Is State Sovereignty Diminishing or Transforming in the Globalized World?
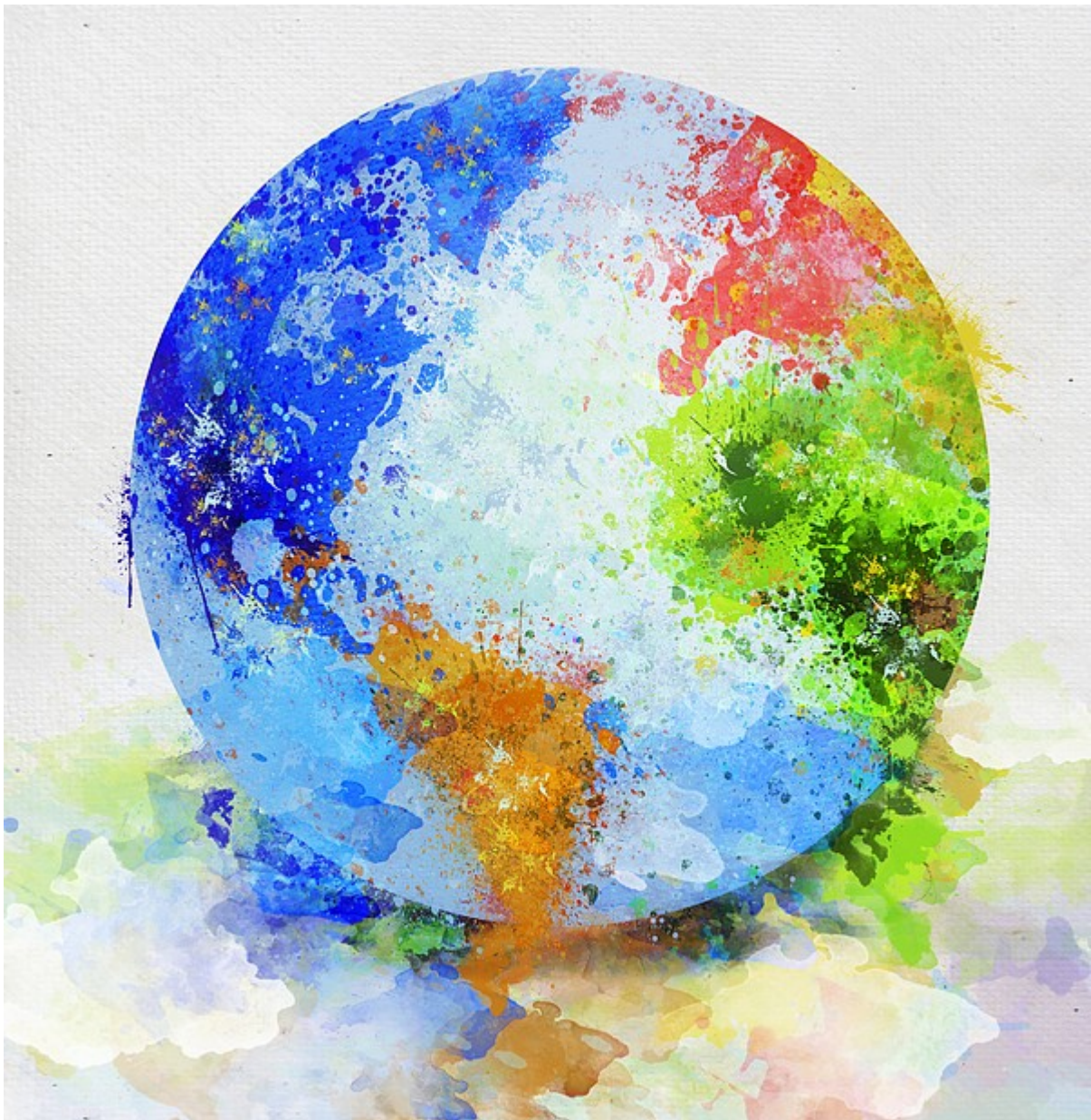
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Painted by Setsiri Silapasuwanchai

Globalization has transformed several aspects of the global system based on sovereign nation-states, and influenced almost all dimensions of human lives. We now not only have greater economic dependence and trade networks, but institutions like European Union, NATO, World Bank, and other international organizations have increased in number and influence manifolds. The state and its 'absolute' sovereignty is also facing major challenges posed by globalization, as it has transformed the nature of politics and governance, from 'state-centric geopolitics' to 'Geo-centric global politics'. Given the several ongoing crisis in the present world, including the Syrian civil conflict; one of the burning questions is whether sovereignty of states is diminishing or transforming, and will sovereignty play an important role in the globalized world or not.

Hyper-globalists hold the view that globalization is bringing the demise of the 'sovereign' state, and global forces curtail the ability of governments to control their own economies and societies. In contrast, others argue that sovereign states are still the principle agents and forces, shaping the world order today. While states can still be sovereign principle actors, their sovereignty can be diminishing (overall significant decrease of ability to self-govern) or transforming (new ways to self-govern and new responsibilities) at the same time due to globalization. But this begs the question, whether sovereignty is diminishing, or transforming as states get new responsibilities and new ways to self-govern itself in the globalized world.

In this post, after defining globalization and sovereignty, I will critically analyze the impacts of globalization on states, their territorial control and monopoly, and find out how 'sovereignty' of states is affected. I will argue that 'sovereignty' is transforming in response to the requirements and processes of globalization and its complexities. Albeit it is diminishing according to the classic concept of sovereignty as external intervention is now more legitimized and institutionalized than ever before due to globalization, I will argue this 'Westphalian' (read: traditional) concept of sovereignty has never really existed fully in practice. So with a more practical and nuanced form, sovereignty in a transformed way will always remain a crucial characteristic of the nation-states, and the 'transformed' nation-states still play a crucial role in the contemporary era of globalization. So to be clear, I take 'transformationalist' view.

> *Transformationalists hold a moderate position and while acknowledging the challenges of global problems they do not see a decline in the importance of nation-state. Instead, they*

believe nation-states are transforming in response to the requirements of globalization and its complexities. However, they believe that in dealing with global problems, a system of global governance with a democratic covenant (i.e. cosmopolitan democracy) is needed. According to a transformationialst point of view, globalization is both founded on and produces the transformation of state. Globalization must not be considered as opposite to nation-state system.

Defining Globalization and Sovereignty

Globalization is such a broad concept that it is very difficult to define its spectrum entirely. Simply put, *globalization is the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness**. Interconnectedness in regard to globalization is often only considered in economic terms- liberalization, privatization, opening up of national economies and global economic interdependence. However, it's unwise to think about globalization economically only. The political aspect of globalization is as much important and it can be defined as increasing focus on the global structures and processes of rule-making, problem solving, the maintenance of security and order in the world system through global platforms, and increasing importance of international organizations. Globalization is also defined in terms of rapid progress of information and communication technologies. Globalization challenges the supreme authority, monopoly control over the people, and sovereignty of the state in the traditional sense, though the global system acknowledges the sovereignty of states. All in all, globalization is a complex process of integration, driven mainly by a liberal economic logic but also incorporating social and political dimensions.

On the other hand, sovereignty is the principle of 'self-government'. The conventional wisdom on sovereignty has always been inadequate to explain the sovereignty we see in practice. The traditional 'Westphalian' definition has 2 dimensions- internal and external. Sovereignty denotes legal equality of states and prohibits interference of a foreign state in another state's internal affairs. It also confers upon a state, the monopoly of violence and legitimate domestic authority over a bounded territory.

Sovereignty: Theory vs Practice

The benchmark definition of sovereignty affirms it to be absolute, but this notion has been challenged on different grounds. Firstly, sovereignty is a historically variable and politically constructed phenomenon. Secondly, it's defined in a very narrow 'state-centric' concept, which tends to ignore the importance of society and limits of power.

Thirdly, the concept fails to capture those economic, ecological and cultural forces that transcend state boundaries and have always been beyond a particular state's control.

The challenge posed by globalization is mainly in regard to the increasing interdependence and transnational activities. But state's role in making decisions in several new frontiers and their ability to control the population has also increased manifolds due to increasing global problems, international security, economic interdependence, and communication advancement. The reason we are so skeptic about sovereignty is because globalization has also made the 'influence' of external agents, like- other states, international institutions, large corporations, in internal affairs of a state, more conspicuous. But analyzing history it can be argued, the notion that all states are 'equally' sovereign have always been false (think about numerous events where the intelligence community of a country interfered in the internal affairs of another state to change the course of events. Or how different aid dependent countries always have to satisfy the larger, economic powers by voting in favor of them, or providing them special privilege in domestic markets, etc). In practice, we all know that states are not equally sovereign in terms of their control over their borders, effective central bureaucracy to achieve collective ends, capacity to influence or coerce others, or domestic legitimacy in the eyes of their population. Consider failed or weak states like Zimbabwe, Somalia, Congo,South Sudan, Central African republic, which are ineffective, lack control over large portions of their land, and have significant legitimacy deficit. So it is unwise to point towards globalization solely for the erosion of sovereignty in most cases, rather than considering other factors like state's obligations, political system, authority. True, globalization is promoting integration as opposed to traditional concept of sovereignty promoting 'exclusion'; but it is transforming sovereignty to 'shared sovereignty' in the cases where state sovereignty is compromised, which plays a crucial role. A glaring example will be European Union (EU), where external agents can interfere into the internal affairs of the state, but nation-states do have their say in the policy-making. And all states do not have the same leverage, but they do have the power to exit from EU, a probable outcome discussed in Greece to counter EU's austerity measures during the Grexit crisis, and the UK referendum on Brexit, where the British people voted to take UK out of EU. Brexit is an excellent example that people in sovereign nations still hold the power to opt out of 'shared sovereignty' opportunities, in favor of preserving their traditional sovereignty.

Territory as Historical Construct and Emergence of 'Shared Sovereignty'

Sovereignty and territory are closely associated with each other as both are key elements of the 'state'. Max Weber's 1946 definition of the state was that "a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force *within a given territory*" (Italic mine). Most definitions, if not all, of sovereignty has an integral part and that is 'territory'. We can define territory simply as a politically enclosed and identifiable region. What's important to notice is that these **political boundaries have never been constant; they are constantly being reshuffled and reorganized.** Being a historical variable, it changed its form from imperial territory, to state territory, and now increasingly to shared global space. The imperial territory was a type of 'civilizational frontiers' which separated cultures and the bounded area was called an 'empire', while the outside people were called 'barbarians'. This concept of territory changed in the 18th century when the core concern changed to 'resources'. Different states were formed, dividing the global space into competitive regions so that they develop themselves maximizing the utility of resources. The 'territorial revolution' took place in 1850s with the invention of telegraph. The advancement of mass communication then made it possible to disseminate information far away and direct people about what to do. Rivalry between empires then subsequently transformed to cold wars in the modern geopolitics. But more importantly, from then to the present day, fixed territory became a pre-requisite of sovereignty and statehood.

When we consider the demonstration of power of a sovereign state in how successful the state is to control the public space, we see that globalization has changed the scenario and state's 'sovereign' monopoly. The underlying reason actually is that these frontiers are 'artificial'. Consider states like Syria; which never really had effective sovereignty. They emerged out of colonialism but different sects of people were put together and conflict between different ethnic groups were aggravated by autocrat rulers. Modern territories of states were in most cases defined completely arbitrarily, without any basis of cultural or ethnic entity, or meaningful economic unit. Weak and failed states were always influenced by external agents though they had 'legal sovereignty' because they became dependent on other states. In terms of external dimension of sovereignty, during the cold war period too, we saw a lot of intervention (open and covert) into other sovereign states by US and Russia. Coups in several countries were organized with support of superpower states to install favorable rulers. We now see increasing cases of intervention into sovereign states for humanitarian concerns (An academic term- "R2P"

stands for responsibility to protect). Due to globalization, the shared human conscience among people irrespective of differences, now takes precedence over territorial integrity of states. Following the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan described what he termed a "developing international norm that massive and systematic violations of human rights wherever they may take place should not be allowed to stand." So globalization, making the world a 'global village', has 'justified' external intervention undermining traditional sovereignty, in cases of humanitarian crisis. But more interestingly, even inside borders, public and private agencies like the credit-rating agencies, law firms and courts; have become more sovereign due to their superior knowledge, expertise and claims to neutrality. These agencies in dominant states were present before globalization, but they now exercise their sovereignty through geographical networks rather than territorial control. Hence political scientists have started to question, whether globalization is the '*post-territorialization of politics*' or not. Thus due to globalization, the traditional notion of sovereignty also demands transformation because as political geographer Agnew noted, "multiple sources of effective authority suggests that sovereignty is no longer usefully thought in terms of the conventional wisdom of a close territorial matching between functional area and geographical scope of sovereign control and authority".

International Institutions and Global Regulatory Governance

International organizations (IO) come in such a variety of forms that they are difficult to define, both with respect to their relationship with states and the state system, as well as in terms of their constituent elements. Before nineteenth century there were very few IOs. After nineteenth century and before widespread globalization, there were IOs and international laws. All the international laws resulted in loss of some degree of traditional absolute sovereignty. But the scale of international organizations in earlier times was constrained by limitations on mobility and communication. Due to globalization, as communications and transport technologies developed, the capacity and scope of international organizations increased. In the past, international law concerned itself only with states and intergovernmental relations. But now we see that it concerns itself with private organizations like MNCs and deals with subjects that were traditionally considered purely domestic matters as regulators. So certainly the international institutions are enforcing "global standards" and regulating markets across the globe, which restraints the state governments to choose for their people, their standards and regulations. But what happens when international institutions overrule or

threaten democratically determined decisions? An example: Indian state of Andhra Pradesh's decision to ban alcohol was overturned in response to World Bank's condition to raise government revenues by repealing ban on liquor and restoring liquor tax. As we see increasing power given to international organizations resulting in loss of national sovereignty raises the question- how these organizations make decisions, whose interests they serve. For example, International Maritime organization was given the power to curtail state regulatory powers when it conflicts with international standards, by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Now, it's evident that with the rise of globalization and proliferation of international organizations, there is a declining state-sovereignty in the traditional sense. But is it diminishing or transforming it in this case?

Although there is increased global governance and regulations, the sovereign state is not undermined even though its role is changing. The new standardized rules, reached by agreement between states, can only work if there are territorial agencies that can enforce them locally and have the power to do so. Those agents can only be sovereign states in the traditional sense. Moreover, in order for international treaties to be implemented, they have to be deliberated, signed and delivered domestically and internationally by the states. This also emphasizes the sovereign states as key actors in a globalized war. The very example that Euro zone leaders are negotiated with Greek ministers prove that Greece still held sovereignty being part of the Euro zone during the Grexit debate and can decide to choose one of many paths; the Euro zone can't force it to stay. Even though Greece stayed inside Euro zone, it depended on the Greek government, not the Euro zone, how the reforms were implemented and bail-out clauses negotiated. Again, the case of Brexit gives an excellent example of how states, being part of IOs, still has sovereignty in deciding whether to stay in or out, and what sort of decisions are taken by IOs they are part of.

It can not be denied though that the erosion of sovereignty to some extent in the traditional sense is apparent because even though the decisions and international treaties and regulations are taken through joint negotiations of participating countries, no country gets exactly what it wants. But the 'Westphalian' sovereignty, the sovereignty we always think as an absolute concept was never really seen in practice, even before globalization. I have already given several examples of how states were never truly, fully sovereign. In the globalized world, the transformed sovereignty of states gives them the

power and authority to act in the best interests of their people, considering all factors and influences. Sovereignty still plays an important role and it should because it is embedded in globalization. Whether the utopian global society without any boundaries will be a reality or not, only time can say.

International Relations   Globalization   Sovereignty   Hyper Globalization

Sovereignty Diminishing