

Geopolitics and Changing States

Workshop, University of Trento

1-2 July 2022

The academic and policy concern with transformation of the state over the last two decades has addressed the issue of how the vacuum created by erosion of the authority, legitimacy, and capacity of states can affect regional if not international order. A great deal of that concern and research focused on the domestic sources of the erosion of state capacity and how those might be translated into a threat to distant shores in the form of international terrorism or migration. But in a range of cases that goes from Bosnia to Afghanistan to Libya, it is also becoming evident that the question of the state is being drawn into the game of great power politics. While weak and fragile states may indeed present challenges such as terrorism and migration, they also can be arenas where great powers try to extend their influence or even where they find the limits to their power

Whereas the development of the modern state was about the centripetal trajectory of politics, with attendant concepts such as sovereignty and nation, centrifugal pressures have led to seemingly liminal spaces where power and politics are certainly present but seem to have no centre. Where civil societies have conventionally been a balancing mechanism to stateness, today they are becoming part of the intricate interdependence of stateness and statelessness. For instance, local elites often look to “fragility” to tap into foreign aid, engage in forms of criminal activity or extract resources but also to engage in state-building and nation-building projects that are framed around the concerns of the strategic interests of external actors. The result is that trajectories of state development are increasingly being drawn into what might be considered as the return of the classical “great game” or power politics, inviting an international order of a different kind.

The title for this workshop wants to highlight the complex relationship between geopolitics and the capacity of states to govern authoritatively clearly defined territories. On the one hand, changing can be seen as a verb, referring to how geopolitics may be transforming states. But changing can also be an adjective, referring to how changing states may be affecting geopolitics. Trajectories of state development have never been linear, but they increasingly play themselves out where there seems to be both a vacuum of political power and the presence of great power politics. Changing states are transforming geopolitics while being swept up in the struggle of great powers to extend their influence with new and traditional instruments.

The aim of this workshop is to explore the relationship between state transformations and geopolitics, as well as different variations of hybrid political agency and their influence on the evolving international order. It wants to bring together young and established scholars to explore how changing states may be affected by the competition between states to extend their influence as well as how these same states may shape the geopolitical game. It is interested in both theoretical and empirical contributions that help push forward our understanding of the relationship between state development and international order. This could include a reflection of the role of non-state or different kinds of actors, such as the European Union or semi-legitimate shadow actors, such as terrorist groups, criminals-in-

law, and organised crime (in their appropriation of state institutions). Of particular interest will be work that examines how conventional understanding of what constitutes states and order may be challenged by changing states and their relationship with geopolitics.

The two-day workshop will discuss papers from 6-8 participants. The conference is scheduled to be in presence, but it may be held in hybrid form if required by Covid regulations. The aim is to move relatively quickly to propose a special issue of a journal so authors would be expected to present a paper ready for discussion. The workshop will conclude a week-long summer school for early career scholars addressing many of the same questions and they will be invited to take part in the workshop. Travel and accommodation costs will be covered by the conference.

Conference Organisers: Viktoria Akchurina (OSCE Academy) and Vincent Della Sala.

Please send a paper proposal (300 words) and short bio to vincenzo.dellasala@unitn.it by 28 February 2022.