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A Strong State: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century

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“A weak state [is] ... a luxury, which only people in exceptionally favorable conditions can afford.”

Ivan Ilyin¹

Challenges to state viability in the 21th century

The world entered a new period of development in the second half of 2008. The global financial crisis and the Russia-Georgia military conflict brought an end to the post-Cold War period and the political, economic and military domination of the United States. The system in which stability, peace and development were largely provided by a single center has disintegrated. The military-political decline of the United States is evidenced by the unwarranted use of military force in international relations and the striving of countries such as Iran and North Korea to develop their own nuclear programs in circumvention of existing agreements. The weakening West is unable to successfully complete its military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, form a viable pro-growth economic order or offer new solutions for stabilizing regional subsystems in Europe and the Middle East. The crises in Ukraine and the Middle East are spinning fast, while the West, far from offering stabilization solutions, is largely hindering their settlement.

Military, political and economic decision-making is becoming decentralized. Significant factors are Russia's use of military force in the Caucasus, recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, reintegration of Crimea and employment of asymmetric military tactics in eastern Ukraine. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have expanded their sphere of action outside Europe and the Caucasus, while NATO's geopolitical zone of responsibility has not changed since the Baltic States gained membership in the bloc. The political and institutional unity of non-Western states – the BRICS group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa – is being economically reinforced through trade, investment and financial diversification. The sixth BRICS summit approved the creation of the New Development Bank, a pool of reserve currencies called the Contingency Reserve Arrangement and an alternative energy association. The rise of alternative systems of values and soft power projects has brought into question the universal viability of the market economy and pluralistic democratic institutions.²

Some signs of the times are the growing destabilization of the global economy, and the system of international relations and regional subsystems. The world has entered a period of transition to a new international system. The direction and final destination of this movement is so far unclear, so analysts describe the new world as post-American or post-Western.³ The world is no longer unipolar, because the dominant or “hegemonic” state and the international military, political and economic institutions it supports are quickly losing the ability to maintain international peace and stability.

¹ Ivan Ilyin, *O silnoi vlasti. Nashi zadachi* [A Strong State. Our Tasks], Articles 1948-1954 in two volumes, Vol. 1, Moscow, 1992, p. 316.

² Despite their differences from the West, Russia and China nevertheless cast themselves as democracies, whereas the Islamic idea scorns any and all secular democratic ideals as essentially corrupt.

³ Farid Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, New York, 2008. Russian analysts have predicted the relative weakening of the United States in the international system of relations since the early 2000s. In particular, Alexei Bogaturov described the post-Cold War international system as pluralistic unipolarity, in which the unipolar center is a group of responsible states that includes Russia (Alexei Bogaturov, *Sovremenny mezhdunarodny porjadok* [Modern World Order], *Mezhdunarodnyye Protsessy*, 1 (1), 2003 <<http://www.intertrends.ru>>).

However, the world has not yet become multipolar, because a new military-political coalition or an institutionalized multilateral mechanism of viable decision-making has not been created.

Growing instability is exposing the majority of states to new challenges and the temptation to find “simple” solutions, which can only strengthen an inward focus and centralization of power. However, as the interwar period between the end of World War I and the beginning of World War II showed, autarchy and nationalism cannot guarantee against further destabilization. The world needs new solutions and new national mechanisms of responsible governance. The time has come to review the parameters and tasks of an effective state. Only those states that correctly assess their capabilities, commensurate with their national experience and place in the global system, will be able to adapt and develop. All other states, as the color revolutions have shown, will split or teeter on the edge of collapse and weakness.

The tasks and types of states

An effective state must be able to ensure internal political stability, economic growth and the possibility of social development, as well as to mobilize resources for achieving its goals. A strong state worthy of its name will be capable of achieving its goals. In addition to formulating goals and mobilizing resources, a strong or effective state also needs elements of democracy to provide for feedback between society and the ruling elite. However, democracy is not the same as state governance. The state is largely governed by institutions responsible for law and stability. An effective state must have sufficient administrative power for resisting external pressure and special interest lobbies,⁴ that is, groups that lobby for big business, ethnic clans or administrative/military agencies. But democratic procedures can and must be used to resist these groups and agencies and to determine priorities in the interests of the broader public. Otherwise, as Aristotle warned, the state will become either hostage to oligarchic groups or unmanageable.

The aspects of state power and effectiveness can vary depending on conditions and the level of public development. Different societies formulate different goals. Some societies have achieved a high level of social and economic development and can reliably provide security against internal and external threats, while others prioritize development and security. Some states are working to maintain their technological leadership and high standards of social protection, while others are focused on accelerated economic and demographic growth. Therefore, it can be concluded that (1) power and effectiveness are relative to goals, and (2) aspects of power of some states may be lacking in other states, where they are complemented with other aspects.

National traditions and position in the international system can play a special role in nation building. It is vitally important to take these aspects into account to gauge the state’s ability to ensure stability and development. States can be divided into liberal, social and developmental or neo-mercantilist. An example of a liberal state is the United States, which was built on the ideals of a small Anglo-Saxon state, which spread to the New World. After World War II, the US moved to the center of the global economic system. The US became the centerpiece of the international system by coordinating and

⁴ For details about the criteria and indicators of state viability, see: A.P. Tsygankov, “Modern at Last? Variety of Weak States in the Post-Soviet World,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, 40, 4.

interconnecting the interests of big business and the state, and by creating a powerful army and defense industry.

This type of liberal state would not be viable in a (semi)peripheral society, but it does have the necessary attributes of effectiveness. Firstly, this state is focused on maintaining its global information and technological edge by creating advantages for business development at home and beyond. The US elite groups have been working to maintain a competitive pro-innovation environment and institutions of global openness. US social programs, though inferior to European ones, are sufficient to maintain the continued influx of immigrants.

Social states can be easily found in Europe, where the Catholic ideals of social justice were used as the basis for a strong social state. In the latter half of the 20th century, the social state demonstrated its ability to restrict big business ambitions with a progressive tax policy, speak on behalf of a numerous middle class and formulate the priorities of industrial development. For example, high growth rates in France and Germany from 1945 through the 1970s were largely ensured by their ability to invest in the human factor, which implied a higher quality of life and professional retraining. The rise of a strong distributive state was due to Europe's central place in the global economic system, and to the lack of ambition to have a strong army and invest in military development, commensurately with the United States or Russia.

China is an example of an East Asian neo-mercantilist state based on the hierarchical Confucian tradition and a peripheral position in the international system. Due to its peripheral status, China is prioritizing accelerated development while using the hierarchical nature of its political culture to maintain internal stability from above. It has been working to gradually improve the authoritarian decision-making mechanism and redistribute the domestic product from the more developed to the underdeveloped regions. The so-called East Asian development model is connected with the rise of the developmental state. The developmental state formulates long-term development goals, pinpoints economic growth sectors and seeks to become integrated into the global economy on the basis of an export-oriented development strategy.⁵ The secret of China's rapid economic development in the past 30 years is its selective openness to the world economy.

Peripheral states with a weak tradition of internal consolidation are in a bad situation. Seeking to become stronger and to formulate growth and development goals, they often create political systems that are not suited for this task. As a result, we see weak states that are unable to meet the current challenges, or states that live off their mineral or energy resources, if they have them. These latter states could have improved their position by launching reforms from above, but this calls for political will. These states most often take the form of a conglomeration of elite groups merged with big business or Western capital, with corrupt officials and a weak and passive society. These weak and parasitic states create social conditions conducive to mass protests and revolutions rather than growth and development.

⁵ S. Haggard, *Pathways from the Periphery: The Politics of Growth in the Newly Industrializing Countries*, Ithaca, 1990; R. Wade, "Lessons from East Asia's Development Experience," *Towards a Prosperous Wider Europe*, edited by M. Dauderstädt, Bonn, 2005.

In other words, not all types of states can be easily transplanted to a different social environment. All of them have advantages that can become drawbacks, and vice versa. For example, liberal states have relatively weak social programs, which can create a competitive environment conducive to growth and innovation. A system of checks and balances in such a state hinders pro-centralization trends and prevents the usurpation of power, but can promote movement towards oligarchy and plutocracy. For example, the power of big business and the defense industry hinders social development and the formulation of priorities in the interests of the national majority. Compared to the social state, the developmental state has a relatively apolitical society, which can simplify its management by the ruling class but undermines the feedback mechanism. And lastly, a social state is relatively stable but tends to focus on introvert development, because it doesn't encourage competition and development, unlike liberal and neo-mercantilist states.

See Supplement for the basic economic and social indicators of the types of states discussed here.

The experience and goals of the Russian state

The Russian state historically differs from all types mentioned above. The Orthodox Russian state sought to maintain a fair distribution of the social product and to protect subjects from the arbitrariness of landlords, governors and other officials. The Russian understanding of justice is focused on the economy and is based on the notion of communal fairness that took root after the baptism of Rus. When Russian rulers failed to ensure this fairness, people often fled to outlying regions or rose up against them.

Russia also has a unique place in the world. Since Peter the Great, Russia has been known as a great power, even if it was not a central but a semi-peripheral state in the global economic system. Considering numerous external threats, Russian rulers never questioned the importance of maintaining its status as a great power and easily sacrificed their obligations to the people to maintain this status. Paradoxically, Russians consolidated around the state to defend their freedom from foreign incursions, even if this affected the internal components of freedom. Military might, imperial power and the ability to stand up against foreign incursions gradually turned from the elements necessary to protect national freedom into the end goals of state policy. The economically semi-peripheral Russian state increased taxes, invented new administrative methods of exploitation, and used poverty and serfdom to build up its army. The authorities disregarded the need for reforms, sometimes seeing them as a threat to the system of autocratic rule. As Georgy Vernadsky (Russian historian. – *Editor's note*) wrote, "Autocracy and serfdom were the price the Russian people had to pay for national survival."⁶

This heritage is preventing Russia from taking the European path. Other obstacles include the national political culture, the need to have a combat ready army and the need to mobilize public resources for accelerated economic growth. Therefore, the development of an effective state mechanism in Russia depends on improving the ability of the ruling class to deal with development and security tasks without becoming hostage to the interests of elite groups and without losing the

⁶ Quoted from: A. Lynch, *How Russia Is Not Ruled*, Cambridge, 2002, p. 18.

connection to society. The modern Russian developmental state must be strong in order to reduce the distance from the leading global economies, fittingly respond to security threats and improve the people's standards of living, especially in the relatively remote and critically important regions of Siberia, the Far East, the Caucasus and Crimea.

The attempts to create a decentralized and liberal Western-type system of government would only further consolidate Russia's economic lag and its oligarchic structure based on heavy reliance on raw materials. A weak Russian state would be unable to create internationally competitive industry. According to Immanuel Wallerstein (American sociologist. – *Editor's note*), "In those states in which the state machinery is weak, the state managers do not play the role of coordinating a complex industrial-commercial-agricultural mechanism. Rather they simply become one set of landlords amidst others, with little claim to legitimate authority over the whole."⁷

On the other hand, Russia certainly cannot revive the old types of strong power, such as autocracy or the system of Soviet government. Instead of trying to control business, the current Russian authorities should adopt clear rules for businesses and provide additional incentives for private initiative and foreign investment. The large-scale modernization reforms, which Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin proposed over a century ago to integrate Russia into the global economy, are what Russia still needs.

Russia's economic policy of the past 15 years has exhausted its potential. Vladimir Putin's Russia depends on energy exports, is operating predominantly based on the interests of influential political and economic groups and has not created mechanisms for sustainable social development. Its political class is not suited to the requirements of the state and its economic development. It did not use the relative prosperity of the 2000s to address fundamental economic and political issues. Russia's economic competitiveness is relatively low. Rampant corruption and the technological lag of Russian business compared to the West restrict the growth of budget revenue and hinder the strengthening of the state. The ineffectiveness of the current state machinery was laid bare by the ruble's devaluation in November and December 2014.

The Western sanctions present not only risks, but also opportunities, in that they can encourage the development and diversification of foreign economic ties in Asia. The Ukrainian crisis increased the basis of internal support for the state and created conditions for a new consolidation of power. However, the authorities still cannot make a choice between continued maneuvering and building a developmental state. The opportunity will be wasted without a strong planning role on the part of the state, which must encourage private initiative, propose new large-scale projects and mobilize resources for their implementation. It must adopt a package of measures, including a resolute battle against corruption, create a legal framework for internal competition and support the most promising economic sectors to help their integration into the global economy.

A strong state is necessary in order to improve the quality of Russia's elite and its political system. To improve the quality of the elite, it must not only offer material incentives, but also formulate political values that will help maintain a strong state. In addition to the opportunity to train abroad, Russia

⁷ Quoted from: D. Ruvalcaba, "Inside the BRIC," *Austral: Brazilian Journal of Strategy & International Relations*, 2, 4, 2013, p. 13.

must also create a network of national universities for training patriotic national elites. Another key priority is a transition from hands-on management to a system of national “primaries,” or the initial selection of members of the elite that would be acceptable to the main groups of the political class. This system has not yet been formalized, which is hindering the development of the institutional basis of Russia’s political system. Considering the importance of maintaining the continuity of strong power in Russia, a leader whose nomination is coordinated with the main groups of the political elite and who is subsequently elected by a national vote will most likely remain in power for a relatively long time. And lastly, the Russian state is sufficiently mature for a transition from the system of managed democracy to competitive elections to regional and central bodies of legislative power. To prevent destabilization, a strong state must integrate more elements of both elite-aristocratic and democratic rule.

The future of a strong state

Only states that use their experience to integrate modern elements of power and viability will succeed in the 21st century. Various types of strong states will grow stronger if they emulate positive elements of other types of states. Only states that satisfy the criteria enumerated below will be able to stand up against the challenges of this century.

Controlling the elite. Such control implies, not recourse to strict administrative power, but the ability to formulate common goals and to mobilize resources for achieving them. This can be done through broad dialogue with various groups of the ruling class, without losing controls or accepting mutually exclusive recommendations in an attempt to satisfy all sides. Crisis-stricken weak, liberal and social states have not been doing this well. For example, representatives of the non-ruling Republican Party in the United States are stonewalling the domestic and foreign policy initiatives of the incumbent Democratic president. They are openly torpedoing official talks with Iran and have even written to Iran’s leadership to caution them against accepting Obama’s conditions.

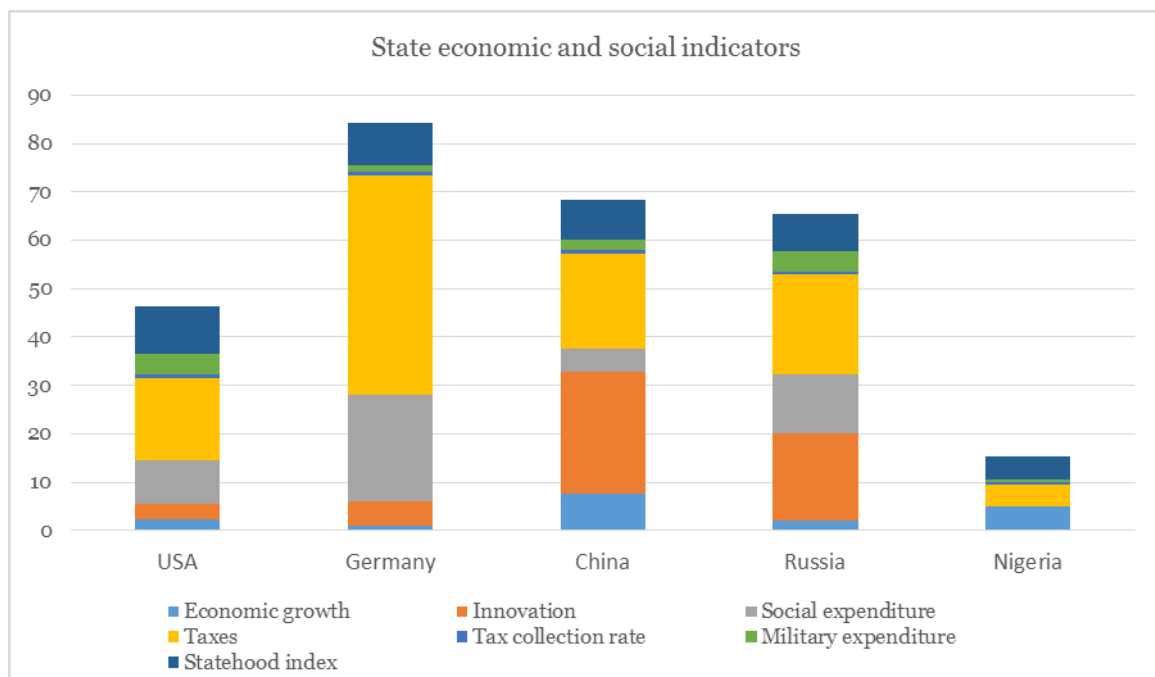
Planning development. Even industrialized liberal and social states can no longer rely on the old self-development mechanisms to overcome the current crisis and to maintain their competitiveness. The stagnating model of the European Union has been struggling to overcome a development crisis. To succeed in this undertaking, it needs not only additional investment and a compromise with “rebel” countries such as Greece, but also a new growth strategy. The EU will not create its own armed forces or satisfy the high social requirements within the framework of the neoliberal development model. As for semi-peripheral and developing states, they cannot achieve new standards of economic growth or social progress without a long-term planning strategy either.

Coordinating positions with society. All states need a reliable institutional mechanism of interaction with their societies to coordinate development policies formulated in cooperation with the elite groups and to prevent these policies from serving only to satisfy the ambitions of the political class. Weak and neo-mercantilist states often disregard the need to plan their actions with a view to the possible social reaction, which can provoke potentially destructive forms of social and political protest.

Investing in social programs. No state can succeed without investing in future generations and human capital. The US progress as an industrialized state in the 20th century was based on its ability to attract the best human minds to the country and to create conditions for vertical social mobility. States' future will depend on clever investment in education, healthcare and other social programs. "Clever" programs must not hinder business activity, but must create a new basis for economic and social growth. Neo-mercantilist states could draw upon the experience of social states, especially those that used social programs to resolve practical issues of personnel retraining and adjustment to new economic conditions.

Promoting strong state values. And lastly, a strong state must promote its values in the world. Strong states are often associated with strict administration, authoritarian rule and censorship. This impression is often created by the neoliberal lobbies that consider neoliberal values to be universal and therefore insist on spreading them around the world. However, the international community, including the public of liberal states, is becoming increasingly disappointed with their ruling classes' inability to guide big business in the interests of the public. The general response to the global crisis in 2008 showed that all states, including the United States, needed new methods for encouraging economic growth or for dealing with crises at the least. The principles of state power and effectiveness can differ, but there is also a universally applicable principle. As we attempted to show in this work, it is a universal principle that states must have the instruments for achieving social goals based on their own historical experience.

Supplement



The United States – a liberal state

Germany – a social state

China – a developmental state

Russia – a security and developmental state

Nigeria – a weak state

Sources:

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