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# Role of Organisations as Non-State Actors in International Relations

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## Introduction

Nation states have traditionally occupied an inviolable position as sole actors on the world stage. States act as rational autonomous entities which follow their self-interest with the goals of security, sovereignty and survival in perspective. In their pursuit of security, states amass resources that allow their military and economic capabilities to increase their power relative to other states. The primacy of states within international relations, however, is now being questioned by the emergence of non-state actors in world affairs and the changing nature of global governance. State power can be exercised along with influence of soft power, economy based decisions and role of private actors or organisations, all of which have now become legitimate mediums of governance in the present-day international system.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) that operate across borders, International Inter-Governmental Organisations (IGOs) such as the European Union and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) having global outreach, all influence up to various degrees the policy frameworks and regulatory mechanisms governing both the domestic

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and international affairs.<sup>1</sup> Credit rating agencies and their structural power to influence flow of investment capital in the private and public sectors must also be taken into account when considering the complex paradigm of relationships between states, markets and private actors in the international arena. Despite this, overall the nation state retains the greatest influence in the sphere of international relations. Yet, at the world stage, there are many players engaged in the game of international affairs. While nation states remain the dominant actors, they are by no means the only ones. Therefore, by virtue of their influence, an actor can be a state, it can be an organisation or an individual.

The state was long considered to be the only meaningful actor within world affairs. The realist paradigm, advocated by authors such as Kenneth Waltz, postulated that global affairs take place within an anarchic framework in which states compete economically and politically to gain positions of relative advantage.<sup>2</sup> No consideration was given to the internal structure of those individual states or the influence of organisations outside governmental control. The forms of these new interpretive models of global governance have usurped the supremacy of the state by the non-state actors.<sup>3</sup>

### **Global Governance**

In the complex interactions and modes of relationships between states, markets and private actors within the international system, the concept of governance is certainly of significance. While no universally accepted definition of the term exists, governance is generally referred to as interpretation of order, stability and politico-economic management. Global governance, specifically, refers to the formal and informal sets of arrangements in global politics. The implication is that states alone cannot manage global affairs. The impact of these transnational networks can be seen in numerous achievements, such as the treaty banning landmines, the Kyoto Climate Convention, the International Criminal Court, the

World Trade Organisation, and the UN peacekeeping operations. In essence, global governance is aptly described as regimes or systems of rule, embracing both formal and informal regulatory mechanisms.<sup>4</sup>

The emergence of the global political economy has altered the authority structures that developed with the rise of the state system. The perspective which emphasised the “state-centric system” is now being replaced by a “multi-centric system” in which non-state actors exert an important influence within the sphere of global governance. In response to these developments, the ability of national governments to address and resolve major issues confronting their societies is declining. It must be noted, however, this does not herald the end of state sovereignty, it merely implies that the exclusivity and scope of their influence has changed substantially, narrowing the range within which their authority and legitimacy are operative.

The international system consists of nation states, international organisations and private actors. The rise in number of international organisations is a consequence of the increasing levels of economic, political, social and cultural transactions between individuals, societies and states. The growth of so many kinds of non-state actors challenges and even weakens the “state-centric” concept of international politics and replaces it with a “transnational” system in which relationships are more complex. These Non-State organisations have changed the international political discourse.

### **Non-State Actors and Characteristics**

Non-state actors are non-sovereign entities which may be individuals or organisations that have powerful economic, political or social power and are able to influence at a national and sometimes international level but do not belong to, or have allied themselves to, any particular country or state.<sup>5</sup>

Other than having characteristics such as having power and the ability to influence, non-state actors have a base or headquarters in a certain

state but their activities may not only be confined to operating in the state itself but also beyond the borders of the state.

### **Types of Non-State Actors and their Roles**

Non-state actors can be classified into the following categories: international Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs); transnational Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs); sub-state actors; Super-empowered individuals; MNCs; and Terrorists organisations. The first group comprising IGOs consists of the organisations that are created by nation states. They are officially sponsored by government agencies. The second group is that of NGOs which is not established by nation states, but by a certain group of individuals, businessmen and other societal forces which are organisations that are private, self-governing, voluntary, non-profit and task or interest-oriented. This group has no legal bonds with nation states, therefore, they are independent.<sup>6</sup>

### **Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs)<sup>7</sup>**

Intergovernmental Organisations (IGOs) are one of the international organisations which comprise members of three or more nation states. IGOs are created and joined by states to solve shared problems. This gives these organisations authority to make collective decisions and to address their global agenda. In these organisations, the states' representatives gather to discuss issues which are of mutual interest to the member states.

IGOs are of two types, global and regional. Global IGOs are organisations having universal membership which means many states are members of organisations like the United Nations (UN), World Trade Organisation (WTO), and International Monetary Fund (IMF). Regional IGOs are a subset of states as members based on a particular interest or region, such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), European Union (EU) and many others.

States form IGOs keeping common interests in mind. With IGOs, certain problems can be solved easily and in a cost-effective manner. States need to correspond with each other and oversee that other states are honouring their commitments. For example, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was formed to encourage free trade and resolve tariff disputes, a task which would have been more complicated and expensive to execute without the IGOs.

There are times where IGOs are not only created to solve problems but to provide a platform for discussion. The UN General Assembly has no predetermined agenda but provides a forum for states to discuss and debate issues that are of concern for the larger community or member states. It maintains international cooperation for resolving issues within the states, ensuring peace, security and promoting harmony. Similarly, WTO's goal is to organise meetings at which states negotiate and resolve problems being faced by them in trade, while Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) promotes regional economic, social and cultural cooperation amongst states in South-East Asia.

### **Multinational Corporations (MNCs)**

MNCs are companies which have headquarters in one state but operations and investments are spread out worldwide. In other words, they have global outreach and several branches or subsidiaries operating in other states. In the past few decades, MNCs have increasingly become powerful as independent actors.<sup>8</sup> Many of the MNCs such as Walmart have annual sales of billions of dollars which match most international organisations (IOs) in size and financial resources. The largest IGO (UN) has a budget which is less than some of the MNCs. The power of MNCs does not rival that of the states yet they exercise substantial influence in formulation of policies.

MNCs are viewed as citizens of the world, beholden to no government. MNCs act globally in the interests of their (international) stockholders, owe loyalty to no state and are driven by the need to only

maximise their profits. MNCs also contribute to their host country's development by providing job opportunities for the locals in that state and thus augmenting the economy of that state.

### **Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)**

NGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations) are organisations that are private, self-governing, voluntary, non-profit and task or interest-oriented organisations. Within those broad parameters there is a huge degree of diversity in terms of their unifying principles, their independence from government, big-business, and other outside influences. Their operating procedures, sources of funding, international reach, and size are also different. They can implement projects, provide services, defend or promote specific causes and influence policy decisions.<sup>9</sup>

International NGOs are private entities comprised of volunteers who form organisations to promote their shared interests and ideals in order to influence the policies of governments. These organisations endeavour to raise issues of common concern like disarmament, environmental changes, human rights, etc., and seek collective and constructive solutions in the form of treaties. The causes espoused by these organisations are respected and find acceptance on the global stage.

NGOs are now being recognised as legitimate actors in international bodies along with states for their expertise in diverse domains of political, humanitarian, technical and economic issues. The sphere of influence of NGOs transcends borders through cooperation with organisations which are aligned with them in thought, purpose and ideology. This enables them to shape public opinion and build up support for issues of common good and develop consensus between nation states to ink international agreements. Amnesty International, which advocates human rights causes, has been instrumental in bringing norms which are globally accepted to end human rights abuse in the member countries. Some of the other issues of concern have been LGBT rights, welfare of women and children,

environmental degradation and its restoration, freedom of expression, protection of civilians during armed conflicts and conservation of wildlife through organisations like WWF.

### **Political Groups that Advocate Violence (Terrorists)**

Terrorists are members of groups that advocate use of violence against civilian or non-combatants with the purpose of intimidating the population and creating an environment of fear for compelling a government or international organisation in order to achieve their political objectives. These non-state actors wield power in global politics and are even able to influence international relations between states. The attack of September 11, 2001 by members of Al-Qaeda and attack on Indian Parliament on December 13, 2001 demonstrate the increasing power of such organisations and the technology now at their disposal.

### **International Criminal Groups**

Transnational actors pose a significant threat to national and international security. Their actions have a direct effect on democratic institutions, public safety and economic stability. The criminal networks have expanded and diversified their activities to achieve explosive and destabilising effect which poses significant threat to economic and democratic governance. These groups are well financed and able to influence even state policies. These groups function with impunity due to connivance with the political establishment. Most of these groups are involved in drugs, prostitution, human trafficking, firearms and many other such crimes. Some examples of international criminal groups would be the Yakuza in Japan, the Sicilian Mafia in Italy, the Russian mafia and drug cartels of Mexico and Colombia.

### **Impact of Non-State Actors**

The non-state actor's role and influence depends on the political, economic and social leverage that they wield. These institutions have assisted in

building public support to lobby with governments for desired policy formulations. They have challenged the erstwhile state-centric system and emerged as alternate centres of power which may be non-political but with interests in economic or cultural domains at the international stage. It has provided a stimulus to international relations and has also been instrumental in several strong peaceful, developmental and ecological movements transcending borders. States and non-state organisations have a symbiotic relationship as they cooperate and work within defined parameters to achieve order, stability, and predictability.

Credit rating agencies can also be non-state actors playing an important role as financial gatekeepers in the allocation of funds to various governments and organisations. These organisations exert influence in ensuring economic stability by monitoring the governance and proper utilisation of allocated funds for developmental projects. Though there is influence of non-state actors in international relations, it does not imply that the power of the state has in any way been diluted. The non-state actors wield considerable influence in addressing specific issues and their associated challenges, yet they lack legitimacy, authority, decision-making and legal capabilities which are vested in formal state structures.

Non-state actors espouse causes based on their ideologies, geographic locations and the influence that they can exercise. At times, they are instrumental in highlighting issues which adversely affect the world at large, though the resolution to these challenges can only be carried out through collective, political will of nation states to arrive at mutually acceptable solutions which are also enforceable.

The inconsistent and biased policies, as well as diminishing influence of intergovernmental organisations, make them the weakest link in the global governance chain. Numerous organisations were conceived but they lacked the teeth to enforce common policy decisions especially when it did not suit the interests of any powerful member state. These IGOs were inept at being transparent and neutral for impartial implementation



of policies in consonance with the stated aims of their existence. It is imperative to consolidate these international organisations and give them requisite legal authority and autonomy to be effective.

To quote Thomas G. Weiss et al.:

Without more solid foundations in international law and without robust intergovernmental organizations, global governance mechanisms are limited to voluntary participation, moral persuasion and peer pressure, invoking democratic or market pressures in order to ensure compliance. The fledgling and inadequate contemporary structures of global governance must move beyond mere providing of incentives for self-interested cooperation when it suits or for only a handful of issues.<sup>10</sup>

States unable or unwilling to adapt strategies based on the constructive inputs of non-state actors will not be able to achieve consensual and able governance. Civil society's organisations play an active role in shaping opinions to influence laws and policies. They challenge traditional notions of governance, accountability, and legitimacy. Global governance is certainly not a continuation of traditional power politics in silos but the new dynamics of power play also involves many powerful key non-state actors that have been described. The growth of non-state actors has provided solutions and opened opportunities in global governance that were missing earlier. If the global system has to function better, then these new elements of power must be appreciated and incorporated.

## **Conclusion**

The growth in the influence of non-state actors understates their importance and reflects on the benefits in global governance by their active participation in the changed dynamics of power sharing. The future global governance will require the coming together of these non-state actors with increased legal framework and more robust orchestration

by intergovernmental organisations. The absence of IGOs with the requisite scope, resources and authority means that the global system is deprived of the tools, wherewithal and legitimacy that only universal intergovernmental organisations can bring. What is required is the expansion in the formidable global governance by use of the political and economic measures to consolidate and strengthen the fundamental working of intergovernmental organisations, especially the UN, to make it more effective. The new world order will require infusion of more power to international organisations along with legal sanctity and incorporation of the emerging non-state actors in furthering robust international relations.

## Notes

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