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Shifting global contours: The new challenges to state sovereignty

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Abstract

Has the ongoing process of Globalization visibly shifted the global contours posing a challenge to state sovereignty? To address this question there arises a need to analyze theoretically the notion of state sovereignty and the developments witnessed in the globalised world. As against Joseph Nye's views on international integration and cooperation, there seems to be a contending trend of globalization posing a serious threat to the national identity and sovereignty of a nation- socially, economically and politically. The present paper is an attempt to examine in detail the various theoretical standpoints on globalization and state sovereignty that would facilitate our understanding of the ambiguities existing in contemporary international politics.

Keywords: Globalization, State Sovereignty, International Politics, Nation-state, Global Restructuring, National Government, International Relations

Introduction

Contemporary global politics are haunted by an ever-present ghost at the feast. The apparition is inescapable yet evanescent. It can inspire wonder, fear and loathing. It is a phenomenon widely referred to as globalization (Longhorne and Arnold, 2006: 1) ^[9]. When people refer to globalization, they generally mean that traditional divisions and boundaries that used to demarcate the global society are no longer the same. In other words, the world is becoming a smaller place. Anthony Giddens sees globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa." Martin Albrow, on the other hand provides a succinct and general definition of globalization as "all those processes by which people of the world are incorporated into a single world society" (Shimko, 2005:196) ^[12]. In brief, the shrinking of the world is globalization, an economic, political, technological, and socio-cultural process where the importance of state boundaries diminishes, and the countries and their people live in an integrated global system.

Global restructuring of the eighties witnessed an unprecedented correlation of economic forces, political power and social structure. There was a change from the Fordist model of assembly line mass production to a much flexible post- Fordist model of production for specialized markets. The increasing labour costs in developed countries, due to high standards of living, reducing working hours of labor and highly competitive export markets, resulted in a search for new avenues for cheap and skilled labor elsewhere. This caused decomposition of production process, which led to transnational placement of production facilities, supported by the high-tech innovation in IT and containerized shipping. All these developments point at the origins of the process of globalization. Further, the globalization process entails three fundamental elements, viz., capitalism, technology and power politics. While Wallerstein considers capitalism as the root cause for globalization, Rosenau assigns the causes for global interdependence and reciprocity to technology. Gilpin moves further to find power politics responsible for the process of globalization. He maintains that the history of pluralization of cultures, now poses a major threat in most societies – both developed and the developing. New issues about the future policy for the democratic states have also emerged. Again, globalization has also introduced new trends such as civil society movements, increasing role of NGOs, greater efforts towards generating increased awareness for global environment, human rights protection, and emancipation and empowerment of

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weaker or marginalized sections. (Sharma and Boreth, 2004:140) ^[1]. However, the new developments, as mentioned above, have also been followed by non-state actors, both governmental and nongovernmental, challenging the dominance of states and their sovereignty.

What is at Stake?

One of the defining features of international politics for several centuries has been national sovereignty. With the forces of globalization at work, many nations seem to be gripped with a fear of gradually losing the ability to determine their own fate with the locus of meaningful decision-making shifting to other entities. According to this constrained state thesis, “changes in the international political economy have radically restricted policy choice and forced policy shifts that work at the preferences of global investors and mobile corporations, rather than to the needs of the domestic political economy and its citizenry” (Shimko, 2005: 196-197) ^[12]. The fundamental question is if states lose their sovereignty and influence within their borders, will it be more difficult for the states to solve the domestic problems within their borders? Whether national political communities can still shape the policies and tame the forces that affect the lives of their citizens?

As globalization intensified, the power of national governments to tackle it seems to have declined drastically and international bodies lack the authority to enforce agreed policies. In effect, globalization invites the real possibility of a more unruly world as transnational forces, like the illegal drugs trade, escape the control of nation-states. Surprisingly, it has been the G8 governments’ abandonment of many national controls, in the determined pursuit of open global markets for goods, services and capital that has created new opportunities for an illegal drugs trade to prosper. Constructing effective policies to deal with inner-city drugs problems, and their related social consequences, needs more than simply local or national initiatives, rather it requires coordinated international action. However, in an interconnected world, the distinction between domestic and local, foreign or international begins to lose its relevance. Beyond these policy considerations, the accumulation of trans-border issues raises more significant questions. What are the limits to national power and how effective is national government when the organization of economic and social life appears systematically to transcend territorial jurisdictions? The answer to such questions needs a review of what ideally constitutes a modern political life ever since the birth of the nation-state (Held 2004: 126-127) ^[5].

The nation-state, which has been the center of political and (to a large extent) economic power for the past century and a half is being squeezed today – on one side, by the forces of global economics, and on the other side, by political demands for devolution of power. Globalization – the closer integration of the countries of the world – has led to a need for more collective action, for people and countries to act together to solve their common problems. There are several problems such as trade, capital and the environment, which can be dealt with only at the global level. But while the nation-state has been weakened, there is a need for the creation, at the international level, of democratic global institutions that can deal effectively with the problems globalization has created (Masker, 2012:324) ^[10].

The Vision of a Borderless World: Challenge to State and Governance

Some 150 years ago, the lowering of communication and transportation costs gave way to what may be seen as the earlier precursor of globalization. Until then, trade was mainly local, it was the changes of the nineteenth century that led to the formation of national economies and helped to strengthen the nation-state. Following this, new demands were put on government. The argument was that markets might be producing growth, but they were accompanied by new social, and in some cases even economic problems. Governments took on new roles towards preventing monopolies, and laying the foundations of modern social security systems, in regulating banks and other financial institutions. As such, there was mutual reinforcement, i.e., success in these endeavors helped shape and strengthen the process of nation-building, and the increased capabilities of the nation-state led to greater success in strengthening the economy and enhancing individual well being. However, on the other hand, a government’s inability to control the actions of individuals or companies is also limited by international agreements that impinge on the right of sovereign states to make decisions. For instance, a government that wants to ensure that banks lend a certain fraction of their portfolio to undeserved areas, or to ensure that accounting frameworks accurately reflect a company’s true status, may find it is unable to pass the appropriate laws. Signing on to international trade agreements can prevent governments from regulating the influx and outflow of hot, speculative money, even though liberalization of the capital market can lead to economic crisis (Masker, 2012 : 323-324) ^[10].

Normatively, the issue of concern is whether globalization is a progressive force to be welcomed and encouraged or a malignant process to be condemned and resisted. As Ian Clark explains, “According to conventional wisdom it is sovereignty which is most at risk from globalization and thus if we wish to trace the impact of globalization, then it is within the realm of sovereignty that the search must properly begin” (Shimko, 2005:197) ^[12].

Interdependence was the buzzword of the 1970s. Oil embargoes, Middle East crisis, and long gas lines brought home how interdependent the economies of the world had become. Although it is often difficult to locate the first usage of the term globalization, it appears to have entered the lexicon of international relations in the early 1980s. The need for the changed terminology emerged from the sense that *interdependence* no longer captured the full magnitude of how much our world was changing. Interdependence suggested that increasing levels of international trade and investment were creating mutual dependencies among different national economies. Globalization goes beyond conveying merely that national economies are increasingly dependent on each other, but that for all intents and purposes they are becoming a single economic system. Further, though the difference between interdependence and globalization might seem to be only a matter of degree, there comes a point where differences in degree become so wide as to become differences in kind. This is what globalization implies – not just greater interdependence, but something far beyond that. Moreover, an interdependent world is one in which borders and national are still meaningful where as in a truly globalized world, they are not (Shimko, 2005: 197) ^[12].

Globalization has reduced the scope of state autonomy drastically. In a global division of labor, the state has no control on global economic forces. It often resorts to reacting to a particular situation rather than initiating any action. An example in this regard could be that of the US government's knee-jerk reaction to business process outsourcing in the wake of tremendous hue and cry over loss of local employment. Yet, it could not effectively curb or control the BPO industry. To realize material gains from globalization, the state progressively facilitates this process often acting as its agent. Political leadership, therefore often finds itself in a strange predicament, surrounded by impersonal and unaccountable forces beyond its control and eventually its capacity to lead diminished. Faced with the power of globalized production and international finance including debt structures, leaders are constrained to concentrate on enhancing national conditions for competing forms of capitalism. Statecraft is reduced to play second fiddle to transnational forces and non-state actors often test it for its efficacy (Agrawal, 2004:145-146)^[1].

International relations scholar Manuel Castells has maintained that the modern nation state might be adversely affected by globalization in four ways:

1. States cannot effectively manage global problems unilaterally and thus suffer a *crisis of efficiency*.
2. Policy makers are not always representative of their citizens' interests and as policy making becomes more global, decisions are made further away from citizens. This results in a *crisis of legitimacy*.
3. Citizens are being pulled toward their cultural identity and toward identity and affiliation with NGOs and other civil society actors. A Variety of forces drives them away from citizen identity and have thus created a *crisis of identity*.
4. Globalization has increased inequality in many states and has created *crisis of equity* (Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2012: 8)^[8].

No one has been more articulate in presenting a vision of globalization as eroding national sovereignty than Kenichi Ohmae. In his books "The Borderless World" and "The End of the Nation State", Ohmae makes a forceful case for the proposition that economic and technological trends are rendering the nation-state increasingly irrelevant and impotent. This effect, according to him, can be seen most clearly in the dynamics of the global economy: "On the political map, the boundaries between countries are as clear as ever. But on the competitive map of the world and when looked only at patterns of economic activity, we would no longer be able to redraw the world's political boundaries. This implies, there is an increasing disjuncture between political and economic realities. However, Ohmae believes that this disjuncture can not last forever since the readjustment is already under way, i.e., the modern nation-state itself has begun to crumble. Nicholas Negroponte outdoes even Ohmae in consigning the nation-state to the dustbin of history. Adding to this debate, Anthony Giddens points out that "Nations have lost the sovereignty they once had, and politicians have lost their capability to influence events. The era of the nation-state is over." But why might globalization be eroding the sovereignty of the nation-state, or even threatening its extinction? The answer lies in technological and political changes that have made it easier

to move, communicate, and trade without regard to location and national borders (Shimko, 2005:198)^[12].

Politics in Transition: From International to Global Politics?

The events of September 11, 2001, probably more than any other single event, brought home just how globalized the contemporary world is. The subsequent war in Afghanistan and the more controversial invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed by insurgency and civil war, are further vivid examples of what it means to call the current era globalized. These developments involved international coalitions and transnational violent networks in conflicts that linked events in seemingly unrelated parts of the world. As such, it is often referred to as *pluralistic* since it depends on a multiplicity of agencies, from states and governmental organizations to multinational corporations, coming together to agree certain global rules, policies and norms.

The reasons for the transition of politics from international to global politics can be explained in various ways. Firstly, some scholars believe that the term global politics is more inclusive since it involves a study of politics and political patterns in the world and not only those between nations (as the term international politics implies). Thus, global politics today is interested in relations among organizations that may or may not be states such as multinational companies, terrorist groups, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); these are all known as transnational actors. Today politics is also about looking at the important role being played by the nonstate actors. These can be supranational organizations that are composed of states. The United Nations is the most famous actor in this category, others include the European Union, the Organization of American States, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the African Union (Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2012:7)^[8].

Further, economic globalization, in effect, has outpaced political globalization. There exists a chaotic, uncoordinated system of global governance without global government, an array of institutions and agreements dealing with a series of problems, from global warming to international trade and capital flows. Finance ministers discuss global finance matters at the IMF, paying little attention to how their decisions affect the environment or global health. Environment ministers may call for something to be done about global warming, but they lack resources to back up those calls (Masker, 324).

The power and influence of transnational movements arises broadly from their capacity to organize people and resources all across the national frontiers towards the attainment of collective goals. Since there is great diversity of transnational movements, from large and well organized groups like Greenpeace, to more spontaneous groups, such as the Women Living under Muslim Laws Network, it is rather difficult to generalize about their power and political impact. As such, their political impact and influence is best measured not in terms of raw power capabilities, which generally tend to be limited, but in terms of infrastructure power. This infrastructure power exhibits the political strategies through which transnational movements and organizations gain a voice in global governance. They often tend to exert their influence by:

- Shaping public attitudes, interests and identities
- Altering the agenda of local, national and global politics
- Providing communities and citizens with a channel of access to global and regional decision-making forums

- Exercising moral, spiritual or technical authority
- Seeking to make governments, international bodies and corporate empires accountable for their actions and decisions (Held 2004: 141)^[5].

As a result of the emergence of global politics, transnational connections and flows have developed within virtually all areas of human activity and, with the explosive growth of Internet, within the realm of virtual reality too. Goods, knowledge, capital, ideas and weapons as well as crime, pollutants, fashions and micro-organisms readily move across national territorial boundaries. For instance, every month, the New York Public Library reports nearly 10 million information requests from across the globe on its main website, compared to 50,000 books dispensed to its local users. This implies that far from nation-states being 'discrete power containers' they have become more akin to a 'space of flows', that is, spaces permeated and transgressed by global and transnational flows and networks. Moreover, the regional and global scale on which many aspects of contemporary social and economic activity is organized, whether it is the illegal drugs trade or the production of the automobiles, links together the fate of communities in disparate regions of the globe in complex ways. As Michael Sandel observes, under conditions of globalization, modern states, traditionally the vehicles of self-government, find themselves increasingly unable to bring their citizens' judgements and values to bear on the economic forces that govern their destinies (Sandel 1996: 339)^[11].

The Changing World Order: A New Era?

Some scholars suggested that the Cold War was a conflict between two sets of rule book. If the cold war period was marked by a clear and sharp divide between opposing socioeconomic systems operating by radically different standards, then the post-Cold War order could readily be characterized as one in which many states were compelled to play as per a single set of rules within a progressively competitive global economy. The question which confronts the states today is which rules need to be emphasized and who would enforce the rules. Globalization seems to be the answer for this question (Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2012: 49)^[8].

Globalization has been defined in different ways by different theorists. For instance, as pointed out earlier in the paper, for one school of thought, namely hyperglobalists, globalization was assumed to be undermining borders and states, i.e., quite literally abolishing the Westphalian system, which had begun to crystallize over 330 years ago. On the other hand, for skeptics, globalization may have weakened the state in some policy areas but the state remained the locus of governance and the primary actor in the establishment of order and stability. To date, the state has survived and those fighting at the streets of Libya and Egypt are fighting for the control of the state. It may be true that power is shifting away from states in some areas but states are finding ways to share sovereignty and trade control in some areas that allow them to survive and even prosper (Lamy, Masker, Baylis, Smith and Owens, 2012:49)^[8].

Conclusion

The sovereign power and authority of national government, i.e., the entitlement of states to rule within their own

territorial space, is being redefined but not necessarily eroded. In the context of transnational systems of rule with other governments and agencies, states now use sovereignty less as a legal claim to supreme power than as a bargaining tool. Within this complex system of multi-layered governance, sovereignty is bartered, shared and divided among the agencies of public power at different levels. The Westphalian conception of sovereignty as an indivisible, territorially exclusive form of public power is being displaced by a new understanding of sovereignty as the shared exercise of public power and authority (Held 2004: 156)^[5].

The globalists and transformationists rightly argue that power is no longer primarily organized and exercised on a national scale but, increasingly, has acquired a transnational, regional or even global dimension. As a consequence, the business of government and politics, itself, is becoming internationalized and globalised (Held 2004: 130)^[5].

Globalization is not only about bringing the world together, rather, it is also about the challenges it has thrown open to the political, social, cultural and environmental spheres. Many threat perceptions in the form of international terrorism and reaction syndromes have emerged at the local level as a result of globalization. The local cultures stand threatened by the steam rolling of their cultural identities. The local movements in India against the opening of fast food chains such as the McDonald and Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and other innovations like genetically modified seeds have already gained ground.

The onset of globalization, it can be rightly concluded, has triggered off forces of change, which has made people rethink about the political institutions such as the state and democracy and also the civil society. In their functioning, the role of cultural pluralism and protection of the local cultures is today primarily recognized in terms of both institutional mechanism and as an element of political morality or a value system. Today, one is witnessing a crisis of development of global proportion, i.e., a true crisis of global civilization. In a way it involves a counter-revolution of the powerful against the weak. The ambiguities of globalization combine with the possibility of a historic transformation and engage not only in divergent beliefs and how the world works today, but also about our hopes and fears regarding the future of global society.

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