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Essay question: Is the state still the primary actor in international affairs?

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The Centrality of the State in Modern International Affairs

Section I: Introduction

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, the world saw the Decade of Optimism marked by reduced tension and increased cooperation between states. Accompanying these developments have been international institutions aimed at facilitating inter-state cooperation, thereby creating a seemingly rule-based international community that fits the unipolar US-centric world order. The United Nations (UN), among other institutions, has played ever more influential roles in international affairs. Rising regional blocs such as the European Union (EU) have engendered burgeoning degrees of integration among neighbouring nations. More recently, non-state actors, including extremist groups such as the so-called Islamic State (IS) have exerted influence analogous to a traditional state. These developments may cast doubt on whether the centuries-old Westphalian centrality of the state in international relations is still relevant to our current world. In this essay, I would contend that, even though the role of the state in international affairs is diminishing, the state is, and will still be, the primary actor in the near future. This phenomenon is because the legacy of the Westphalian system lingers, and the state remains active in international strife (Section II). Admittedly, the importance of the state in shaping international relations has

diminished since the end of the Cold War due to the acceleration of regional integration, the increasing need for global cooperation, and the advent of prominent non-state actors (Section III). Nevertheless, the state still remains the primary actor because most states prioritise national interests, the state is indispensable in mobilising resources and coordinating efforts in major international conflicts, and the proper functioning of international institutions relies heavily on the behaviour of their member states (Section IV).

In making my argument, I shall define a *state* as a discrete unit of sovereignty in the Westphalian system. A sovereign state is a geographic region where "a government is the supreme or exclusive authority within specified borders" (Hobson & Sharman, 2005). In such a realist state-based system of international relations, all states are treated as legally equal units competing against one another to further their own national interests within an anarchical environment, while upholding the principle of non-interference in others' domestic affairs. From the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the state has largely been the main actor in international politics even though certain hierarchies among the states existed (Hobson & Sharman, 2005). The question "Is the state still the primary actor in international affairs?" can thus be specified as "Having been the primary actor in international affairs for the past few centuries since 1648, is the state still so in today's world, especially after 1991?". Here, the phrase "primary actor" certainly does not convey absoluteness. Rather, it refers to the *state* being a factor that, as compared to other factors, contributes most significantly to explaining how political entities in the world interact with each other in terms of military actions, trade, cooperation and so on. With the context set, I shall proceed to discuss whether the state is still the primary actor in current international affairs in the following Sections.

Section II: The Centrality of the State

The state remains the primary actor in international affairs as the Westphalian system still underpins the current international system. Born from the ashes of World War Two, the equal and exclusive sovereignty of individual states over their territory and domestic affairs is guaranteed in principle in the UN Charter. Each state acts as a unit on its own on the world arena. This principle is enshrined in the UN Charter Article 2.7 which unequivocally states that "Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter" (United Nations, 1945). As a result, individual states still have a major say in their own policy decisions, including those related to foreign affairs. These decisions will ultimately impact their relationships with other countries. This autonomy confers on the state the power to shape international affairs. Critics may quickly point to the EU which dictates many aspects of a member state's domestic as well as foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, even though EU states may be restricted in their autonomy in formulating policies related to international affairs, these countries are not representative of most of the nations on Earth. Supranational organisations with such policy-making power do not cover most states in the world. Hence, in discussing the general trend observed in international politics, the state is still the primary actor as guaranteed in the current international system.

Also, state actors still dominate conflicts in today's world. When motivated by self-interests, the enormous power of the state machine often translates into war, ignoring international laws. Although recent years have seen an apparent shift of the world order towards liberalism, an aspect

of which demands the rule of law in international politics, many countries still bypass international institutions to engage in aggression when their national interests are perceived to be at stake. Article 2.4 of the UN Charter (1945) generally bans the use of force by states except under certain carefully stipulated conditions, stating: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations." Also, Article 24 of the UN Charter (1945) states that "In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf." On the surface, these clauses limit the influence of the state in waging war on another state as any legal use of force generally requires a UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution authorising member states to do so. However, the well-known US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 proceeded without the approval of a resolution from the UNSC, as the previous Resolution 1441 did not authorise any use of force. This incident accentuates the fact that even with a well-established international organisation that governs matters of peace and security, states are often still the major belligerents in international conflicts, placing self-interest above the established international law. Another case in point is the ongoing Yemeni Civil War. This war is effectively a proxy war, with Saudi Arabia and the US backing Yemen's government while Iran supports the Houthi rebels. Despite UN condemnation of Saudi bombing of Yemen and numerous calls to a ceasefire (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2018), the war has shown no sign of abatement. In this proxy war, various states act as independent players maximising gains to their national strategic advantages, ignoring the liberal international system upheld by some of the belligerents themselves. Hence, the state still remains the major actor in international affairs.

Section III: The Diminishing Role of the State

Having discussed why the centrality of the state is still relevant in today's world affairs based on a brief analysis of the theoretical basis and real-world observation in Section II, I shall now discuss the waning trend of state centrality observed in recent years. Firstly, this decline has been driven by the rise of regional organisations and closer regional ties. The massive devastation that both World Wars inflicted upon countries around the world has demonstrated so clearly the magnitude of the horrors of war. These horrors were amplified by the fragility of inter-state relations in the same geographic region. To prevent another major war and increase cooperation in various areas, regional organisations are created to safeguard peace and security. Depending on the degree of integration and centralisation, some regional organisations are increasingly exerting collective power and influence on the world stage similar to a traditional state, thereby diminishing the role of individual member states in international affairs. A prime example would be the EU. With the EU representing its members in major world conferences such as G20 and various trade negotiations, the member states have to surrender part of their sovereignty in devising foreign policy to the EU community. This transfer of power, be it for better or for worse, significantly weakens individual member states' decision-making power. Hence, it may be argued that the state has become less and less the primary actor in international affairs.

Secondly, the decline of the prominence of the state in international affairs has also been driven by increasing needs to promote international cooperation on various global issues. In the past decades, globalisation has connected states and peoples more closely than ever, creating "the need for governance and rule-making at the global level" (Barnett & Duvall, 2009). Many policymakers

believe that global governance will enable states and peoples to "cooperate on economic, environmental, security, and political issues, settle their disputes in a nonviolent manner, and advance their common interests and values" (Barnett & Duvall, 2009). This trend of globalisation is at the same time compounded with urgent challenges such as climate change and mounting financial risks. The effective resolution of many issues, including environmental conservation, migration management, nuclear disarmament, financial system regulation, women's rights etc., hinges upon whether governments worldwide are willing to make concerted efforts to tackle them. This reality has pushed more countries to come together to ratify treaties and establish international institutions that seek to coordinate and regulate these efforts. For example, the Paris Agreement was signed in 2016 by the majority of the countries to combat the effects of climate change under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Under the Paris Agreement, each country must determine, plan, and regularly report on the contribution that it undertakes to mitigate global warming (Paris Agreement, 2015, Article 3). The formalisation of rules governing environmental protection shifts the focus from individual states as the sole decision-making entities to an international framework that demands states to adjust their domestic policies in order to comply with the rules. Through this accord and many other similar agreements on disparate issues, a set of "international law" is forming. We are moving away from a world with the state being the only actor to one stipulated by international laws and rules, which are in turn regulated by international bodies. In this respect, the centrality of the state in international affairs seems to be under attack in the new ideals of rule-based international order.

Thirdly, the decline of state centrality can also be attributed to the increasing involvement of non-state actors in international politics. Non-state actors here refer to entities that are not affiliated or

directly subject to orders from a state government. To make a distinction from the previous paragraph, international treaties and organisations are still ultimately largely made up of individual sovereign states which exert various degrees of influence. Increasingly, however, we can see non-state actors, possibly in the form of multinational companies and even terrorist organisations, exerting more political influence in current world affairs. An infamous example would be the so-called Islamic State (IS), which has staged dozens of terrorist attacks worldwide and occupied large swathes of land in Syria and Iraq, killing thousands of civilian lives. IS is not internationally recognised as a state, yet it was influencing the world as if it were a functioning state. The immense influence that IS carried at its peak has blurred the lines between states and non-state actors in international affairs.

Section IV: The State's Primacy Despite Its Declining Influence

Critics may dispute the centrality of the state in international affairs due to the reasons presented in the previous Section. However, I would argue that, despite the relative decline in the state's influence over international affairs in recent years, the state will still remain the primary actor in international affairs in the foreseeable future. Firstly, as mentioned in Section II, the Westphalian thinking still dominates international relations and there is indeed a practical need for countries to prioritise their self-interest. It is expected that the crafting of national and foreign policies values national interests over the collective interests of a greater organisation. This behaviour especially manifests itself when national interests are perceived to clash with external, collective interests. In particular, democratic states, having derived their mandates from the promise that they will deliver the will of the majority, tend to uphold national interests dearly, especially when faced with a largely populistic electorate. The apparent success of the EU used to be touted as a promising new

model of international integration, bringing humanity one step closer to the tantalising ideal of world governance purported by some to be capable of eliminating strife. However, in recent years, many EU member states have experienced push backs against European integration. In a huge blow to the decades-long regionalisation efforts, the UK is set to crash out of the EU in 2019. In several other countries such as France and Greece, right-wing political forces that aim to pull their respective countries out of the Union have been gaining popularity rapidly. For instance, populist French politician Marine Le Pen, leader of Front National, promised a "Frexit" referendum during her presidential election campaign. Before dismissing Brexit as a mistake made by the "ignorant masses", certain British interests are undoubtedly perceived to be in conflict with the strict rules set by the EU. Many "Leave" campaigners believed that the EU took decision making power from "the people" in favour of key regulatory bodies such as the European Commission, which negatively impacted the sovereignty of the UK (Jennings & Lodge, 2018). In pursuing greater national sovereignty and interests, UK voters have turned their country into a major actor of greater autonomy in the international arena, reducing the influence of supranational institutions like the EU. Also, the threat of more members leaving highlights the fragile dependence of regional bodies like the EU on the individual states. It is essentially the state that determines the trend of international relations, even under the cloak of regional institutions.

Secondly, even though some non-state actors are heavily involved in conflicts, the state, in most circumstances, remains the most efficient entity in mobilising resources and spearheading inter-state campaigns. In a war involving *non-state* antagonistic forces, they are often funded and militarily supported by mostly-foreign *state* actors. These states provide critical logistical, economic, and strategic support for warring factions such as weaponry, training, natural resources

and even troops. Therefore, they are tremendously powerful in determining the tide of war. Also, foreign states may be directly involved in combating non-state armed forces, utilising state resources. A prime example would be the ongoing Syrian Civil War. Although many warring factions are non-state forces, such as the anti-government Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Kurdish forces, many of the major forces are backed by state actors. The Syrian government is backed by Russia and Iran whereas the US and its allies such as Saudi Arabia support the moderate rebels and Kurdish forces. The indispensable and decisive role of the state in influencing regional wars highlights the centrality of the state in international conflict.

Thirdly, even in a world increasingly ruled by international institutions, decisions of individual states, especially major powers, often heavily impact whether an international body functions properly. With rising hopes for global governance, many people count on international institutions to act as "departments" or "ministries" of a "global government" that rules over states equally and fairly. However, it must be noted that international institutions ultimately comprise of individual member states and derive their power from the agreement and contribution of member states, based on charters written, again, by state actors. As a result, the power dynamics between states involved in an international body can greatly influence its success in carrying out its expected duties. This exertion of state power into affecting the workings of an international institution, thereby imposing power onto other states can be seen as the extension of realist inter-state interaction. A clear example is how any of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council is able to veto a resolution, rendering efforts to solve international conflict heavily dependent on major powers' perception of their own national interests and willingness to cooperate. In addition, rising populism in many Western countries has motivated politicians to place short-term national interests over the

long-term need for international cooperation, resulting in uncooperative behaviours that greatly thwart international projects. In June 2017, the Trump administration announced that the US would withdraw from the Paris Agreement that aims to alleviate the effects of climate change. Trump argued that "The Paris accord will undermine (the U.S.) economy," and "puts (the U.S.) at a permanent disadvantage" (Chakraborty, 2017). Being the second-largest carbon emitter in the world, the lack of commitment from the US to climate change mitigation greatly jeopardised the effectiveness of global climate actions and the international cooperative mechanism. Similar cases of withdrawal of major players from inter-state organisations, such as Brexit, highlights the fragility of international bodies and their consequent dependence on state actors. These incidents show that the state, especially when powerful, often has the power to supersede international institutions in influencing international affairs. Hence, the state remains the primary actor in international politics.

Section V: Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that the state is still the primary actor in international affairs because of the legacy of the Westphalian system and active involvement of the state in international strife. Despite the acceleration of regional integration, the increasing need for global cooperation, and the advent of prominent non-state actors, the state still remains the primary actor. National interests are prioritised by most states. The state is vital in mobilising resources and coordinating efforts in major international conflict, and the behaviour of the member states heavily impacts the proper functioning of international institutions. Nevertheless, despite individual states remaining the main actors on the global arena, the ideal of long-lasting peace and security through international cooperation is not out of reach. The trend of globalisation is set to deepen despite setbacks, and

previously isolated issues faced by a state can now affect the whole world in profound ways. The need for international cooperation will only increase. Consequently, higher levels of cooperation are hopeful, driven by the unprecedented level of global interdependency in trade, the advancement of technology, and the urgent needs to solve transnational problems such as climate change and terrorism. We should aspire towards the ideal of more stable global governance in the future, while acknowledging the current centrality of the state in international affairs.

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