

Sovereign Nation-State System: Rise, Features & Causes of Decline

Rise of the Nation-State System:

The nation-state system in international relations began taking shape around the year 1648 when the Thirty-year War in Europe was brought to an end by the Treaty of Westphalia. This Treaty paved the way for this development because it recognized that the Pope could no longer command the allegiance of the states and that Pope had no right to interfere in the affairs of the states in the name of his highest spiritual authority.

The state as such, emerged supreme in its territory with a power to command its people in both secular and temporal spheres. The concept of sovereignty of the state got full recognition. Relations among nations came to be conducted by sovereign states for securing their respective interests in relation with other states. In the era of imperialism even the use of power of the state for dominating other states came to be recognized as a right of the state.

In the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, the rise of nationalism as the basic principle of nation-state got a world-wide acceptance. The rise of the modern nation-state in England in which nationalism became coequal with the idea of individual liberties and popular participation in public affairs, the American Revolution 1776 and the French Revolution 1789, gave strength to the concept of nation-state fortified with the spirit and philosophy of nationalism.

Napoleon Bonaparte, however, transformed nationalist sentiments into an expansionist ideology and used his citizens army to score victory after victory in Europe and Middle East. Ultimately, however, he was defeated in 1815 by the forces of nationalism he had helped to awaken.¹

The unification of Germany (1864-71) gave further strength to the concept of nationalism as the hall mark of the state. The philosophical foundations of the nation-state received tremendous strength from the ideas of Hegel (1770-1831), the German philosopher.

The modernisation of Japan and rise of intense nationalism gave further strength to it. The march of events of the 18th and 19th centuries, particularly the coming of the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century, invigorated the consolidation of the nation-state as the fundamental unit of protection.

Once this development had taken place, the resulting case of economic and social interactions within them and the relative isolation of their populations from neighboring states helped the solidification of different cultures, institutions and linguistic and religious patterns of behaviour which came to be identified with the nation-state. The state came to be sovereign, territorial nation-state. International relations got transformed into relations and interactions among the nation-states.

Features of the Sovereign Nation-state System:

The nation-state came to get firmly entrenched when humankind entered the 20th century. It got identified with its four essential elements: Population, Territory, Government and Sovereignty. In the sphere of international relations its four basic credentials Nationalism, Territorial Integrity, Sovereignty and Legal Equality got fully recognized.

I. Sovereignty of Nation State:

Sovereignty came to be regarded as the hall mark of the nation-state. The concept of sovereignty implied internal and external sovereignty. Internally, the state had the right to order the behaviour of all its citizens and their associations in all

respects. Externally, sovereignty implied the right of the state to act out its desired role in international relations on the basis of its desired policies.

The right to secure the goals of national interest by the use of national power got recognized as the supreme power of the nation-state. The right of each nation to use war as an instrument of its policy came to be defined as the sovereign right of each nation to protect and secure its sovereignty.

International Law was accepted as the law among states and not over the states. It had its basis in the common consent of the nation-states. In fact, International Law recognized the sovereignty, territorial integrity and legal equality of all the nation-states. International relations came to be recognized as relations among sovereign nation-states.

II. Nationalism as the Philosophy of Nation State:

The nation-state was considered fortified with the philosophy of nationalism. In fact the rise of nation-state was accompanied by the rise of nationalism, which in turn strengthened the nation-state. Nationalism grew steadily to advocate an identification of the individual with the state. The political socialization process of the individual inculcated the value that every person was a citizen of the state by birth.

That as a citizen one derived all rights and benefits from the state and that as a citizen one was bound to obey and defend the state. It was accepted that the state provides innumerable services to its citizens in return for obedience to its laws. The resulting faith of the individual in his state and his love for it gave rise to strong nationalism.

On the one hand nationalism produced several conflicts and on the other hand it led to the birth of strong movements among dependent people to gain independence from imperialism and colonialism. In Asia and Africa people began strongly opposing imperialism and colonialism for securing sovereign statehoods. They were strongly motivated by the desire to establish their own sovereign nation-states.

The rise of nationalism was also accompanied by the emergence of aggressive nationalism in international relations. This development acted as a big reason for the outbreak of wars among nations. The two World Wars came mainly due to rise of intense, aggressive and militant nationalism of some states, particularly their dictators.

“Wherever the nation- state was a reality, nationalism buttressed and reinforced the state; when it remained an aspiration, nationalism endangered the existing multi-national states.” As such nationalism came to be a key element in the emergence and working of the nation-state system in international relations.

III. Territorial Integrity or Territorial Impermeability of the Nation State:

The nation-state came to be conceptualized as a territorial entity. Protection of the people living within its boundaries became its chief responsibility.

Territoriality became responsible for making the nation-states:

(1) defensible units, and

(2) internally pacified areas. Further, territoriality gave further strength to the concepts of Sovereignty and Nationalism just as these gave strength to it. Preservation of territorial unity and integrity of the state became a valuable part of nationalism and the sovereign right of the nation-state.

IV. Legal Equality/Sovereign Equality of all Nation-States:

Finally, the nation-states of the world came to be recognized as equal sovereign states irrespective of their sizes, populations, military capabilities, economic resources etc. International law recognized all states as equal sovereign entities with an equal legal status and rights.

The nation-states with all these four characteristics, came to be key actors in international relations. These worked as the actors in the international environment and the international system came to be a nation-state system i.e. a system of relations and interactions among the nation-states acting through their respective governments, statesmen and diplomats. As international actors the nation-states conducted their relations in times of war and peace.

Decline of Nation-State System:

The world has now started living with free flow of goods, services, people and knowledge across the boundaries of nation states. The borders among the states have started becoming soft borders. Globalisation is on its way and nation state is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its traditional features and sovereign behaviour.

The nation-state system with its classical traditions, however, could not remain fully in operation in the international relations of the second half of the 20th century. On the one hand, the rise of a large number of sovereign nation-states in Asia and Africa and the resurgence of the nation-states of Latin America increased the scope of international interactions as really global interactions among the nation-states, but on the other hand several other factors began attacking the nation-state system.

Several scholars came forward to predict the demise of the nation-state system while others predicted a declined role for these actors.

“International Politics today is not conducted between or among nations, nor in its most important phases even between states.” —Herbert Spiro

‘The nuclear age has rendered the nation-state and the concept of sovereignty quite obsolete.’ —Prof. John H. Herz and Kenneth Boulding

Some others, like Charles Malik held the view that now cultures and not nations were the ultimate units or actors in international relations.

The questions that naturally arose were: Why and how has the nation-state system changed? What has been the quantity and quality of change? Is the nation-state system dead or heading for a demise? Has it become obsolete or still continues to hold relevance?

After the end of Second World War, the nation-state system initially showed signs of strength due to the rise of several new sovereign states filled with nationalism and committed to preserve their sovereignty equality, integrity and independence of action in international relations.

However, later on several developments in the international system induced many changes in the nation-state system. The four cardinal elements of the nation-state system underwent changes which resulted into the weakening of the nation-state system.

The rise of several powerful non-state actors, constraints imposed by the nuclear age, and increased interdependence among nations together proved to be a big

source of weakness for the nation-state system. From a state-centric international system, it started developing into a system characterised by decreased role of the nation-state and as a system with an increasing role of the non-state actors and some supranational actors.

The following factors acted as a source of setback for the Traditional Nation-state Centric International System:

1. Increased Interdependence among Nations:

The rise of the welfare state committed to provide a variety of benefits and services to its people, the age of mass production resulting from advances registered in scientific, technological and industrial spheres, the consequent possibility of meeting the increased demands for socio-economic welfare of the people, the communications revolution, increased' mobility of the people all over the globe and some similar other factors combined to give rise to an ever increasing international interdependence.

This compelled the nation-states to enter into increased international intercourse and to form regional groups and international agencies. Each nation-state now found itself dependent upon others just as others became dependent upon it. The rich states became dependent upon the poor for purchasing raw materials and for selling the finished products. The poor states found it essential to meet the demands of their populations by depending upon imports from the rich states.

The states now found themselves compelled to modify their policies and reconcile their national interests for securing the desired goods and services in international relations. This factor played a key role in diluting the traditional love for sovereignty. Globalisation and regional functional integration further reflected the increasing interdependence and a changed/reduced role of the nation-state. In fact

in this era of Globalisation, the nation state and its hall mark, sovereignty has suffered a big decline/change.

2. Universalism and Nationalism:

In the age of increased international interdependence, the nation-state found it essential to secure a compatibility between the goals of the national interests and the national interests of other nations as well as with the international objectives of peace and security. In fact, in the age of internationalism, the nation-state found it essential to formulate the goals of its national interests in such a way as could also help the achievement or at least not hinder the achievement of universally recognized objectives of international relations.

Even the powerful actors, including the super powers, now found it impossible to ignore the need for efforts towards arms control, arms reduction and disarmament even while these continued to remain involved in an arms race. Nation-states now had to accept and serve universal objectives and interests i.e. common interests of all the people of the world.

3. Trends towards International (Regional) Integration:

The nation-states now found themselves unable to secure individually their development objectives. These found it essential to cooperate with each other at the regional as well as international levels. The economic integration of European states (European Union with single European currency and banking system), the regional economic integration of the ASEAN states, the attempts at the development of SAARC into a South Asian Union and the presence of several other such organisations, the emergence of a large number of regional functional and defence organisations, the rise of a large number of global organisations actively engaged in promoting socio-economic cultural cooperation among the

nation- states, the emergence of trade blocs, the stability of the United Nations and an increasing realization about its utility as a common organisation, the trend towards institutionalization of bilateral as well as regional relations, the strength of the international movements like Afro-Asian solidarity movement and Non-aligned Movement, the consolidation of the Third World, the need for fighting the manager of international terrorism, and the movements for the protection of human rights and environment and others, all such developments strengthened the common consciousness of common goals among the people of the World.

The national boundaries were no longer regarded as absolutely sacred and essential for human welfare. Such a feeling played an important role in diluting nationalism in favour of internationalism or at least in favour of a nationalism with an international content. The nation-state system began moving towards a global system.

4. The Nuclear Age and its Impact:

The nuclear factor seriously affected the nation- state system. A modern nation-state found itself incapable of providing security to its people from a possible nuclear war. The non-nuclear states found themselves defenceless against the threats of a nuclear war.

The nuclear powers had the means, rather the overkill capacity, and yet these found it difficult to use the «-power for securing their desired goals. The U.S.A., despite being a super power had to withdraw from Vietnam and likewise the erstwhile U.S.S.R. found it impossible to control events in Afghanistan.

“The Nuclear factor virtually rendered the nation-state obsolete.” We may not agree with this extreme observation of Herz and Boulding but we cannot deny that

the power of the nation-state has got adversely affected by nuclear weapons. Even the possession of nuclear weapons did not really increase the national power of the state. Because of strong world public opinion, no state could now dare to use nuclear weapons.

5. Limitations on National Power:

Factors like World Public Opinion, International Morality, International Law; Movements in favour of disarmament and arms control etc. and the rise of several strong international peace movements, together acted as a source of big limitation on the national power of each state. The nation-state found it very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve its desired goals of national interests by the use of force/war in international relations.

The failure of the several local wars, Indo-Pak wars, Arab-Israel wars, Iran-Iraq war etc. to settle the disputes that each of such war tried to settle, clearly brought home the message that a modern nation-state could not hope to secure its interests by means of use of force, violence and war. This further acted as a source of change in the nature and role of the nation-state.

6. The erosion of the Concept of Sovereign Equality of the Nation-States:

A fundamental premise of the traditional nation-state system has been the concept of sovereign equal states establishing relations and interacting as equal partners of international relations. At present, however, the sovereign equality of the nation-states is true more in theory than reality. Even in the classical age of the nation-state system, (1850 to 1945), only some states, the powerful and major actors, dominated the international system.

In contemporary times the USA, Russia, Britain, France and China as nuclear powers (P-5) holding the veto power in the U.N. Security Council, Japan, Germany

European Union states as the developed and economically rich states and four or five local leviathans like India and Brazil, are the main actors in contemporary international relations. Most of the small states are either totally or partially dependent upon the rich, developed and powerful nations.

The power that the U.S.A. enjoys in the international system clearly gives it an edge over other states. Hence, equality of all nation-states has not been a reality. It has been true mostly in theory. It has recently got further eclipsed because of the opening of the age of IT revolution, globalisation, space age, threat of an all destructive total war, and the continued dependence of the Third World states upon the developed states.

7. Rise of several powerful Non-state Actors:

The rise of several powerful non-state actors like the Multinational Corporations and several NGOs has adversely affected the nation-state system. The non-state actors, called variously as transnational actors, nongovernment actors or multinational actors, are formed by private companies groups or classes of people living in different parts of the world.

These are designed to work for carrying out a particular trade or business or production or distribution of goods and services in several parts of the world. Several NGOs and international movements have been playing a vigorous and good role for the protection of Human Rights of all the people and the environment of the earth. These are not formally associated with the governments of the states whose people/associations join hands to organize and run these powerful international movements.

In the contemporary era, there are more than 10000 transactional non-profit organisations in the world and when we add in it the multinational business corporations, the figure becomes much higher. The number of non-state actors outnumber the nation-states by nearly 50: 1.

International relations of our times cannot be analyzed only in terms of relations among and between the nation-states. One has to take into account the role of non-state actors also. In fact the role of Non-state actors has virtually come to be the dominant reality of contemporary international relations. The multinational business corporations have assumed the power to influence, even determine the economic policies and activities of the Third World states as well as to influence the economies and policies their parent states.

8. Globalisation:

The emergence of the process of Globalisation has again been a source of limitation on the sovereignty of the Nation-State. Now the nation-states have to accept and participate in the process of Globalisation. This is essential for securing development through mutual cooperation and collective action. States have to accept the memberships of WTO and its decisions.

The world has now started living with free flow of goods, services, people and knowledge across the boundaries of nation states. The borders among the states have started becoming soft borders. Globalisation is on its way and nation state is finding it increasingly difficult to maintain its traditional features and sovereign behaviour.

Because of all these factors, the nation-state system has now suffered a serious setback. The setback has been acute serious and alarming and some scholars

believe that the days of the state-centric international system are over. The nation-state system has developed a weaknesses & loss of role. It is on the way to become totally obsolete.

The internationalists believe that the communications, transportation, technological and social revolutions as well as the current process of globalisation have together caused a big shrinking of the world in which the nation-state is becoming increasingly weak. The trans-nationalists advocate that the nation-state system is inadequate to meet the needs and challenges of the contemporary age and hence the coming of transnationalism must be welcomed and strengthened.

Some scholars believe that the rise of several well-organised, powerful and effective non-state actors has resulted into the demise of the nation-state system. The concepts of Sovereignty, Nationalism, Territorial Integrity and Sovereign Equality have undergone several changes under the impact of new developments, new ideas and new realities. This has led to a decline in the role of Nation-State in the international environment.

Is the Nation-State System Dead Or Dying?

Increased importance of international economic relations is bound to strengthen the role of non-state actors but it can eliminate neither the nation-state nor the political relations among the nation-states. In the event of confrontations between and among the trans-national actors, the nation-states are destined to play a role and governments are destined to prevail over them.

The changes in the nation-state system have been many and big. The age of high technology, communication revolution, IT revolution, nuclear weapons, total war, increased interdependence and globalisation have given several setbacks to the

traditional nation-state system. In this nuclear age, the nation-state cannot adequately perform its very basic function—the defence of the people.

This has adversely affected its character as a sovereign entity. It can no longer really hope to be fully self-sufficient and self-reliant. Interdependence has emerged and is bound to remain the condition of international living. International and regional organisations are bound to remain and even increase in the future. The nation-states are bound to go in for some sort of ‘integration’ for their survival and health as viable units.

However, all this should not be taken to mean that the nation-state system, if not already dead, is going to die in future. We cannot fully accept the views of scholars like Spiro and Herz. International system is and destined to remain basically a nation-state system in one form or another. Nation—state is and destined to remain a major actor in international relations.

“The nation-state system entered its ‘time of troubles’ long ago, and it may be in final stages of dominance. It is becoming increasingly inadequate in the light of growing interdependence of peoples and the imperatives of the nuclear and space ages. However, while many observers criticize it as obsolete system which is on its way out, the system has shown a remarkable capacity for adaptation and survival.”

—Toynbee

The Nation-state system has undergone changes, it is most likely to undergo still further changes and yet it is destined to survive. Doctrines of Sovereignty and Nationalism have been dynamic and can undergo changes in the light of the new environment and new thinking. By their flexibility, these can help the Nation-state

to absorb the setbacks and survive to play its role as an active actor in international relations.

“In this age, we find ourselves stranded between the old conceptions of political conduct and a wholly new conception, between the inadequacy of the nation-state and the emerging imperative of global community. The world is now living with the idea of becoming a global village. Yet we must clearly understand that future world order is to grow out of the existing one and that it cannot secure a total break with the system that has a history of about 500 years at its back.” In other words the Nation-State system is destined to survive and remain a determinant of international politics. —Henry A. Kissinger

Hence International system is bound to remain with the nation-state system though the nation-states are destined to suffer some loss of position and dominance that they had been enjoying till today. The Nation State in neither dead nor it is going to die. Despite a changed role and some decline in position “the nation-state still means political and legal sovereignty and continues to work as a leading actor in international relations. It still claims full loyalty of its citizens who look to it for their defence, well-being and as the agency for conflict-resolution and crisis-management in international relations.”

Nation-state continues to be the dominant form of political organisation in the world and national interests, objectives and capabilities continue to significantly shape the nature and scope of international relations. Trans-nationalism can increase in scope and strength yet it cannot replace the nation-state system.

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relations among the nation-states. In the event of confrontations between and among the trans-national actors, the nation-states are destined to play a role and governments are destined to prevail over them.

We can conclude that the nation-state is bound to remain a key actor in international relations, though with changed, even reduced role. The international system is now in a state of flux. The nation-state has so far retained a dominant position but only by accepting and developing several inter-government organisations as well as by tolerating the emergence and growth of several non-governmental, transnational, people to people relations, associations and movements.

These new actors have helped the nation-state to retain its entity. However at the same time, these have also undermined nation-states by becoming elements of the international system in their own right and by pursuing their own interests or those of the international community as a whole as distinct from the individual interests of the nation-states.

The nation-state, however, still retains a near monopoly over the use of coercive force in the international system. It still moulds and regulates the activities of non-state actors. People still live as citizens of their nation states. Within the fold of European Union, the people of the sovereign states of Europe still cherish their continued allegiances and links with their respective nation-states. Football matches among various state football teams fully demonstrate the continued allegiance of the people to their respective nation-states.

Hence, the view of the demise of nation-state is a pessimistic, premature and therefore, unacceptable view. Even ethnic conflicts being witnessed in several

parts of the global are governed by the desire on the part of different ethnic groups to have their own nation-states. International system of the 21st century continues to be characterised by the active presence of 193 nation-states. Globalisation has been affecting sovereignty but sovereign nation states still continue to live and progress in this age.