

GLOBALIZATION AND THE NATION STATE

by
Jayantha Dhanapala
Under-Secretary-General for Disarmament Affairs
United Nations



A Cartography of Governance: Exploring the Role of Environmental NGOs

The Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy
University of Colorado Law School
University of Colorado at Boulder
Boulder, Colorado 7 April 2001

[Introduction - Sovereignty, Globalization, and Interdependence](#)
[The Nation State - Globalization and the NGOs - Conclusion](#)

Introduction

My task today is not an enviable one, for the twin subjects of my remarks -- globalization and the nation state -- have already been the focus of voluminous tracts by some of the keenest observers of the modern age. Yet one must address these issues, for the future role of environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) will be profoundly affected by the evolution of this complex process known as globalization, and this ever-changing structure known as the nation state. In the years ahead, environmental NGOs will not simply be passively influenced by these two hallmarks of our time, but they will also have the potential to influence them both for the good of all, and to ensure their harmonious coexistence for the common benefit of humankind.

Sovereignty, Globalization, and Interdependence

An essential link between globalization and the nation state is the concept of sovereignty, a term dating back several centuries, well before the nation-state system was established in 1648. Originally intended in reference to the establishment of order within a state, sovereignty has since been interpreted by some as a legal quality that places the state above the authority of all external laws.

Yet whenever a state exercises its sovereign right to sign a treaty, it is also wilfully limiting that right by the very act of undertaking an international legal obligation. States are also bound by other rules, such as customary international law. With these formal legal limitations, sovereignty stubbornly persists even in an age of globalization -- and is manifested in such functions as the coining of money, the gathering of taxes, the promulgation of domestic law, the conduct of foreign policy, the regulation of commerce, and the maintenance of domestic order. These are all functions that are reserved exclusively to the state, a condition that the European Union is challenging today in many dimensions of governance, but has by no means overcome.

States have, over the years, discovered that their interests are better advanced within a broader system of binding rules than without such a system. Rules help to define rights, including property rights, as well as duties, including duties to do and not to do certain things. What precisely these rights and obligations are depends on a whole complex of circumstances: political, economic, cultural, and technological. In our current age, globalization is having a profound effect upon national and international rules -- it is, for example, influencing the norms that govern world commerce, transportation, environmental protection, to name only a few.

There is, however, no universally-agreed definition of this term. It made its debut in western public policy circles in the mid-1980s -- replacing "interdependence" -- and was at the time generally viewed in an economic context. Globalization simply referred to a largely commercial process involving rapid increases in the exchange of goods, capital, and services across national frontiers. It figured particularly in writings about the role of multinational corporations, with their global networks of vertically-integrated subsidiaries and affiliates.

Expanded flows of commerce across borders had, to be sure, many benefits. They provided profits, jobs, efficiencies of scale, lowered unit costs, and increased the variety of goods available for everyone to buy. This commerce was facilitated by important technological trends, like the increased speed and declining cost of long-distance transportation (both of passengers and of cargo) and similar developments in the field of telecommunications. Simply put, it was not just getting easier to do business across national borders, but highly desirable to the growing numbers of potential beneficiaries of this commerce.

Some commentators over the ages have even written that unfettered trade would be the key to world peace, since states -- and the large economic interests within them -- would be most reluctant to let wars interfere with the cool logic of mutual economic gain. Journalists, social scientists, and political leaders joined their economist friends in heralding a new age of interdependence, one that promised a more rational way of going about the world's business,

one less influenced by unilateral actions by nation states, including the use of force.

Yet any fair assessment of interdependence must go back somewhat farther in history than the last few decades or so, for the concept is actually much older. Several historians, economists, and political scientists throughout the 20th century used the term extensively in their writings. They understood that the world's economy was highly interdependent even well before World War I. A recent study by the International Monetary Fund, for example, stated that "By some measures, international economic integration increased just as much in the 50 years before World War I as in recent decades, and reached comparable levels."

Many of these writers were also keenly aware of another dimension of interdependence -- namely, its potential to make armed conflicts much more devastating. Distinguished observers like Norman Angell, Leonard Wolf, Francis Delaisi, and Ramsey Muir wrote extensively on this theme and questioned the adequacy of the nation state in meeting the economic and security challenges of the new century.

In short, the close interdependence of the world's economies did not only offer great benefits, but also entailed great risks, and great responsibilities for governmental reform. The capacity to generate wealth clearly did not come with any guarantees that this new wealth would be distributed equitably, as recent economic trends show clearly that the gap between the rich and poor -- both within and between nations -- has widened even in the generally prosperous decade of the 1990s. Interdependence also entails cross-border exchanges of what are called, negative externalities, including environmental pollution, risks of international pandemics, and thriving clandestine markets for arms, components of weapons of mass destruction, narcotics, and even illicit transfers of various forms of industrial wastes.

Globalization is an ongoing process, not a completed condition. Against the grand tapestry of history, it has arguably just started. It has grown from a purely economic or technological concept and now implies evolutionary change on a cultural dimension as well. Information communicated through modern print and electronic media is not just affecting commerce, but shaping world-views, relations inside families, and attitudes of citizens to the state. The process, however, has still not significantly touched an extraordinary proportion of humanity and hence has not yet truly earned its title, globalization.

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan has spoken repeatedly about how unevenly the benefits of globalization have been distributed. He has noted the existence of a "digital divide" in which only 5 percent of the world is connected to the World Wide Web -- 80 percent of which is published only in English. He has repeatedly noted in his speeches that half of humanity has neither received nor made a simple telephone call. As for the economic benefits, he notes that almost half of humanity still lives on less than \$2 a day, and that over a billion people earn less than \$1 a day. Whether one looks at the availability of drinking water, sanitation, educational opportunities, other crucial facets of human development, one can see that globalization per se has offered no cure-all for humanity's welfare needs.

Nor has globalization ushered in a golden age of world peace. In the decade since the end of the Cold War, over five million people have been killed in armed conflicts around the world -- that is about a million more than the entire population of the state of Colorado. Today, the world is now spending around \$800 billion on defence expenditures, over 90 percent of the levels spent during the Cold War. There also remain an estimated 30,000 nuclear weapons that, if used in a global conflict, could eliminate all the various gains of globalization in just a few minutes.

[Back to top](#)

The Nation State

Many of the brightest prospects, as well as the worst potential risks, of globalization stem from the fate of the nation, in particular its association with the administrative structure known as the state. The idea that each state should have, or coincide with, its underlying nation goes back many years before the doctrine of national self-determination was enshrined -- albeit selectively -- in the Versailles Treaty after World War I. Though there is considerable disagreement over the formal definition of the term, the communitarian nation differs from the administrative machinery of the state much as the human spirit differs from the bones and muscles of one's body. The nation is not an administrative contrivance, but a form of collective social identity, one that is based on a common historical, linguistic, or cultural heritage.

Historically, the leaders of states have relied upon nations as a base of support for official laws and policies, indeed, as a basis for their own legitimacy. As the backbone of political power of the administrative state, the nation has rallied behind many great causes, including many of the progressive reforms in social, economic, and environmental policy of the 20th century. Yet since Napoleonic times, the nation has also been associated with the age of total war, of horrific conflicts between the peoples of the world rather than just their armies. This unfettered spirit of the nation, when combined with the revolutionary advances in military technology in the 19th and 20th century, has led to the bloodiest years in the history of humanity. Even today, the nation, and its associated ideology -- nationalism -- continue to provide a formidable obstacle to constructive international cooperation on an enormous variety of common global problems.

In an age of total war, of instant global communications and fast, cheap travel, the nation state has appeared to many observers as a quaint, even dangerous anachronism. Even a hard-core realist like Hans Morgenthau was drawn to declare thirty-five years ago that -- in his words --

Modern technology has rendered the nation state obsolete as a principle of political organization; for the nation state is no longer able to perform what is the elementary function of any political organization: to protect the lives of its members and their way of life . . . The modern technologies of transportation, communications, and warfare, and the resultant feasibility of all-out atomic war, have completely destroyed this protective function of the nation state.

Contemporary observers and leaders alike have devoted considerable effort throughout the postwar years in the pursuit of measures to go -- in the popular parlance -- "beyond the nation state." The functionalist approach of Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman -- the pioneers of the European Union -- sought to tackle this problem by building habits of cooperation in relatively non-sensitive areas of economic and cultural activity in the belief that, in due course, these habits of cooperation would spill over into more sensitive areas. Habits can be powerful political forces indeed. As Samuel Johnson once said, "The chains of habit are too weak to be felt until they are too strong to be broken."

Obsolete though it may be in many ways, the nation state nevertheless persists as do, quite obviously, a multitude of nations. Indeed, many of the legal and political principles of exclusivity commonly associated with the nation state are enshrined in the great treaty linking all countries, the Charter of the United Nations. Yet, at the start of the new millennium, we are also seeing the gradual emergence of an awareness throughout the world of our common humanity and the planet as a whole rather than simply the sum of its parts.

This synthesis of the globe and the nation state as the fundamental units of sustained political activity is but another way of thinking about the process of globalization. The idea here is not to replace the nation state but to adapt it to be more responsive to human needs in new global conditions.

Without a doubt the best expression of the synthesis that is now underway can be found in a historic document that was issued last September after the Millennium Summit at the United Nations, the largest-ever gathering of world leaders. This document, called the Millennium Declaration, consists of a statement of common values and principles, as well as a list of specific common objectives. Specific initiatives are outlined in the areas of peace, security, and disarmament; development and poverty eradication; protecting the environment; human rights, democracy, and good governance; protecting the vulnerable; meeting the special needs of Africa; and strengthening the United Nations.

It is noteworthy that the primary agent for pursuing these common, global goals remains the state. The declaration itself, for example, was, unlike the Charter, a statement by "heads of State and Government" not their peoples. In this document, these leaders emphatically rededicated themselves "to uphold the sovereign equality of all States," to respect their "territorial integrity and political independence," and to reaffirm their commitment of "non-interference in the internal affairs of States." It is hard to read this language and conclude that the state is obsolete.

Yet to read only those passages pertaining to the state would be to ignore other parts of the declaration that clearly seek to move the focus of political action to the betterment of all humanity. Hence one finds listed among the key values of the new Declaration a "collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity at the global level." The document declares the existence of a duty "to all the world's people" and refers throughout to "our common humanity."

What makes this Declaration so interesting is not only the solid consensus behind it, but its brilliant synthesis and redefinition of ends and means in the millennium to come. The document puts forward clear global ends and relies upon states as key agents in pursuing those ends on behalf of all humanity. The Declaration offers states a road map of initiatives they should follow for the collective good of all.

In the area of protecting the environment, for example, the Declaration's language calls upon states to embrace and implement numerous international conventions and understandings, including the Kyoto Protocol and support for the principles of sustainable development enshrined in the Rio Declaration. The actions needed to enforce such agreements do not materialize from nowhere: they continue to depend heavily upon enlightened action by states.

[Back to top](#)

Globalization and the NGOs

This begs the question, how is it possible to motivate structures of the state that have for centuries now sought to maximize the interest of specific local nationalities, to implement instead policies that serve the global common good? Even if it were possible to place an enlightened leader at the head of every government on Earth, that would be no guarantee that the complicated machinery of the state would respond to this solemn new responsibility.

Global values simply cannot be imposed upon states from without. They must be embraced by states from within. The state is a neutral administrative structure that can be used for purposes both good and bad. It is neither inherently nor inevitably the enemy of globalization.

The central challenge of our time is not to achieve the end of the nation state, but to rehabilitate the ends of the nation state.

Globalization must mean more than simply the sterile process of expanding markets. In presenting his Millennium Report to the General Assembly a year ago, Secretary-General Kofi Annan offered the following observations:

To make a success of this great upheaval, we must learn how to govern better, and -- above all how to govern better together. We need to make our States stronger and more effective at the national level. And we need to get them working together on global issues, all pulling their weight and having their say.

A few days later he described the following as needed for a well-functioning international system: "Ultimately, national action is the determining factor. If there is a single idea that embodies the sum total of national action, that idea is good governance."

The essence of good governance is popular participation, transparency, and public accountability. Strong laws to protect the environment, for example, are forged as a result of a sustained political process, a process involving persisting efforts throughout civil society. Enlightened leaders in government require this popular participation to adopt laws and policies to meet genuine human needs, just as the groups in society that are advocating such reforms must also depend upon official authorities to promulgate and vigorously enforce such reforms.

In this light, NGOs can be a catalyst of what is truly good about globalization. Though they are elected by no one and lack legal authority themselves to govern, they play a crucial role in helping the state to identify new goals, in educating the wider public of the need for action, and in providing political support that government leaders need to enact new laws, to implement new policies, and to see that they are enforced. NGOs also will have a role in exposing inefficient and ineffective policies and in mobilizing demands for constructive change.

[Back to top](#)

Conclusion

If it is true that the nation state is likely to remain for some time to come a prominent reference point in the "cartography of governance" -- the subject of this symposium -- it is also true that the specific role of this administrative structure will be determined by more than structural or topographic features of a political system. To this extent, a "meteorology of governance" is needed as well, for it addresses the dynamic though often unpredictable processes that occur across the political landscape.

If the winds of political change are to sweep into the dusty halls of government, they will originate from the same place they have always arisen from time immemorial -- they will flow from the voices of the people.

To overcome the numerous institutional obstacles to change, broad-based coalitions must be formed among the people. Environmental NGOs can accomplish much through their own hard work and focused efforts. They can accomplish much more, however, through networks of alliances with other groups throughout civil society that share a commitment to the common good. These are the kinds of networks that led to the conclusion of the Mine-Ban Convention and the campaign to create an International Criminal Court. The Partial Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty owes much of its existence to sustained work by people around the world who were concerned about the health and environmental effects of atmospheric nuclear testing.

This track record indicates that the nation state and globalization are surely not mutually-exclusive concepts. Working together, they have the potential to be among humanity's most effective means of improving life on this planet for all and on an equitable basis. This challenge is no more important than in international peace and security, and no more demanding than in

the area of disarmament.

If the collective aim is inclusive, results-based globalization, clearly environmental NGOs have already made an excellent start in their combined efforts -- not to eliminate the state -- but to channel its significant resources toward achieving responsible, collective ends. This is the solemn task of environmental NGOs in the future, the task of mobilizing a stubborn defence of our common global heritage. Its best partners in this grand endeavour will remain an informed public, other like-minded groups, a state guided by enlightened laws and policies, and a common global forum to coordinate and integrate different pathways to our collective ends.

The fate of these collaborative efforts will profoundly shape both the cartography and meteorology of governance in the new millennium. They will determine whether humanity will find itself facing the dawn of a new millennium, or the encroaching darkness of its last sunset.

[Back to top](#)