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Transnational Threat in the ‘Globalized’ Era

During the Cold War, international threats were universal in the sense that they were almost always viewed through the lens of East–West rivalry. With the ending of the conflict in 1989, it was widely claimed that a more favourable climate for international cooperation would be one of the main results of this event. Since then, threats have once more taken on a universal quality, only this time as part of a contention by political elites that certain forms of cooperation and behaviour are not only desirable but also unavoidable, due to the emergence of a qualitatively new set of ‘challenges’ that threaten ‘all nations’ in a more interdependent world. Based on this, the period since the late 1980s has been marked by rigorous attempts to universalize the principles on which international action in these areas is founded and to build or revise international institutional arrangements.

The primary source of this normative consensus has been the governments of advanced industrialized countries (AICs), which have been instrumental in delimiting a particular set of problems that are characterized collectively by their lack of ‘respect’ for territorial borders. This (now familiar) list is headed by terrorism, international crime, drug trafficking, nuclear proliferation and environmental damage, and is often joined by concerns regarding flows of ‘illegal’ immigrants and the spread of diseases such as AIDS. Most analyses have focused on the contribution of broader global changes to the emergence and expansion of these issues, with a wider debate among prominent theorists of international relations concerning how such issues represent part of a more general challenge to national states that, it is argued, has not only limited the capacity of states to act autonomously but has also begun to impinge upon their sovereignty. Others have suggested that, while sovereignty has been clearly eroded in some areas (such as economic management),
state managers have made attempts to consolidate their hold over other areas where the state has traditionally tended towards monopolistic control, especially those related to security matters. However, most perspectives accept, either implicitly or explicitly, that ‘new’ or expanded transnational problems have been important dynamic influences behind a significant growth in multilaterally constituted policy initiatives; a process which some claim has also led to a diffusion of power away from states to non-state actors. Much of this work has tended to overlook the critical influence that discourses of transnational threat have exerted upon political and social ideas, providing both context and rationale for action at all levels: from global to national, down to region, city, even individual. From this perspective, the construction and legitimation of action contingent on particular forms of threat becomes a highly important factor in ensuring that particular actions are favoured over others.

Recognition within AICs of more problematic conditions for national governance has stimulated a process of professionalization of ‘expert’ groups with discrete areas of technical knowledge and competence. This has been based on a perceived need to give such groups a more flexible and quasi-autonomous role in the design and implementation of policy. It is also linked to the much broader and embedded belief inherent in post-industrial societies of the need to maximize the application of technology to address complex problems. The reasons for this lie in the uncertain impact of transnational forces on national structures and the need for state managers to assess both the extent of this impact and to act in ways which can be legitimized (to electorates and to political elites from other states) on the basis of this assessment.

However, the response to transnational problems since the 1980s has led directly to changes in the form and practices of the state apparatus. At the international level, a parallel trend has been apparent in the emergence of complex networks with regulatory or policy implementation functions across a wide variety of transnational issue areas (from economic and environmental through to security issues). Many of these networks have arisen as a result of closer and more extensive intergovernmental cooperation that has led to direct contact between national ‘experts’ from different states. As certain national actors have been assigned competence to assess and address problems whose dynamics are seen as having an ‘external’ aspect, they have also acquired legitimacy to exercise competence in transgovernmental policy-making fora (for example, civil servants from home affairs ministries). Groups of this type are distinguished by their possession of a successful claim to recognized