Climate Change and the Island States: Reimagining the International System

Lokendra Sharma

Published online: 24 Aug 2021.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 200

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Commentary

Climate Change and the Island States: Reimagining the International System

Lokendra Sharma

Climate change, often identified as one of the biggest challenges of this century and beyond, affects the small island states of the Indian Ocean, Pacific and elsewhere in various ways. This includes the possibility of submergence or uninhabitability of island states with rising sea levels and the threat to marine life due to rising ocean temperature. Even if the islands are not completely submerged due to rising sea levels, they may become uninhabitable due to several factors like damage to the coral reef, intrusion of saltwater in the freshwater table, rising food insecurity and extreme weather events.[1] These threats question the notions of territoriality, sovereignty and statehood of island states in a post-submergence/uninhabitability scenario, challenging the very basis of the current international system of nation-states. In this context, a few questions come to the fore: Is climate change a stressor for the international system? What are the other stressors? Can they bring about the unravelling of the current international system? If so, then in what ways could the world be reimagined?

Emergence of the modern international system

The nation-state system, or the international system, has come into being in the past few centuries. The world was unfamiliar with the idea of a nation for most of the history. Rather, the 'nation' represented a disruption in the way social organization happened historically—in forms such as tribal kinship, clans, fiefdoms, city-states, kingdoms and empires. The system of modern nation-state emerged in a particular historical context in Europe in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries. In its evolution, the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 is a significant milestone; Westphalia espoused the principles of sovereignty, non-interference in internal affairs and separation of the Church and the State. In the next two centuries (eighteenth and nineteenth), the French and American Revolutions solidified the still nascent nation-state system. The reunification and formation of German and Italian nation-states in the nineteenth century further added impetus to this Westphalian system that engulfed the entire world in the twentieth century.

Colonialism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries contributed to the spread of the Westphalian system across Asia, Africa and Latin America in two ways. First, colonialism led to the spread of European ideas of sovereignty and nationalism to the

Lokendra Sharma is a PhD candidate in the School of Conflict and Security Studies at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru.

non-European lands. Second, the colonized countries inherited the institutions of the colonizers post-independence. Finally, in the twentieth century, two events occurring within three decades heralded the Westphalian international system to the global level. First, World War I (1914–1918) which led to the end of Empires, as the Ottoman, Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian Empires were dissolved and dismantled. Second, World War II (1939–1945), the aftermath of which led to the inception of the United Nations (UN). The Westphalian principles of sovereignty, non-interference and inviolability of borders were codified into international law by the UN. Due to the aforementioned factors, the newly decolonized countries in the 1950s through the 1970s have since been trying to fit into this international normative framework.[2]

Stressors for the international system

The current international system has been under stress since its inception in the 1940s. This stress was induced because the newly independent states of the Third World attempted to transform themselves into nation-states, imitating the European way despite having widely differing circumstances. However, it is pertinent to understand the difference between a 'nation' and a 'state' before engaging with this process of transformation. It is also important to understand what nationalism is and how it is associated with the idea of nation.

Earnest Gellner, in his famous book, *Nations and Nationalism*, defines nationalism as a 'political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent'.[3] Another important scholar in nationalism studies, Benedict Anderson, defined the nation as 'an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign'.[4] However, the link between nation and nationalism and a more comprehensive definition of these terms was put out by Rejai and Enloe in 1969 much before the aforementioned definitions appeared. According to them, while nationalism 'refers to an awareness of membership in a nation (potential or actual)', nation is a 'large group of people' who have a feeling of belonging together based on 'common language, religion or race, common history or tradition, common set of customs, and common destiny'.[5]

The 'state' and 'nation' are also different—while the former is a political–legal entity, the latter is a Hyphenate one.[6] The state and national boundaries may not necessarily coincide; in fact, generally they do not. The European nation-states emerged out of bloodshed and wars over three to four centuries. According to Charles Tilly's famous aphorism, in Europe 'war made the state, and the state made war'.[7] The Third World countries, in contrast, inherited colonial boundaries that, because of the prevalent international norms and laws post-World War II, were inviolable, that is, they could not be altered. The sovereignty of the states extended to all their administrative areas. While the post-colonial state boundaries were drawn by the colonial masters for administrative and other purposes as per their convenience, the spread of ethnic communities was utterly disregarded. The result was artificial states having multiple nations within them. In many cases, national communities spread across various states. These Third World states have ever since independence embarked on state-building projects that have often been a violent process.[8] A significant number of countries trying (without the requisite

preconditions) to fit into the nation-state frame is one of the stressors for the current international system since its inception in the late 1940s.

Another stressor for the international system is the phenomenon of globalization. Arguably, the forces of globalization have been there in some fundamental sense since the birth of civilization thousands of years before, but they intensified and their impacts became far more pervasive following the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, enabled by the rapid technological advancement witnessed in the last few decades. Globalization has brought people closer, boosted cross-cultural communication and contact. Anthony Giddens, a British Sociologist, famously defines globalization as: '[T]he 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'.[9]

Globalization has also brought actors like international non-governmental organizations, international and regional governmental organizations, multinational companies and other transboundary non-state actors (including terrorist and criminal networks) to the fore. Further, with the flow of ideas and information in the age of social media, national borders have become less rigid, at least in the digital realm. Globalization has, due to the aforementioned factors, reduced the salience of the 'state' in the international system. In fact, it has put into question the very basis on which nation-states operate—the idea of territoriality. According to Anthony McGrew, 'globalization embodies a process of deterritorialization: as social, political, and economic activities are increasingly "stretched" across the globe, they become in a significant sense no longer organized solely according to a strictly territorial logic'.[10]

There is an ongoing debate among the scholarly community on how globalization impacts the international system. Primarily, there are two opposing views: one side believes that globalization has made national borders meaningless, has led (or will lead to) the demise of the nation-state system, while the other side argues that the state still remains the most powerful actor. The actual reality lies somewhere between both the extremities: globalization has put pressure on the nation-state system, but has not made either the national borders or the state, meaningless. Especially after the 2008 financial crisis, there has been a rise of populist regimes throughout the world and the accompanying resurgence of the 'state'. There has also been a cultural pushback to globalization's homogenizing tendencies; the working classes have also rejected globalization as the promised economic benefits did not trickle down.

Climate change: another stressor?

Climate change, as discussed earlier, threatens the very survival of island states. The threat is not just of submergence due to rising sea levels, but also that of uninhabitability due to factors like depletion of freshwater sources, agricultural issues and extreme weather events. In the context of small island states in the Indian Ocean, Pacific and elsewhere, climate change challenges the notions of territoriality, sovereignty and statehood associated with the current international system. How will the peoples of submerged island states be accommodated in the community of nation-states?

Not only the impacts, but the response to climate change also puts strain on the international system. The fallout of climate change is transboundary and global in

nature. The response to climate change, therefore, cannot be a national one; it has to be a global response, with nation-states coming together with a collective strategy.

However, would climate change lead to the unravelling of the international system? It can be argued that the claims being made about the fallout are exaggerated to put pressure on the states to act. Successful adaptation and mitigation measures might soften the intensity of the fallout. And as Michael Gagain pointed out in the context of the Maldives, a vulnerable island state in the Indian Ocean, the sovereignty and statehood of island states can be preserved by building artificial islands and amending the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.[11] While other ways could be the formation of an island state government in exile; retaining some form of international legal personality and erecting coastal structures (sovereignty markers).[12]

Furthermore, despite the sovereign equality of states being enshrined in international law, large land-based states occupy the positions of power, marginalizing the small island states. Even with their limited normative power potential, the impact of small island states in deciding their fate and charting the trajectory of the current international system would be muted.

Climate change, therefore, would be another stressor; however, like other stressors, it would be incapable of bringing about the demise of the international system in itself. Parallels can be drawn with the debate on the relationship between climate change/environmental degradation and conflict. One side argues that climate change/environment leads to conflict, while the other side says that climate change/environment is not the initiator, but adds to an underlying conflict, becoming an enabling or contributing factor. Similarly, climate change is just another stressor that strains the current international system, insufficient to cause its demise or unravelling.

Reimagining the international system

Even as the stressors highlighted above would not bring an immediate demise of the international system, they do contribute (along with a host of factors) to its gradual unravelling. The human collective (or organization) has only increased in size and complexity, beginning from the tribes to the large states to the supranational entities like the European Union. No system is permanent; the current system may also see its gradual demise and replacement by another.[13] What would replace the current international system if the Westphalian system were to fall? The historical trend suggests that the current nation-states may be gradually replaced by regional formations, which would transcend the national boundaries. Supranational bodies may eventually pave the way for a global arrangement where citizenship may not just be national or regional, but global. Moreover, with technological advancement, the world would increasingly move into the cyber and digital space and the actual physical space would lose its salience. Such a new global system may not have any borders (both physical and digital) nor any physical marker of sovereignty. The idea of a nation-state, which is understood as the *natural way of things today*, might itself become alien. Climate change, as highlighted previously, is a problem that transcends national boundaries. If the manifestations of climate change are going to be as catastrophic as predicted by the epistemic communities, individual responses by countries are bound to fail. For the response (both adaptation and mitigation) to

be effective, it has to be a global one. In this way, climate change will only fasten the gradual movement towards a global system.

Reimagining is a matter of scholarly speculation, and the world can be imagined in countless ways. But this should not be a reason to dismiss such an exercise. From a critical theoretical viewpoint, after all, theory shapes reality as much as reality shapes theory; the world is constituted and reconstituted through the meanings that are attached to it. And as Matthew Bolton argues, narratives, discourses and imaginations do play a role in bringing about global political change.[14]

Notes

1. Lilian Yamamoto and Miguel Esteban, 'Vanishing Island States and Sovereignty', *Ocean & Coastal Management*, 53(1), 2010, pp. 1-3.
2. Mohammed Ayoob, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict, and the International System*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder, 1995, pp. 71-88.
3. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p. 1.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso Books, London and New York, 2006, p. 6.
5. Mostafa Rejai and Cynthia H. Enloe, 'Nation-States and State-Nations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 13(2), 1969, p. 141.
6. Ibid., p. 143.
7. Quoted in Brian D. Taylor and Roxana Botea, 'Tilly Tally: War-Making and State-Making in the Contemporary Third World', *International Studies Review*, 10(1), 2008, p. 27.
8. Mohammed Ayoob, no. 2, pp. 21-42.
9. Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1990, p. 64.
10. Anthony McGrew, 'Globalization and Global Politics', in John Baylis, Steve Smith and Patricia Owens (eds.), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 19.
11. Michael Gagain, 'Climate Change, Sea Level Rise, and Artificial Islands: Saving the Maldives' Statehood and Maritime Claims through the Constitution of the Oceans', *Colorado Journal of International Environmental Law and Policy*, 23(1), 2012, pp. 118-120.
12. Lilian Yamamoto and Miguel Esteban, no. 1, pp. 6-8.
13. This assertion, even as inspired from the work of Immanuel Wallerstein, who propounded the world systems theory, limits itself to the international system bereft of the political–economic or ideological perspective from which Wallerstein argued (that is to say, this essay does not concern itself with the ideological/economic logic of the new world system); see Immanuel Wallerstein, 'The Rise and Future Demise of the World Capitalist System: Concepts for Comparative Analysis', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16 (4), 1974, pp. 387-415.
14. Although Bolton makes these arguments in the context of disarmament, it is nonetheless relevant in the present case; see Matthew Breay Bolton, *Imagining Disarmament, Enchanting International Relations*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 2020.

Disclosure statement