

The State, War, and the State of War

Holsti, Kalevi J. 1996 (reprinted in 1997, 1998)
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Reviewed by Senzo Ngubane

Attempts to offer an understanding of the relationship between war making and state creation in the world have been undertaken by many international relations and strategic studies scholars. In most of these attempts attention has been focused on how state making in Europe differed from that in other parts of the world. In this context, we have come across a number of publications on the collapsing or deteriorating of States in Africa. Linked to this is the question of war and how the world has come to understand it. In all these attempts various authors have tried to explain the changes that have taken place regarding the nature of wars and conflicts in the world.

The book *The State, War, and the State of War* follows suit, albeit in a very detailed and appropriate manner, as it tries to reflect that any understanding of the relationship between war and state is a historical construct. The book proceeds from the premise that the nature and conduct of war prior to 1945 differs from the nature and conduct of war after 1945. This position stems from the view that wars up until 1945 were waged between states (inter-state). During that time, the author asserts that wars followed a demarcated sequence, which normally began with the declaring of an ultimatum. The

post-1945 era, however, witnessed more wars emanating from within states (intra-state), which the author refers to as wars of the third kind. For instance, the author argues that in the 1970s there were 921,000 deaths through combat, but of these almost 90% (820,000) were due to civil wars (p 37). Interestingly, throughout this section an attempt is made to offer an account of why states wage war against one another and why different groups within a state take up arms against each other or against the state itself.

The other part of the book deals with the issue of state making or state creation. The reader is taken through the historical events that led to the creation of modern European states and it is clearly shown how these processes differ fundamentally from the manner in which states were created on other continents. For instance, the author asserts that state creation in Europe was linked to war and was a lengthy process, whereas in other parts of the world such a process was prevented from occurring because of colonialism. In essence, the book argues that to understand the present day ills associated with states in former colonies, like those of Africa, one has to look at the manner in which colonialism systematically ensured that state creation in this part of the world would be problematic. The colonialists' conduct during this era showed that they never once thought that a state would one day be formed by the indigenous people (p 63).

In this context, the book looks at how post-independence "states" experienced a number of problems within themselves and how they faced internal rather than external "enemies". This is one of the reasons why anarchy within states rather than between states has been the source of war and conflict in the period after 1945. The discussion is then followed by a look at the issue of strong versus weak states; the factors which lead to one state being weak and the other being strong, and ways of determining the difference. According to the author, a strong state is characterised by, among other things, its capacity to command loyalty, and hence its right to rule and to maintain a monopoly over the legitimate use of force.

On the contrary, a weak state lacks respect for central authority among the community. It is also characterised by personality politics where the institution becomes synonymous to the incumbent. One does not have to look very far afield to note that there are states in Africa that could easily be characterised as weak. The crucial thing to note is that this section raises a number of thought-provoking questions about the view of state creation founded on Western concepts. The question is whether there is an alternative to such a



concept, given the fact that most of the societies outside of the West had different political systems.

The latter part of the book deals with the role of the international organisations, specifically the UN, in resolving conflicts and handling the problems associated with weak and failed states. The author maintains that the UN Charter is founded on a Westphalian system, which upholds the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity. One of the challenges facing the UN today is that if it has to embark upon proper humanitarian action, and if it is to take charge in preventing massacres of civilians, it will have to violate the sovereignty principle and thus re-define its role in international relations.

Holsti's book is relevant to anyone interested in taking a fresh look at the contemporary nature of the state and international relations. It does not only raise crucial questions, but it also puts to the test international relations theory as informed by the historical events and experiences of the Western countries, or the "great powers", at the expense of lesser states. The book therefore challenges the orthodox views regarding war and conflict, and peace and stability in the world. The book also serves as an excellent reference source as it carries with it a comprehensive appendix, by region and type, of major armed conflicts in the world from 1945 to 1995.