup>

Not surprisingly, Freedom House reports “a disturbing



decline in global freedom” and an ebbing of the democratic tide that had been surging from 1984 through 2004, with 61 countries suffering declines. “Acceptance of democracy as the world’s dominant form of government—and of an international system built on democratic ideals—is under greater threat than at any point in the last 25 years.”<sup>20</sup>

“The future international order will be shaped by those who have the power and the collective will to shape it,” Robert Kagan argues.<sup>21</sup> Regrettably, Washington seems wearied by the realization that a liberal international order favoring free government doesn’t run on autopilot or grow by magic.

## AMBASSADORS

We must never put our nation ahead of our faith. That would be idolatry. But it pays to recall that Paul saw himself as a citizen of Rome’s earthly kingdom and Christ’s eternal kingdom; he brandished his Roman citizenship; and he called believers “Christ’s ambassadors.” Yes, that means “our citizenship is in heaven,” as he put it. But to extend Paul’s metaphor, it also means nation-states matter enough to heaven that God has deployed ambassadors around the world to represent and promote His interests.

One of those interests is order. We sometimes forget that God does not like chaos. Genesis tells us He brought form and order out of chaos. Paul writes that He is not a God of disorder (I Corinthians 14), that governments are in place for our own good (Romans 13), that we should pray for “all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives” (I Timothy 2). The implication is clear: Earthly government serves an

essential function in God’s plan. Legitimate governments exist to protect life and property, to be instruments of justice, to deter and if necessary defeat enemies, and to maintain law and order—within nation-states and between nation-states. The nation-state system provides a measure of order in a world predisposed to chaos.

To be sure, in Christ, there is neither “Greek nor Gentile nor Jew,” “no barbarian, Scythian, slave or free.” However, the given of scripture is that nations exist, nations are an important organizing feature of this world, and nations play crucial roles in maintaining order and protecting innocents. That would not happen in a world without nation-states. Instead, such a world would descend into the law of the jungle, or be micro-managed by some unchecked tyranny. As history proves, God’s crowning creation cannot flourish under either extreme. P

**Alan W. Dowd** is a senior fellow with the Sagamore Institute Center for America’s Purpose and a regular contributor to *Providencemag.com*. His writing has appeared in *Providence*, *Policy Review*, *Parameters*, *Military Officer*, *Claremont Review of Books*, *Landing Zone*, *World Politics Review*, *byFaith*, and other leading publications.

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