

Briefing Memo

Sovereign States and Security in a Global Age

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Preface

It is said that sovereign states have become unstable due to the progress of globalization. There are two factors that are thought to have contributed to this phenomenon. The first factor is the increasing security threat by non-state actors. Sovereign states still remain to be the principal actors in the international community, cross-border flow of people, goods, capital and information has been further facilitated by the advancement of globalization and a relative expansion of non-state actors' influence has been brought about in the international community, and as a negative impact, terrorism and crimes committed by non-state actors are increasingly posing serious security threats to any country. The second factor is that the diversification of security challenges is exposing the limitation of a nation's capability to respond. New threats such as international terrorism and organized crimes cannot be handled by a single nation alone. Here we will try to understand the current situation surrounding sovereign states in order to consider the future of sovereign states.

Sovereign states and international order

The fact that sovereign states are in an unstable situation means that sovereign states face various problems. In order to figure out these problems, we need to trace the origin of the international political system that consists of sovereign states. As is well known, this system (called the Westphalian system) is thought to have originated from the Peace of Westphalia signed in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years' War, which was a long religious war. The significance of this treaty can be summarised into two points. Firstly, it was a realistic measure to overcome the never-ending religious division. From this point onwards, the nature of international relations shifted to balance of power which is based on the actual state powers. This shift can be expressed as secularization in international relations. Secondly, with the de facto collapse of the Holy Roman Empire, which was an empire (or a super power) that had continued from medieval times, the sovereignty of each state was enhanced. However, on the other hand, the splitting up of the empire into sovereign states indicates the disappearance of a political entity responsible for the global order. The international society could be said to have turned into a battle field for several Leviathans as written by Thomas Hobbes.

It is interesting to consider the current problems faced by sovereign states in the context of these two points. In relation to the first point, we should note the fact there are forces that are yet again trying to bring in the never-ending confrontation of beliefs into the current secular international relations. Here I would like to talk about non-state actors like the international terrorist networks, particularly Islamic extremists led by Al-Qaeda. The radical Islamic revivalism are said to be the thinking behind the ideologies of the Islamic extremist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda, and it is seen as a direct challenge to the Westphalian system. The groups that advocate the adherence to the radical Islamic revivalism take a standpoint that territorially delimited sovereign states do not have legitimacy, weakens the Islamic world and infringes the doctrine of Islamic universality and solidarity. This philosophy reaches an extreme conclusion that advocates the spread of Islamic revolution far beyond state borders, denying the notion of sovereign states, and replacing the current secular international order with a world order that has been Islamized.

In relation to the second point, the issue here is how to secure the stability of the international society where there is no ruling power that has control over sovereign states that act autonomously according to their own law and motives based on self-interests. Moreover, in this present world faced with the deepening of global security issues that a single state alone cannot respond to, it is necessary to consider how to reinforce the framework to tackle these issues. In other words, creating a political entity responsible for maintaining world order has been and will be an important issue. The lessons of World War I and World War II led to the construction of a collective security system in the form of the United Nations, and this system has been playing a certain leading role in maintaining peace and stability of the international society. Evidently the role of the UN has been expanding. After the Cold War, the UN has significantly changed its position on the principle of non- interference in internal affairs of sovereign states which is one of the main principles of the UN Charter. Since regional and ethnic conflicts have produced failed states that have lost their ability to govern (governance ability), and it becomes apparent that this can cause instability of the international society and pose a threat to security, and the UN needs to be involved in the domestic issues of problematic countries in order to prevent the crisis from happening. In this instance, it can be said that state sovereignty is no longer absolute. Conversely, there are views that the United States needs to take the responsibility for maintaining the world order because the US enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength in the world today. However even the US does not necessarily possess the infinite capability to be engaged in all the world over on a constant basis. Even the "supremacy" the US has over the other countries will not be maintainable unless it is accepted by the other countries. Therefore, the search for a political entity responsible for maintaining the world order may very well lead to strengthening the capability of the UN rather than "revival of an empire."

Sovereign states and non-state actors

Views are divided over whether the movements by non-state actors, such as the Islamic extremist terrorist networks, who are directly challenging the Westphalian system and trying to break down the border of sovereign states, can be regarded as the sign that the world is shifting to a post-Westphalian system. It can be pointed that at present the monopolization of the use of justified violence by sovereign states is collapsing. Sovereign states have monopolized the use of physical force, externally in the form of military power against external threats to national territories, and internally in the form of police force for making the citizens within the territory observe the law to maintain social order. However, currently the diffusion of various weapons among non-state actors is becoming a serious trigger factor for terrorism. Phenomena such as the diffusion of arms and the spread of terrorism are related to the appearance of failed states. Failed states cannot properly manage state borders, and therefore cannot control effectively armed groups and weapons in the border areas. Due to these factors, disputes involving failed states turn into cross-border disputes, and deteriorate even further by involving surrounding states. Furthermore, failed states are an ideal base for non-state actors such as the Islamic extremist terrorist networks. For example, the September 11 terrorist attacks was an example of the threat of serious worldwide terrorism caused by non-state actors that have gotten their bases in failed states. Although means of deterrence may be meaningful in the relationship between sovereign states, in the case of non-state actors, the lack of territories or people to be defended makes it hard to deter their attacks. Worse still, it is difficult to pick up the sign regarding when and where these types of attacks are likely to occur.

What will happen to sovereign states?

Sovereign states can be divided into stable states that possess the will and ability to be responsible for the safety of the territory that they govern, and unstable states that lack such will and ability and can be a source of serious terrorism. In failed states like the latter case, their sovereignty is not absolute, and therefore from a humanitarian standpoint the interference in their internal affairs is called for. Nevertheless the objective of the interference is to establish a justifiable and trust-worthy government in the states, and to enhance its capability to ensure autonomously safety within their territory. Here the key issue will be the reconstruction of its function and ability as a sovereign state.

Although it remains unchanged that the maintenance and enhancement of sovereign states is an important issue for the international society, we can point out that individual sovereign states are transferring a part of their sovereignty to international organizations such as the European Union. What should we make of the factors that encouraged this type of consolidation? After the experience of the two world wars, the European countries have become aware of the disastrous results brought on by sovereign states' exertion of their

sovereign power based on nationalism. Therefore the European integration can be described as an effort to conquer such problems. It can be said that the relationship between European countries is shifting to a new form of relationship which openly shares matters that would have been conventionally classified as relating to sovereignty, and carries out mutual intervention. In other words, the EU is a highly-developed system, which is not dependent on the balance of power, does not emphasize national sovereignty, and accepts mutual interference regarding various fields. Is it possible to think that these three points will indeed deny the Westphalian system? Would the progress of the European integration through the EU destabilize sovereign states? And would the EU want to become a new “universal empire” that will be responsible for maintaining the European order?

Conclusion

The changes in the circumstances surrounding sovereign states, as I have described so far, are unlikely to become factors that can drastically change the international order that consists of sovereign states. It looks improbable that Islamic terrorist organizations, that try to bring in the notion of religious confrontation into the dynamics of international relations, are becoming widely accepted. Moreover, the issues relating to failed states are, as far as the efforts by the international society are concerned, to restore their ability to govern, and to assist them to regain their normal status as a sovereign state. Peace enforcement and peacekeeping operations are activities with just such objectives. Also even with attempts to achieve regional integration such as the EU, the more the common policies are pursued the more the differences in the capabilities among member states become apparent. Some cases have led to problems such as the emergence of a trend to move away from the EU. It seems that even with the progression of integration, the framework of sovereign states will be maintained.

The challenges by non-state actors will in turn result in the increase in security issues that sovereign states need to address. The military establishment of each state will be expected not only to cope with traditional security issues but also with new non-traditional issues such as terrorism. But since many states face the problem of financial restrictions, it is difficult for them to tackle broad issues. It is the most important for sovereign states to seek security measures that do not pose threats to another states.

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