

# Global State Formation in the Twenty-First Century

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*Posted: 12 June 2015*

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State power is always changing. In 2000, at a moment of rapid transformation after the Cold War, I proposed the outline of a theory of the global state. Mine was not a teleological theory, like Alex Wendt's 2003 argument summarised in his contribution on this site. Although I started from many of the same observations that Wendt now deploys, I interpreted them in a more specific historical manner. Certainly, there has been a long secular trend towards a smaller number of 'states'. In the last century in particular, my book identified a major concentration of state power, as the international system evolved from the multi-imperial form which it took before 1945 (in which seven or eight rival empires dominated the globe), to the Cold War system of two 'blocs', to the 'unipolar' Western-global dominance which developed after 1989.

However the trend has been uneven and contradictory, and its conclusion in the kind of world-state theorised by Wendt is not 'inevitable' as he contended in 2003. Nor is it as straightforwardly desirable as he now argues, although I agree that there is transformative potential in the globalisation of the state.

To obtain better purchase on these developments, we need first to consider what was involved in the modern stages of the concentration of state power, and what their consequences were. The system of European (including later US and Japanese) world-

Although like Wendt I largely follow Max Weber's definition that a state is a power centre which has a monopoly of violence in a given territory, I qualify that definition along the lines proposed by Michael Mann: see my *Theory of the Global State*.

empires that originated in the sixteenth century destroyed indigenous polities in many parts of the world, and its internal competition eventually led to the two hugely destructive world wars of the twentieth century. These culminated in the transcendence of the imperial system itself, as the German and Japanese empires were defeated and Britain, France and the rest were also subordinated to the USA. The resulting Cold War bloc-system certainly neutralised most of the old imperial rivalries, but it replaced them with an unstable balance of power between nuclear-armed superpowers, which threatened global annihilation. Moreover the blocs were very far from benign systems of rule: Soviet power in Eastern Europe was repressively imperial, US hegemony in Latin America and parts of Asia sustained corrupt and repressive regimes, and the new Chinese state (the forgotten third 'pole' of the Asian Cold War) presided over the largest state-made mass deaths in modern history.

The principal upside of this period, from the point of view of the internationalisation of the state, was the developing integration in Western Europe. Wendt makes much of this positive example of peaceful internationalisation, which was complemented by expanded economic and social dimensions of national sovereignty in managed, welfare-state economies. However these developments were only possible because of US dominance and the NATO military alliance, which preceded European economic integration. Elsewhere in the world, the period was one of simultaneous state-fragmentation and nation state-building, as around a dozen old empires were replaced by over a hundred independent states (some of them the results of secessionist movements which fractured the larger states). Decolonisation and the struggles over power in post-colonial states were, like colonisation itself, extensively violent processes, marked by new genocidal phenomena as I have charted elsewhere. While many post-colonial states remained dependent on one or more of the superpowers and the old colonial powers, the larger and more important states - of which China was always the strongest example - represented huge new concentrations of power and potential rivals for the Western and Soviet blocs.

The end of the Cold War resulted from the coming together of two main trends. One was the failure of the Soviet Union in the inter-bloc military competition (it could no longer afford the economic costs of keeping up with the USA), compounded by the failure of the political reform process initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev, which led to the state's break-up in 1991. The other was the worldwide movement for democracy in the 1980s, originating in Latin America as well as Eastern Europe, which ensured that the end of the Cold War system was also a moment of democratisation. The combination of these two trends meant that the new 'unipolar' US-Western dominance was accompanied by a 'global democratic revolution', as not only the old Soviet-bloc states but also US allies (South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia etc.) cast off authoritarian regimes. Even China saw a major contestation in 1989. With the disappearance of Soviet competition and under pressure from democracy movements, the USA could afford in many cases to support and even promote change - but mostly not in the crucial Middle Eastern region where authoritarian regimes were too strategically valuable. It is also important to note that democratisation was far from universally peaceful. Two major genocides of the early 1990s, in former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, could be traced directly to conflicts arising from democratisation and, in the latter case, to botched political intervention by the USA and UN.

Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that the end of the Cold War offered opportunities for benign extensions of internationalisation and democratisation, which could have led further in the direction Wendt (and I) would like world state-formation to go. In 1991, the new Russian Federation was weak and China, still in the early stages of its transformation into an economic superpower, was no rival for the USA. Russia's support enabled Western initiatives in the UN Security Council, new military interventions (notably the US-led war to remove Iraqi invaders from Kuwait), international legal developments (the tribunals for former Yugoslavia and Rwanda and eventually the International Criminal Court) and a general expansion of the roles of international organisations. What I call the 'global layer' of state power expanded, with the support of the core military and economic Western bloc and its worldwide systems of alliance, which unlike the Soviet bloc remained more or less intact and thus in an even more commanding position in the international system.

However it is possible, from the vantage point of 2015, to say definitively that many of the opportunities available a quarter of a century ago were squandered. The West promoted crash marketisation of ex-Soviet bloc economies, which led to oligarchical power, degraded welfare systems and weakened prospects for democracy. Despite airy talk of a common European security architecture, NATO expanded by incorporating former Soviet-bloc states, including even former Soviet republics, setting up a new conflict with Russia which erupted in the Georgian and Ukrainian wars of 2008 and 2014 respectively. The Kuwait war of 1991 - although widely supported and internationally legitimate at the time - set up a long-running new Iraqi conflict which tempted the George W. Bush administration into the fateful invasion of 2003, which in turn provoked genocidal civil war in Iraq. The USA's unilateral use of military power both stimulated Islamist terror and destroyed the international consensus against it that had briefly arisen after the 9/11 attacks. Moreover, following NATO's earlier intervention in Kosovo, the Iraq invasion had far-reaching effects in persuading Russia, China and other regional powers that when crucial interests were at stake, global institutions could be set aside. The US determination to undermine the International Criminal Court underlined this lesson. Likewise, the substitution of US arms for local transformation in Iraq and the West's continuing support for repressive dictatorships even in the aftermath of the Arab Spring gave the lesson that democracy may be desirable, but it is not essential.

In short, if we are looking for a benign, democratic world-state any time soon, we are going to be disappointed. Wendt acknowledges this by suggesting a 100-200 year time-frame for its development. This is distant enough to allow that his argument might be plausible, but not so distant as to make questions about process - how we get from where we are now to his ideal - meaningless. Wendt's children or grandchildren may live to judge the outcome of his claim. As I have suggested, today's principal centre of state power is a Western conglomerate, centred on the USA but comprising a large number of states and regional institutions, which in turn largely dominates the global layer of international institutions. Other large centres of state power (China, India, Russia, Brazil, Pakistan, Indonesia, Nigeria, etc.) are formally nation-states, but many are quasi-imperial in reality and subject to deep internal tensions. At least four main processes link these and many smaller centres to the dominant West: participation in common international institutions as well as bilateral relations; economic interdependence (trade, investment, etc.); social linkages (personal investments and connections of non-Western elites with the West); and global communications (the global interdependence of mainstream media, Internet and social media).

All these types of linkage have increased significantly over the last quarter of a century. In this perspective, it does indeed appear likely that both the absence of direct wars between major states (particularly between the West and the states listed above, or among the latter) and especially of major wars between such states - the latter has lasted over sixty years - will continue. It could be possible that in the absence of such wars, the four integrative tendencies that I have indicated will continue, each mutually reinforcing each other and aiding momentum towards a global state in the medium or longer future.

There are, however, two very big reasons to be sceptical about such a line of development in the coming decades. First, none of these integrative tendencies can fully offset manifest changes in the underlying power relations between the West and other major states in the twenty-first

century. The USA badly overreached itself in its invasion of Iraq and since then its military and political dominance has increasingly been brought into question. The deep crisis of the Western part of the world capitalist system after 2007-8, in which the financial regulation failures of US and other policymakers led to a sovereign debt crisis in the Eurozone, has highlighted underlying shifts of economic power to China, India and other states. We are in a period of the relative decline of the West and rise of non-Western states; while none of the latter has the economic or military power to successfully challenge the West in the short (and probably medium) term, the long-term implications of this change could undermine both the coherence of the integrative trends and the elimination of major war between major states. We know from the outcome of the pre-1914 period of economic globalisation that interdependence does not always prevent war.

Second, other wars - between major and lesser states and between states and non-state and terrorist movements - show no sign of disappearing. Even the prospect of minor wars between major states seems now, after Ukraine, considerably greater than it did a decade ago. Let me underline that within these categories are hidden some pretty nasty wars, which may be very consequential for the world system. We might not have counted the US-Iraq war of 2003 as a major war (the direct, interstate conflict lasted but a few weeks and saw modest casualties by historic standards), and we would certainly not categorise Iraq as a major state. But it is evident that this war had huge knock-effects. Likewise, the Russia-Ukraine conflict which began in 2014 is not even an open or direct interstate war, but few doubt its major effects on Russia-West relations and more widely. Evidently, too, both the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the emergence of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2014 have proved hugely destabilising of global and regional power relations. In short, the attempts by the West and Russia to exert their military power, combined with the actions of lesser states and non-state actors, may push key regions and even the world into new conflicts with fateful consequences. It would therefore be rash to assert that major wars between major states have definitively disappeared from the world: one or other of these lesser conflicts could still, at some point down the line, push us into a big major-state war, even if the odds against it are still quite good.

None of this means that a world-state, in Wendt's sense, cannot emerge from the twenty-first century. On the contrary, conflicts both major and minor can be motors of state-integration. After all current Western-global integration is to a considerable extent the result of the Second World War and the Cold War. Clearly conflicts like those in the Middle East since the 1990s, and the terrorist threats that have emerged from them, have also stimulated military-political integration, not only within the West but also involving other states. Financial crises, too, may force integrative measures, as when the G20 was formed to reinforce the Western G7/8 with other major states, in the crisis of 2007-8. But given the manifest lack of interests of US, Chinese, Russian, Indian and other political elites in creating stronger global institutions, it seems likely that integration will be limited and piecemeal, and that disintegrative tendencies could prove equally strong. Given the historic importance of major wars in achieving big changes in the world system, it may only be through new wars, with all their destructive effects, that political change will occur. Just as there was nothing inevitable about the emergence of a Western-dominated world in the late twentieth century, there is nothing inevitable about its transformation into a more recognisable global state in, say, the late twenty-first or twenty-second. It is also possible that the conflicts of our coming era will produce new faultlines and axes of destruction.

If something like a global state comes about, what will it look like? Wendt rightly dismisses the caricature of a totalitarian world dictatorship routinely trotted out by opponents of world government. But his ideal of a light-touch, democratic world state, preventing military anarchy but devolving most other matters to regional and national states is just as unlikely. We might argue that the dominant state will be a modified form of today's Western-global state conglomerate with increasing Chinese and other non-Western characteristics. The Western conglomerate is hardly the embryo of the liberal-democratic world order that Wendt advocates: at its centre is a US polity dominated by anti-global interests, highly resistant to global institutions, still widely supportive of authoritarian regimes, and prone to abusing military power in ways that provoke world polarisation. The global layer of international institutions, which involves all centres of state power, remains relatively weak. If the authoritarian Chinese superstate continues to become more deeply integrated in global political and economic institutions, like the USA and the West it will bend them to further its own interests; it is unlikely to influence institutions in a liberal-democratic direction. China's future is in itself, of course, a hugely consequential question, and the long-postponed fall of Communism could mean that all short-term bets were off. All that we can say definitively is that the internationalisation of the state will continue to evolve through military and economic crises. This is a deeply embedded set of processes, which will undoubtedly continue, but in forms that it is difficult to foresee today. Its long-term consequences are as likely to be disturbing, from the point of view of a humane, integrated world order, as they are to be benign. Outcomes depend, however, on human action, and in a world of increasing democracy and communication we all have opportunities to make a difference.

The role of economic contradictions in global state formation was, I now believe, underplayed in Theory of the Global State, and also in Wendt's article.