

SECURITY

Against Global Federalism

by Jason Sorens

War is the scourge of our species. Aside from the killings and maimings, war is the font of direct taxation, mass conscription, domestic surveillance, and state propaganda. It is little wonder then that liberal thinkers have long sought to abolish war. Kant's plan for "Perpetual Peace" envisioning a cosmopolitan federation of liberal republics remains influential.⁵¹

Global federalism is doubly attractive to economic liberals, who envision a world in which people may trade goods, travel, invest, and make contracts the world over, without let or hindrance. When jurisdictions have open borders to goods, capital, and people, they will have to compete with each other, giving them an incentive to adopt policies that appeal to their citizens.⁵² The great liberal ideal

⁵¹ Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Essay*. Tr. M. Campbell Smith. London: Allen & Unwin, 1903 [1795].

⁵² Hayek, Friedrich A. "The Economic Conditions of Interstate Federalism," *New Commonwealth Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1939): 131–149; Tiebout, Charles M. "A Pure Theory of Local

of “privatizing” governance would then be possible—not necessarily in the anarcho-capitalist sense of abolishing territorial monopolies on the legitimization of force, but in the sense of replacing the dominance relation at the heart of the state⁵³ with a customer service orientation like that found in the private market.

Yet the risks of global federalism outweigh the considerable benefits. Here I take *federalism* to mean a permanent, integrated political structure with a supranational element, not a mere treaty relationship. The risks of global federalism are the incentives for tyranny, the inevitable centralizing decay of political institutions, and the lack of recourse citizens will have to both. In fact, there is a good case to make that the average territorial extent of sovereign states in the 21st century is too large.

Instead of dismissing the idea, however, let’s test the best case for it.

Expenditures,” *Journal of Political Economy* 64, no. 5 (1956): 416–424.

⁵³ “Like the political institutions historically preceding it, the state is a relation of men dominating men” (78). Weber, Max. “Politics as a Vocation,” in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, pp. 77–128. London: Routledge, 1948 [1919].

Put simply, the case for a world federation follows the same track as the case for government to begin with. As Kant puts it, “Nations, as states, may be judged like individuals who, living in the natural state of society—that is to say, uncontrolled by external law—injure one another through their very proximity. Every state, for the sake of its own security, may—and ought to—demand that its neighbour should submit itself to conditions, similar to those of the civil society where the right of every individual is guaranteed. This would give rise to a federation of nations which, however, would not have to be a State of nations.”⁵⁴

Although he hated his broader political philosophy, Kant here explicitly draws on Hobbes’ *Leviathan*. Hobbes saw a state of war as a period not just of fighting, but of preparing to fight. Without a common power to overawe potential combatants, they would be perpetually locked in a security dilemma, investing in their war-making capability to the exclusion of the sciences and arts of commerce and civilization.

The problem, therefore, is not simply to stop active hostilities, but to make sure that the state of peace is

⁵⁴ 128–129.

“established” (emphasis original).⁵⁵ Only a permanent institutional framework could make peace secure, and that required, so Kant believed, a federation of free states, each of which had a republican constitution, and each of which respected the rights of foreigners (“universal hospitality”).

Now, Kant also says that the federation will not itself be a state. He calls it “a covenant of peace,” which unlike a mere treaty aims “to put an end to war for ever.”⁵⁶ Members of the “alliance” would submit themselves to “public laws and coercion.” The federation would be voluntary and could be formed through gradual accession of liberal states.

Kant sees accession to this kind of federal union as a moral duty. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* he offers a distinctive, contractarian account of the state. Unlike Locke, Kant believes that the duty to submit to a civil condition may be compelled:

“It is true that the state of nature need not, just because it is natural, be a state of injustice... But it would still be a state devoid of justice, in which when rights are in dispute, there would be no judge

⁵⁵ 119.

⁵⁶ 134.

competent to render a verdict having rightful force. Hence each may impel the other by force to leave this state and enter into a rightful condition.”⁵⁷

In the absence of a civil condition, all property rights are merely provisional, Kant believes. Since private property is essential to life, he reasons, it is a duty of justice to submit all property claims to a definitive arbiter under a civil constitution.

But if foreign states can violate property rights as well, are they truly secure under a domestic constitution? If it is acceptable to compel other individuals to enter a civil state in order to secure property rights, why would it not be acceptable to compel other states to enter a world state in order to secure property rights? The answer could be simply that Kant sees no other practical method for setting up the system he envisions. It would be contradictory to advocate wars of conquest as a means of establishing a system to end wars of conquest.

Going beyond Kant’s advocacy of a loose confederation of free, republican states is

⁵⁷ 90. Kant, Immanuel. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Tr. Mary Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

constructivist international relations theorist Alexander Wendt. Wendt argues that a world state is both inevitable and desirable.⁵⁸

Wendt's argument is teleological and Hegelian, not just in its dialectical logic but also in its idealism. The fundamental force driving humanity to a world state is the struggle for recognition, which trumps even the material struggle for survival.

States seek recognition, and individuals seek recognition. Under anarchy, neither enjoy recognition: their very existence at risk from war. States can find mutual recognition under a “society of states” such as that brought about by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.⁵⁹ But individuals will press for recognition of their freedom from coercive death by foreign states, Wendt says:

“Over time we can expect individuals to make those needs apparent to their leaders, inducing the latter toward growing caution in the use of force as a tool of diplomacy, particularly as the costs of war rise.

Eventually, through this pressure from below states in a Lockean culture will learn

⁵⁸ Wendt, Alexander, “Why a World State Is Inevitable,” *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2003): 491–542.

⁵⁹ 512.

to desist from war altogether, and to find non-violent means to solve foreign policy problems.”⁶⁰

This next stage of evolution Wendt calls “world society.” Yet this system is not stable either, because it lacks “collective protection against aggression,” i.e., by rogue states and groups.⁶¹ Collective security is necessary so that states aid each other in protecting their members from this aggression. Wendt sees Kant as stopping here, at a system in which states retain their independent existence but are united voluntarily in mutual defense.

Wendt sees a collective action problem in maintaining this system over time. Further, states will be able to secede and arm themselves for aggressive purposes. Even if no member state displays any intention of doing this, there is a clear advantage, he believes, to constitutionalizing universal recognition. Even Great Powers will rationally see the advantages of a world state as compared with a world in which small powers can go rogue and technologies of coercion (such as weapons of mass destructions) are asymmetric.⁶²

⁶⁰ 519.

⁶¹ 520.

⁶² 524.

A world state would be an equilibrium because it would prohibit secession while satisfying individuals' and states' needs for "fully recognized subjectivity," presumably through a federal structure.⁶³ That does not mean it would be invulnerable to outside shocks, just that it would be a "fixed-point attractor."

Moreover, the world state would not be despotic because despotism "would not satisfy the thicker Hegelian criterion of mutual recognition of equality," in which case "the struggle for recognition would go on."⁶⁴ Moreover, Wendt points out, the status quo of completely unaccountable violence across state borders (he gives the example of U.S. killing civilians in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq) is itself despotic.

Wendt insulates his argument from the charge of internal contradiction (the process is driven by the demand for recognition, but states would lose their subjectivity and recognition upon subsumption within the world state) by claiming that the world state would both constrain its members and be constrained by them, creating relevant differences

⁶³ 525.

⁶⁴ 526.

among individuals, (former) states, and the world state that would acknowledge the subjectivity of each.⁶⁵

Still, Wendt's argument for the non-despotic nature of the world state is unpersuasive. If the world state denies individuals recognition, they may protest, but what power do they have? They may well be unable to coerce such a state, indeed that is the whole point of the world state to begin with, to overawe aggressors.

A world state would pose an unacceptable risk of a catastrophic outcome for human liberty and dignity: the possibility of a totalitarian regime controlling the entire species, with no hope of escape or revolution.

Indeed, any worldwide federation, no matter how decentralized – even Kant's pacific federation of sovereign states – would pose such an unacceptable risk, so long as there is any chance that the federation develops a supranational element or centralizing tendency.

History indeed leads us to expect such a centralizing tendency. The American Articles of Confederation

⁶⁵ 527.

were quickly replaced with the U.S. Constitution, which in due course succumbed to the New Deal Revolution, radically transforming the relationship between the central government and the individual. Under the New Deal Constitution, the U.S. government has not yet become a complete tyranny, but it is indubitable that the barriers to such a development are much lower than they were in 1789.

The European Union offers a largely positive example of a pacific federation of liberal states. It has greatly enhanced freedom of trade, investment, and migration, outweighing its negative effects for human liberty. It remains highly decentralized, as member states enjoy a unilateral right of secession and the right to conduct foreign affairs, and EU direct taxation is a minuscule fraction of total public taxation in the EU.

Nevertheless, even the EU has displayed a tendency toward centralization under the guise of “ever deeper integration.” The Social Chapter is one avenue by which the EU may come to exercise direct regulatory control over individuals. That this tendency is observable within a mere 68 years, as of this writing, since the initial founding of its

predecessor organization, implies that over centuries, a stable global federation could become quite centralized indeed.

Once a centralized global federation or world state emerges, it will be next to impossible to undo it. For that reason, it is imperative to find “fixed-point attractors,” in Wendt’s language, that preserve national independence while satisfying the demands for recognition and protection from aggression that he identifies.

Perhaps greater decentralization, not centralization, is part of the answer. One can make a credible case that the average territorial scale of sovereign states is now too large. As the scale of the state increases, it makes the problem of interstate war lessen. There are simply fewer dyads that can fight. Wendt is correct to this point.

But the problem of intrastate conflict is now far more serious than that of interstate conflict. Far more people have died in civil wars and terrorist campaigns since the end of World War 2 than have died in wars between governments.⁶⁶ The growing

⁶⁶ Our World in Data, “Death Rate in State-Based Conflicts, World,”

scale of the state potentially exacerbates these conflicts, in two ways.

First, ever larger unions, especially when they empower ethnically narrow regimes, increase the risk of secessionist campaigns. Intrastate secessionist conflicts are the most intractable form of organized violent conflict in the world today.⁶⁷

Second, ever larger unions increase the political value of controlling the central government and therefore increase the incentives for violent struggle over control of the central government. Thus, larger countries are at greater risk of civil war, secessionist or not.⁶⁸

Perhaps states should be territorially smaller and should form region-wide “pacific federations” but not to anything approaching a global scale. The model here could be the Holy Roman Empire, which pacified Renaissance Germany through a

<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/death-rate-in-state-based-conflicts>, accessed 04-18-2024.

⁶⁷ Wucherpfennig, Julian, Nils W. Metternich, Lars-Erik Cederman, & Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Ethnicity, the State, and the Duration of Civil War,” *World Politics* 64, no. 1 (2012): 79–115.

⁶⁸ Fearon, James D. & David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.

system of elected emperors, who acted as “enforcer” of peace among the sovereign member states. The system worked until it was cataclysmically fractured by the Reformation and the Wars of Religion.

Instead of an equilibrium achieved through a final end-point of a teleological process, an equilibrium of balance of power, as unsteady as it may sometimes be, is a better solution for reducing war and violent conflict, both internal and external. But we humans will always have to live with war of some kind. Utopian schemes to abolish war at all costs, like global federalism, risk far greater harms.

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