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BEYOND THE WESTPHALIAN VEIL: The Inadequacy of State-Centric Approaches in Understanding Contemporary International Security

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Abstract

For centuries, the architecture of international security studies has rested upon the Westphalian bedrock of state-centrism. Realist and neorealist frameworks historically posited the sovereign state as both the primary actor and the ultimate referent object of security, treating the international system as an anarchic arena defined by a zero-sum pursuit of material power. Applying realist and Liberal theories and the qualitative methods of data collection based on content analysis, the study argues that contemporary security architecture faces unprecedented transformations. The proliferation of transnational threats ranging from asymmetric cyber warfare and global health pandemics to climate-induced migrations and decentralized terrorist networks demonstrates that traditional state-centric models are no longer analytically sufficient. This article examines the theoretical blind spots of statism, evaluates the shift toward multi-actor frameworks. Based on the foregoing, this article recommended for a re-conceptualized security paradigm that incorporates human agency and complex interdependence.

Keywords: Westphalian Veil, State-Centric Approaches, Contemporary International Security, Statism

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Introduction

The Westphalian System refers to the modern international legal and political order based on the concepts of sovereign states, territorial integrity, and non-intervention. Deriving its name from the Peace of Westphalia the collective term for the treaties of Münster and Osnabrück signed in 1648 it officially ended the Thirty Years' War in the Holy Roman Empire and the Eighty Years' War between Spain and the Dutch Republic. While traditional International Relations (IR) theory treats 1648 as the foundational birth year of the modern nation-state system, contemporary historical and critical scholarship has heavily challenged this narrative, labeling it the "Westphalian Myth".

Traditional security studies, catalyzed by the Cold War paradigm, conceptualized international relations through the lens of military-strategic interactions among monolithic states (Buzan, 1983). In this view, the state acts as a rational, unitary actor safeguarding its territorial integrity against external military aggression. Yet, treating the state as an unproblematic, homogeneous category generates a profound epistemological barrier. As feminist and critical security theorists argue, state-centrism creates a "limited vision" of global politics by conflating the security of the ruling apparatus with the security of the populations residing within its borders (Booth, 1991; Bilgin, 2024.). Consequently, contemporary security studies face a reality where the primary threats to populations frequently emanate from within the state itself, or from deterritorialized forces that bypass state borders entirely (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Security sectors across the world are increasingly faced with global challenges such as migration, health crises, digitalization and cyber threats, climate change, or organized crime. These issues not only transcend borders, but also require states and societies to think innovatively on governance responses to these challenges. The fundamental national interest of every country is to ensure appropriate conditions for the life and activity of its citizens along with the greatest possible degree of security for its population - that is, with the lowest possible level of threats to security. In today's increasingly globalised world, threats to security are no longer of a military nature alone, but are joined by threats and dangers relating to criminality, health, social factors, politics, the environment, economics and flow of information. Wars are no longer so frequent, they mostly take place in local settings, and great efforts by the international community are required to resolve them.

Contemporary threats and those that threaten security are increasingly trans-national in significance. Some of these threats are all the more dangerous in a highly interdependent world, because for a long time countries underestimated them or did not know how to decide to bring them to an end. Today no state is able to withstand these types of threats, and the solution therefore lies not in a border closed through isolationism, but instead in forms of international alliance and cooperation in exposing dangers, making plans to ensure security and eliminating the consequences of these threats. International security issues involve major global threats that put world peace, state safety, and human well-being at risk. These challenges range from traditional military conflicts and nuclear weapons to modern digital and environmental dangers. Global security issues include rising geopolitical conflicts, cyber warfare, climate change, and the misuse of artificial intelligence. These interconnected threats cross national borders, destabilize regions, and put pressure on international organizations like the United Nations to find new ways to protect people. It is therefore important to examine the challenges facing traditional state-centric approaches

and interrogate why they are no longer sufficient for understanding and responding to contemporary international security.

Statement of the problem

Contemporary international security challenges span traditional state-based military conflict, shifting global power alignments, and borderless transnational threats. These multi-dimensional risks require complex, cooperative global responses because no single nation can isolate itself from them. Malicious state and non-state actors routinely launch disruptive cyberattacks against critical infrastructure. The integration of artificial intelligence into autonomous weapon systems introduces new ethical and tactical dangers. State-centric approaches to international security rooted primarily in realist and neorealist international relations theory posit that sovereign states are the foundational, and often sole, actors of consequence in global politics. In this framework, the primary security dilemma arises from an anarchic international system lacking a supranational authority to enforce order, compelling states to prioritize survival, territorial integrity, and the accumulation of power (military and economic).

While state-centric models have historically provided a coherent lens for understanding great power competition and interstate war, their analytical and practical utility faces profound limitations when confronted with the complex, transnational security challenges of the twenty-first century. These contemporary international security challenges further include: decentralized extremist networks and violent non-state actors exploit porous borders and fragile state governance, particularly across parts of Africa and the Middle East. Illicit trafficking of arms, humans, and drugs destabilizes vulnerable regions and funds parallel gray economies. Environmental degradation and extreme weather patterns intensify competition over dwindling natural resources like water and arable land, multiplying displacement and conflict risks.

Infectious disease outbreaks and pandemics test the resilience of global health frameworks and pull military or security forces into domestic containment roles. Fleeing violence, economic collapse, and environmental crises, displaced populations often encounter restrictive border policies and political friction globally. It is based on the above problem that this study investigated the dynamics of traditional state-centric approaches contemporary international security challenges.

Theoretical Frameworks

Realism and Liberalism

Applying Realism and Liberalism provides a powerful dual framework for analyzing how the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU), and the United Nations (UN) respond to contemporary security challenges. While Realism highlights how these bodies struggle with state sovereignty, power politics, and structural fragmentation, Liberalism illuminates their institutional design, reliance on collective security, and the pursuit of multilateral cooperation.

Realist Interpretations: Power, Sovereignty, and Structural Limits

Realism views the international system through the lens of anarchy, where states remain the primary actors driven by self-preservation, material interests, and the maximization of power Amani Africa (2025). From a realist standpoint, regional and global organizations possess only as much authority as sovereign member states are willing to surrender.

- i. **ECOWAS and the Resurgence of State Sovereignty:**
Realism explains the severe structural strains facing

ECOWAS, such as the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to form the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). When regional supranational mandates clash with regime survival or vital national interests, hard state sovereignty prevails over community rules. Realism also accounts for the dominance of regional hegemons (like Nigeria) and the transactional nature of military cooperation, where security mechanisms are often sideline-managed through ad-hoc coalitions (e.g., the Multinational Joint Task Force) rather than deep integration.

- ii. **The AU and Geopolitical Fragmentation:** The African Union's Peace and Security Council frequently struggles to enforce mandates in major crises (such as Sudan or Eastern DRC) because powerful member states or external actors pursue competing strategic interests. Realism interprets the AU's reliance on state-led consent as a structural limitation; without an overarching enforcement monopoly, the AU remains susceptible to great-power competition and the prioritization of domestic regime security by national leaders over collective norms (Williams, 2021).
- iii. **The UN Security Council and Great-Power Paralysis:** At the global level, the UN exemplifies realist dynamics through the veto power held by its Permanent Five (P5) members. Contemporary security challenges ranging from European conflicts to Middle Eastern and African crises frequently paralyze the UN Security Council. Realism demonstrates that when vital national interests or zero-sum security competition divide major powers, the UN's collective security apparatus becomes functionally gridlocked.

Liberal Interpretations: Institutionalism, Interdependence, and Multilateralism

Liberalism (specifically institutionalism and liberal internationalism) argues that international anarchy can be mitigated through formal rules, international law, economic interdependence, and multilateral institutions. Liberals contend that organizations like

the UN, AU, and ECOWAS provide frameworks that lower transaction costs, foster long-term cooperation, and redefine state interests around shared values.

- i. **ECOWAS and Normative Institutionalism:** Liberals point to the historical success of ECOWAS's institutional architecture such as its Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention and the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance as proof that rules-based regional bodies can constrain behavior, deter unconstitutional changes of government, and deploy collective responses. Even amid recent institutional crises, the push by ECOWAS toward structural reform and democratic governance frameworks reflects a fundamentally liberal faith in institutional adaptation and legal norms.
- ii. **The AU and the Architecture of Collective Security:** The creation of the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA), the African Standby Force, and Agenda 2063 ("Silencing the Guns") embodies liberal institutionalism. The AU operates on the liberal premise that regional stability is indivisible, requiring institutionalized early-warning systems, peer review mechanisms (like the African Peer Review Mechanism), and collaborative governance to manage complex transnational threats (Booth, 1991).
- iii. **The UN and Universal Multilateralism:** The UN represents the pinnacle of liberal international order. Mechanisms like the *Pact for the Future* and the Sustainable Development Goals (particularly SDG 16 on accountable institutions) illustrate the liberal conviction that sustainable security requires deep cooperation across human rights, economic development, and international law. Liberals argue that transnational challenges pandemics, climate change, and cyber threats cannot be solved unilaterally, rendering multilateral institutions indispensable.

Comparative Analysis: Realist vs. Liberal Dynamics in traditional state-centric approaches

Dimension	Realist Perspective	Liberal Perspective
Primary Actor Driving Response	Sovereign states protecting national/regime interests.	Multilateral institutions, norms, and transnational coalitions.
View of ECOWAS/AU/UN Failures	Inevitable results of anarchy, weak enforcement, and the assertion of state sovereignty.	Temporary institutional design flaws requiring structural reform, better resource-sharing, and deeper integration.
Approach to Contemporary Threats	Reliance on hard power, military deterrence, and ad-hoc security balancing.	Preventive diplomacy, institutional cooperation, human security, and rule-of-law promotion.

Source: Researcher 2026

Methods of data collection and Analysis

Data for this study were sourced from already existing information from textbooks, internet, journals and newspaper. Thus, relevant and useful data that would give clarity and meaning to the research were extracted, quoted, and used in this study qualitatively.

Results and Discussion

PRINCIPLES ASSOCIATED WITH THE WESTPHALIAN SYSTEM

Mainstream IR theory (particularly Realism and Liberalism)

attributes several foundational norms to the 1648 settlement:

1. **State Sovereignty:** The principle that each state possesses absolute authority over its internal affairs and domestic population within its defined borders, free from external earthly authorities (such as the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor).
2. **Legal Equality of States:** Regardless of geographic size or military might, participating states theoretically possess equal juridical standing.

3. **Cuius regio, eius religio (Whose realm, his religion):** Building on a modification of the earlier Peace of Augsburg, the treaties allowed individual rulers within the Holy Roman Empire to choose the official confession of their territories (Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Calvinism), while carving out protections for minority religious practices, thereby decoupling internal governance from absolute papal oversight.
4. **Balance of Power:** The institutionalization of a framework intended to prevent any single European power from achieving universal hegemony.

- ii. **The Monopoly on Legitimate Force:** Drawing on Weberian principles, the state is viewed as the sole entity authorized to wield and manage organized violence.
- iii. **Self-Help and Power Maximization:** In the absence of a global police force, states rely on internal mobilization (military buildup) or external balancing (alliances) to ensure their survival.
- iv. **National Interest Primacy:** Foreign and security policies are driven by the pursuit of national interests, often decoupling state action from normative or humanitarian considerations.

Tenets of State-Centric Security

- i. **Sovereignty and Territorial Defense:** Security is defined primarily as the protection of state borders against external military aggression.

Contemporary Security Challenges Testing the Model

Modern security threats frequently originate from non-state actors, systemic vulnerabilities, or interconnected global phenomena that bypass traditional borders, rendering strict state-centric frameworks increasingly inadequate.

Security Challenge	Nature of the Threat	State-Centric Limitations
Transnational Terrorism	Decentralized extremist networks (e.g., remnants of ISIS, Al-Qaeda affiliates) operating across fragile or failing states.	Built to counter rival militaries, traditional state apparatuses struggle to deter or engage clandestine, non-territorial actors who possess no conventional center of gravity.
Cyberwarfare and Hybrid Threats	State-sponsored or proxy cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, disinformation campaigns, and economic sabotage.	Attribution is notoriously difficult, and the digital domain blurs the lines between domestic law enforcement, intelligence, and interstate military conflict, undermining traditional deterrence doctrines.
Climate Change and Resource Scarcity	Ecological degradation, rising sea levels, and food/water insecurity driving mass migration and civil unrest.	Ecological threats do not respect sovereign borders. Treating climate security purely through a lens of national power or border fortification ignores the necessity of planetary collective action.
Global Pandemics	Rapid spread of novel pathogens capable of destabilizing global supply chains and societies.	Pathogens are indifferent to national sovereignty. State-centric hoarding of medical countermeasures or competitive nationalism often exacerbates global vulnerability compared to cooperative health governance.

Analytical and Practical Shortcomings

- i. **The Agency Problem of Non-State Actors:** By prioritizing governments and formal militaries, state-centric frameworks systematically overlook the security impact of multinational corporations, private military companies, transnational criminal cartels, and civil society movements.
- ii. **Neglect of Human Security:** The traditional model measures security from the "top down" focusing on regime survival and territorial integrity. This frequently leaves populations vulnerable to internal oppression, poverty, and human rights abuses perpetrated by the very states meant to protect them, a paradox highlighted by the humanitarian interventions and the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine.
- iii. **The Fallacy of Absolute Anarchy:** Contemporary security architecture is densely populated by international institutions, legal regimes, and norms (e.g., the WTO, international criminal courts, non-proliferation treaties). State-centric models often dismiss these institutions as epiphenomenal, failing to capture how they actively shape state behavior and mitigate conflict.

Dynamics of Contemporary Insecurity

The persistence of interstate rivalry exemplified by great power competition proves that state-centric dynamics have not vanished. However, addressing contemporary risks requires moving beyond a rigid Westphalian framework. Effective security governance increasingly demands a synthesis of state power with human security, transnational multilateralism, and networked governance that accounts for non-state actors and planetary-scale interdependencies.

To understand modern conflict, scholarship must move beyond the inter-state security dilemma. Contemporary security dynamics are defined by hybrid warfare and gray-zone conflicts, where state actors employ proxies, disinformation campaigns, and economic coercion below the threshold of conventional military war. Furthermore, globalization and digitalization have accelerated complex interdependence. As economic, informational, and ecological systems intertwine, local disruptions rapidly cascade globally. Traditional state-centric defense planning historically optimized for linear, predictable borders proves structurally incapable of absorbing systemic shocks that operate across multiple velocity vectors (Buzan, 1983).

Why State-Centrism Fails

The inadequacy of state-centric frameworks is exposed across three distinct dimensions of modern international relations:

- i. **The Rise of Non-State Actors:** Transnational corporations, private military contractors, decentralized insurgencies, and ideological net-war networks exercise independent agency that disrupts traditional balance-of-power equations (Complex Interdependence, 2024).
- ii. **Non-Military Vulnerabilities:** Ecological degradation, systemic financial collapses, and pandemics do not respect national frontiers. A state-centric focus on military deterrence offers zero defense against structural or systemic disruptions (Keohane, & Nye, 1977).
- iii. **The Human Security Paradox:** State-centric models often rationalize internal repression or humanitarian neglect in the name of "national security," rendering vulnerable populations invisible (Bilgin, 2024).

Conclusion

Ultimately, contemporary responses by ECOWAS, the AU, and the UN cannot be understood through a single theoretical lens. Realism explains the friction, state pushback, and institutional paralysis occurring when regional norms collide with hard national sovereignty. Simultaneously, Liberalism explains the enduring architectural design, normative aspirations, and collaborative frameworks that these organizations use to pursue collective survival. Addressing 21st-century security requires navigating this exact tension: recognizing the immutable pull of state interests while expanding institutional capacities to manage a deeply interdependent world.

The continued reliance on state-centric methodologies is no longer merely a theoretical oversight; it is an analytical liability. While states remain vital instruments of governance and collective action, they are components of a much denser, fragmented, and interdependent global ecosystem. Developing effective responses to 21st-century security challenges requires an epistemological shift that replaces Westphalian exclusivity with pluralistic, multi-tiered security frameworks capable of accounting for both human agency and transnational complexity.

Recommendations

1. It has become necessary to broaden the Security Agenda. This can be achieved by incorporating non-traditional sectors environmental, economic, cyber, and societal health into mainstream security analysis.
2. It is equally pertinent to redefine the 'Referent Object' by shifting focus downward to human security and upward to global systems, recognizing that individual well-being and planetary survival are the ultimate prerequisites for sustainable order.

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