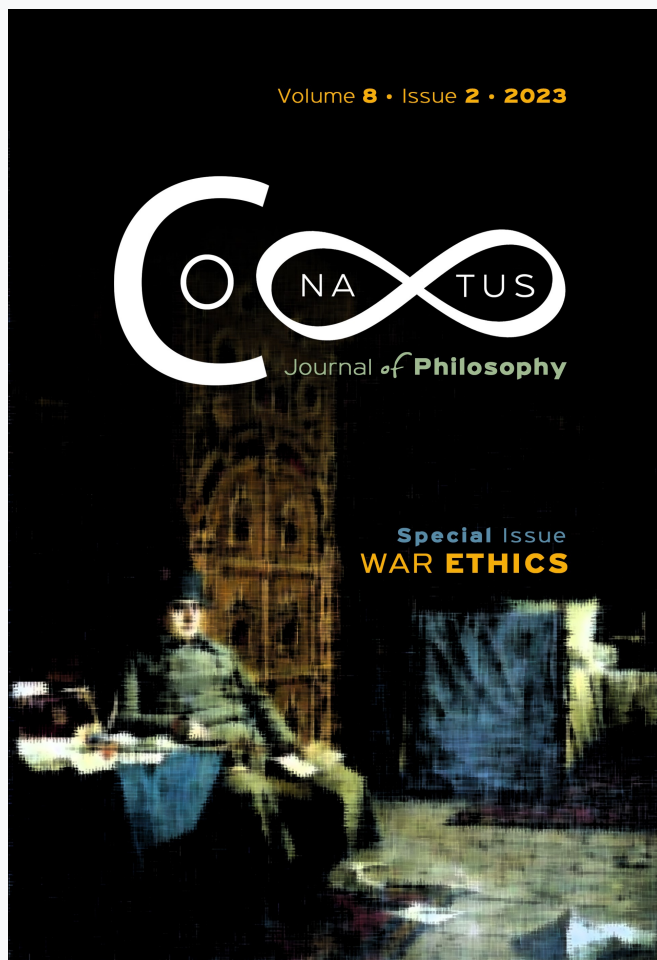


## Conatus - Journal of Philosophy

Vol 8, No 2 (2023)

Conatus - Journal of Philosophy SI: War Ethics



### Existential Threat as a Casus Belli

*Sergey Kucherenko*

doi: [10.12681/cjp.35080](https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35080)

Copyright © 2023, Sergey Kucherenko



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

#### To cite this article:

Kucherenko, S. (2023). Existential Threat as a Casus Belli. *Conatus - Journal of Philosophy*, 8(2), 299–312.  
<https://doi.org/10.12681/cjp.35080>

# Existential Threat as a Casus Belli

**Sergey Kucherenko**

*HSE University Moscow, Russian Federation*

*E-mail address: sakucherenko@hse.ru*

*ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7644-9865>*

## Abstract

*Existential threat is often mentioned in political rhetoric. While it is mostly used to denote threats to humanity as a whole, like climate change or AI, it is also used on a smaller scale. Existential threat to a state or a similar entity is often evoked too. Such a threat is considered grave enough to justify war and – possibly – the use of nuclear weapons. In the present article, the author aims to deconstruct the notion of “existential threat” in relation to the state and show that it should not be used as a reason to go to war. The main argument is that the state has a specific mode of existence which makes it impossible to speak of state death unambiguously. Therefore, there can be no apparent threats to its existence. The author proposes a normative interpretation of the state. The state is understood as a project of a certain group, or even an individual, therefore the discussion of “existential threat” to a state should be dropped in favor of a more grounded evaluation of potential gains and losses by different social groups and political parties.*

**Keywords:** *just cause; just war; existential threat; state; ontology*

Since any war of aggression has been “criminalized” by article 2 (4) of the UN Charter,<sup>1</sup> every war should be presented as self-defense to avoid immediate international backlash. Yet, the “inherent right of [...] self-defense if an armed attack occurs,” from the article 51 of the UN Charter,<sup>2</sup> is a bit narrow for real politics. Waiting for real ag-

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations, “Article 2 (4),” in *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice* (San Francisco, CA: 1945).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations, “Article 51,” in *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International*

gression to enable this right is often an unaffordable luxury, therefore, one often needs a reason to strike preemptively. Here the concept of “existential threat” comes as a useful tool.

What is an “existential threat?” The term itself contains the answer – it is a threat to existence, i.e., it is something that is (or is perceived) to have a reasonable chance to end someone’s or something’s existence. For a human being, it is often the biggest threat and the biggest source of fear – life’s end means the end of everything. Therefore, it is understandable why a reference to such a threat instills fear and urges to act, to do something to avoid the ultimate fear – death.

It may be the main reason why the notion of “existential threat” serves as a solid justification for a defensive war. Not only does it evoke the “inherent right of [...] self-defense,”<sup>3</sup> mentioned in the UN Charter, but also creates a rhetorically powerful sense of urgency. In the face of a truly “existential threat,” one acts first, postponing doubts for a later time. For the same reason, the “existential threat” may also serve as a nice “just cause” for those who employ the Just War Theory (JWT). It is even better, because the JWT, unlike the UN Charter, is not very explicit on what possible causes are just causes, leaving room for interpretation.

The infamous USA meddling in the Middle East gives us nice examples of the “existential threat” rhetoric. George W. Bush’s declaration of the operation “Iraqi freedom” twice mentioned “danger to the world” and once “danger to the USA,”<sup>4</sup> that Iraq posed. However, the explanation of how exactly the USA will be threatened, at best, raises doubt. The ex-president mentions terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, he claims that fighting a war overseas at that moment will prevent fighting the war on the US streets later.<sup>5</sup> President Obama’s decision to intervene in Syria also refers to threats to U.S. security, which the Syrian regime allegedly posed at the time. He mentions, that stopping Asad from gassing children at the moment will also make American children safer over the long run. Obama is not explicit on how this is possible, he even mentions that Syrian armed forces do not pose any real danger for the USA, so the USA will be 100% secure while fighting for their security.

---

*Court of Justice* (San Francisco, CA: 1945).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, “President Bush Addresses the Nation” (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, March 19, 2003), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

In the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, both sides have already claimed to be averting an “existential threat.” Ukraine insists that it fights against a genocidal conquest, while the Russian Federation believes that the possible admission of Ukraine to NATO will threaten Russian Federation’s security and even sovereignty.

Looking at the turn of events in the aforementioned cases one may ask: was the threat real enough to consider the use of force proportional? What exactly was going to happen were the force not used and would it have been worse than the actual events? It is even more concerning if we take into account the fact that “existential threat” is a staple cause for nuclear weapons usage. The “nuclear doctrines” of both the USA and Russian Federation imply that a threat to a state is a valid reason for the first strike. Russian nuclear doctrine as stated in the Decree of the President of the Russian Federation of June 2, 2020, No. 355 mentions that the nuclear weapons may be used when “the very existence of the state is endangered.”<sup>6</sup> The USA Nuclear Posture Review of 2022 mentions that the threat to the “vital interests” of the USA and its Allies is a valid reason to use nuclear weapons.<sup>7</sup>

I aim to show that “existential threat,” or its close synonyms like “grave danger,” “security concern,” etc., are not rationales for war. I adhere to the position that such claims are nothing more than an impressive manipulative trope, which pushes to action without giving good reasons. The concept of “existential threat to the state” and its abuse needs to be criticized. I claim that the concept of an “existential threat” is a meaningless concept when applied to states, societies, polities, and other similar objects, and it should be avoided in policy-making.

To demonstrate this, I’ll cover three topics. First, I’ll give an overview of the just cause principle in JWT to show that it gives little understanding as to what a truly just cause should be. It doesn’t effectively restrict the “existential threat” concept from possible usage within the JWT. Therefore, I have to present the problem with the “existential threat” itself. To do this I’ll move on to the problem of state death to show that states do not die in the same way as we, humans, do. The states may even resurrect or remain the same while seemingly changing a lot. To show, why the states do not die as expected, I’ll try to explore

---

<sup>6</sup> Vladimir Putin, “Executive Order of the President of Russia No. 355 of June 2, 2020 ‘On the Fundamentals of Russia’s Nuclear Deterrence State Policy,’” <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202006020040>.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Research Service, “2022 Nuclear Posture Review,” <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1193838.pdf>.

the state's mode of existence which is different from that of physical objects or individuals.

### I. Just cause principle

The principle of just cause is one of the main *jus ad bellum* principles since the inception of the JWT. Despite this, it is still the subject of academic discussion. This principle requires the *casus belli* to be just, though it gives no further explanation as to what it means. Intuitively one can say that just cause should do something with justice, but justice itself is a vague concept, so it doesn't clarify anything. Most of the time the theorists simply list the causes they consider just for some reason, but these causes cannot be derived from the notion of just cause itself.

If one turns to a classic just war tradition, the most common just causes are the self-defense and restoration of previously violated rights, provided that they are subjected to the proportionality principle. This view is present in St. Augustine, Francisco de Vitoria, Hugo Grotius, and other classics. St. Augustine claims that war is just when it's aimed to avenge wrongs or to restore the previous order, which is presumably just. Later theorists, like Grotius, add the preemption of a threat to a list of legitimate causes.

Classic Just War theorists of our era are influenced by the UN Charter and drop "restoration of rights" and "avenging wrongs" from the list of possible causes. Daniel Webster and Michael Walzer consider self-defense the only really appropriate case to wage war, though they make an exception for preemption of an imminent threat. Webster here is more restrictive, while Walzer considers it appropriate to perform a preemptive strike against a potential aggressor if he's merely preparing and has a "manifest intent to injure."<sup>8</sup>

Bruno Coppieters and Nick Fotion also mention a relatively new reason for war – a "responsibility to protect."<sup>9</sup> This responsibility is an enlargement of the principle of other defenses and vests international society with the responsibility to protect communities from crimes against humanity, genocides, and such by the so-called "humanitarian interventions." This concept was developed in the 90s through the mid-00s until it was rectified at the UN World Summit in 2005.<sup>10</sup> However,

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Coppieters and Nick Fotion, eds., *Moral Constraints on War: Principles and Cases* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008), 31-32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>10</sup> The General Assembly of the United Nations, "Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly

the concept of humanitarian intervention turned out to be way too permissible and allowed aggression under the pretense of containment of “illegitimate” governments. It fell out of fashion lately, at least in public rhetoric.

Uwe Steinhoff in his post-revisionist account on just war principles tries to formulate the formal, all-encompassing principle of just cause. According to him, classical and revisionist approaches to defining just cause, are either too restrictive and self-contradictory, or allow for a slippery slope that paves the way to too much war. To avoid this, the notion of just cause should be merged with the notion of proportionality on every stage of waging war. In general, Steinhoff is comfortable with war for any cause,<sup>11</sup> though in formal definition he states, that

[a]n agent has a just cause for waging war [...] if there is an injustice, an emergency, or an agreement to wage war between the potential parties to the war, such that under the given [...] circumstances the [use of military force] [...] is not necessarily disproportionate.<sup>12</sup>

This principle applies to the abstract right to wage a war, while the particular war only has a just cause if it is actually fought proportionally. It’s a nice distinction, which further accentuates the importance of proportionality when we evaluate a war. Still, I find it lacking as a guiding norm. The war, especially the war of well-organized entities, has its own logic, and, as Carl von Clausewitz noted, tends to become an absolute war. Therefore, the second formulation of principle may be useless in “real life”: when already fighting, you may have matters more important than to theorize about proportionality of your strategy and tactics.

We can see that the JWT gives only one clear just cause: self-defense in case of actual military aggression. Other causes are related to topics of self- and other-defense, but are only conditionally just and require additional considerations. How do the “existential threats” fit in such a definition? Steinhoff’s overtly permissible criterion makes an “existential threat” a valid just cause, providing it is proportional to

---

on 16 September 2005 60/1. 2005 World Summit Outcome,” (Pub. L. No. A/RES/60/1, October 24, 2005), [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_60\\_1.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Uwe Steinhoff, *The Ethics of War and the Force of Law: A Modern Just War Theory* (London: Routledge, 2021), 68.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 60-61.

avert it with war. And it is because a threat to someone's very existence easily allows the use of the last resort. The only remaining question is the "existentiality" of a threat. If we try to define the just cause as self-defense, or pre-emption, then it has no unambiguous correlation with the concept of "existential threat." Clearly, not every aggression aims to destroy its target, and not every alleged threat to existence means imminent aggression (or even aggression at all). Yet, the appeal to possible death has great rhetorical power, which distorts the ability to evaluate the situation.

## II. State death is a problem

As it was mentioned above, "existential threat" appeals to fear of one's death. But the validity of such a fear may be doubtful when we speak of a state – a complex object whose mode of existence raises lots of ontological questions. What is a state and how can it die? Merriam-Webster dictionary defines state as "a politically organized body of people usually occupying a definite territory especially: one that is sovereign," and "the political organization of such a body of people."<sup>13</sup>

These definitions imply that the state is no more, if some or all of the aforementioned qualities – territory, population, sovereignty – are lost to some extent. However, the concept of state death is relatively unexplored in political science, probably due to its seeming self-evidentiality. Authors of realist tradition in international relations theory, for example, like Kenneth Waltz, or John Mearsheimer, view "state survival" as a main interest of a state, yet they do not specify, what state death means. Moreover, Waltz mentions once that states are extremely resilient. Even Uganda will outlive most non-state entities like General Motors in the world.<sup>14</sup> One of the most comprehensive accounts of state death in modern international relations theory belongs to Tanisha Fazal. She defines state death as "the formal loss of foreign policymaking power to another state."<sup>15</sup> I tend to agree with this definition, and I'll give reasons below.

Let us speculate a little bit on the possible causes of state death, according to the above-mentioned definitions of the state. We can propose that loss of territory, population, or sovereignty may contribute to

<sup>13</sup> Merriam-Webster, "State Definition and Meaning," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/state>.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979), 95.

<sup>15</sup> Tanisha M. Fazal, "State Death in the International System," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 312.

state death. The quantifiable qualities – territory and population pose an immediate difficulty: how big a change should be to make matter? It reminds us of Theseus' ship and heap paradox. The population changes constantly and steadily, and is fully replaced within 100-150 years; yet, it feels wrong to say that the state dies with the change of generations. The territory of many states had also changed a lot through history, without necessarily causing state death. The increase in territory or population also does not seem to mark state death: it is more often viewed as growth and strengthening. Therefore, only the complete loss of territory or population – that coincides with sovereignty loss – marks an obvious death of the state. The growth and even partial loss of territory seem to leave the state alive. It is safe to assume, at least for now, that only the loss of sovereignty entails state death.

If we turn to Fazal's list of perished states,<sup>16</sup> we can see that most of them, though definitely dead at the time mentioned in the list, have resurrected since then. Of the 50 states listed, 30 are alive and well right now. Most of the dead states were temporarily subjugated by the Third Reich and were released after the Allied victory (some even retained pre-war governments). There are a couple of states that are difficult to speak about: the Austrian Empire, Germany, the Soviet Union, Poland, and the Czech Republic. Almost all of them broke down completely, yet still there exist Austria, Hungary, Russia, Slovakia, etc. Most of these countries claim to be descendants or even continuations of states that are listed as dead. Let us look closer at some of these resurrections.

Take, for example, Poland – Polish Commonwealth, to be more precise. This Eastern European State suffered three partitions: 1772, 1793, and 1795. The first two partitions resulted in great territorial losses, yet one can say, that the Commonwealth continued to exist until it was fully subjugated. However, it is debatable and one can always say that loss of territory and population made the subsequent loss of sovereignty inevitable. However, even after this loss of sovereignty, Poland reappeared on the world map after the First World War, claiming to be a descendant of the Polish Commonwealth. It was again partitioned during the Second World War, losing all territories and policymaking capabilities. Yet Poland again rose from the ashes, claiming to be a descendant of the medieval Kingdom of Poland.

Germany changed its configuration a lot during its recent history. It was fully conquered and partitioned after 1945, yet *two* Germanies sprawled on the map of Europe after a short time, only to reunite after the end of the Cold War. The loss of territories to France and Poland,

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 320.



as well as other Eastern European states, didn't make Germany less German. Even the desire of modern Germany to distance itself from the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> German Empires with their ideology and politics doesn't change the fact, that there is undeniable historical continuity at least since German Confederation, which makes it possible to view Germany as the same, though ever-changing state.

Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and Russian Federation pose an even more difficult case. The shifts in territory between the aforementioned states were huge in 1917-1921, 1939-1945, and 1991. Yet it would be wrong to say that the Russian Empire died because of the loss of Poland and Finland, or Soviet Union fell because it lost Baltic states and Central Asia. All these states existed before the acquisition of these territories and remained themselves all the time, which supports our assumption that territory and population do not matter that much on their own. The transition between states seems to be the result of regime change. Yet, as with Germany, the retrospective view has a similar weird effect: while the USSR is definitely not the same as the Empire, and the Federation is definitely not a continuation of the USSR, all three states without effort become stages of a continuity which can be easily named "Russia."

It seems that sovereignty is the essential characteristic of a state, and the loss of sovereignty is the point when the death of the state occurs. Yet, we have seen, that states easily come back from the dead claiming that they are the descendants of the dead states, if not the same states reborn. It is truly weird behavior, a behavior that is usually unexpected for something we consider dead. It wouldn't be too much of a claim to say that states cannot truly die to the very end like physical individuals do.

### III. State existence as an ontological problem

To explain the weirdness of state mortality we have to move to the problem of state existence. The author tried to explore this problem in the political realism in International Relations (IR) elsewhere.<sup>17</sup> There I tied the possibility of state resurrection to the mode of existence of the state – the state exists not as a thing, but as a norm, as a possible idea to be embodied and realized. My main claim about the mode of state existence was derived from Alfred Schuetz's article on multiple realities. In the late 40s he developed the idea of a hierarchy of reali-

---

<sup>17</sup> Sergey A. Kucherenko, "Existence of a State as a Value Problem in Political Realism," *Voprosy Filosofii* 7 (2021): 5-16.

ties, where different value-based realities existed against the backdrop of the Paramount reality – the “world of workings” – “the world of physical things [...] the realm of my locomotions [...] it offers resistances to overcome which requires effort.” The main characteristic of this world is the directed time where working happens and is recorded in history. As Schuetz emphasizes:

Working [...] [unlike mental action] is irrevocable. My work has changed the outer world. At best, I may restore the initial situation by countermoves, but I cannot make undone what I have done.<sup>18</sup>

I may glue my favorite mug if it's broken, or even buy a new one, but the event of the mug being broken will remain in history and the mug will never be the same.

Following Shuetz, I too will consider the world of workings to be ultimately real (if this word is of any meaning), where the true irreversible death – the one we fear – happens. This death we fear most because it means the complete end of existence. The death of entities from other planes of reality may be reversed because their very existence is the result of ever-changing interpretations. The “death” on other planes of reality, on the opposite, is a matter of interpretation and may be reversed. Let us take literary characters as an example. Sherlock Holmes never really dies in waterfall – we may return to previous books to revive our impressions of his past adventures, wait for Conan-Doyle to revive his hero, or even write our own fan fiction. The great detective from Baker Street exists in a way quite distinct from that of a physical individual and this way allows him to never truly die, no matter how many times we depict his death or read this depiction.

In a way, it is analogous to a state. When a physical individual dies, she is irreversibly dead, no matter what we do. We may try to redefine death, pretend that her life goes on in her children, pretend that another person is her, etc. All these actions do not revert the fact of her death: the body that acted in a way that made us recognize it as a person started to irreversibly decay. The political state, on the opposite, may be easily revived with the means of imagination and interpretation. When Poland rises from the ashes after 1945, we say that it is pretty much the same Poland that was in the 30s, and it doesn't feel intuitively wrong. Therefore, it is possible to assume, that the state

---

<sup>18</sup> Alfred Schuetz, “On Multiple Realities,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no. 4 (1945): 541.

exists on a different plane of reality than regular physical objects and individuals.

Despite this, the state is often perceived as something resembling an individual, or an organism, who is born, lives, and dies, who has different organs and abilities, who has its own motives, and interests, and who is almost consciously struggling for survival. This way of thinking was popularized in IR theory by political realists, especially by structural realists like Kenneth Waltz. The “tenets” of political realism view the state as a basic unit of international relations. The states divide the territory into jurisdictions, making possible international relations. This view is widespread across most IR scholars nowadays, even outside realism and it has its own merits. Yet, this position has downsides: by thinking of the state as an individual we tend to ascribe to it not only motives and agency but moral values similar to that of an individual. Yet, even the realists themselves – namely Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz – mention that the state is not an empirical thing, but a mere abstraction.<sup>19</sup> As mentioned already, it changes the game. If the state does not truly exist, we do not have to fear its death, like we don’t truly fear the death of Sherlock Holmes. Still, the states seem to exist to some degree, so we have to clarify, how exactly they exist and why they cannot experience a true “existential threat.”

We’ve said before, that sovereignty is the most important part of an object we call state. The state can possibly lose almost all its territories and people, but if sovereignty remains, the state remains too. If sovereignty is restored, then the state comes from the dead, even if it has different territories and people. What is this sovereignty that matters so much? Though often mistaken for independence in common knowledge, sovereignty means the supreme authority. The modern discourse on sovereignty can be roughly traced to Jean Bodin’s “Six Books of the Commonwealth,” where sovereignty is defined as unrestricted power. This power should be truly unrestricted: no authority, even formal should be exercised over the sovereign, the power should not be conditional, divided, or temporary. Sovereign is not bound even by his own law or word.<sup>20</sup>

Such sovereignty is not an empirical fact but a political and/or legal claim on how things should be – it is a norm. Bodin himself mentions that a people – a free city, for example – may be sovereign as a

---

<sup>19</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Singapore: Mc Graw Hill, 1997), 117; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 175-176.

<sup>20</sup> Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

whole. No matter how exactly the free city is administrated, the source of the governmental institutions' power is assumed to be the supreme authority of the city as a whole. It creates a lot of potential problems because such sovereignty is a matter of interpretation: how do we know for sure, if a magistrate acted on behalf of a whole city and not out of his self-interest? The sovereignty of this kind is a norm, and an unclear norm it is. Not only there is an instance that claims to be a source of unrestricted power; but this instance is often not an empirical thing and its will is never fully known. This abstract notion of sovereignty is also present in Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other social contract theorists with the only notable exception being Baruch de Spinoza.

I find insightful the notion of sovereignty developed by Stephen Krasner. In his 1999 book on sovereignty, he stresses that sovereignty means different things within the same discourse. It is a “multi-faceted concept” that describes facts and norms that are related but are not tied hardly to each other. He himself chooses four aspects of sovereignty. Two of them are purely legal – international legal recognition and Westphalian sovereignty, understood as the legal; exclusion of foreign authority in domestic affairs. The other two are practical goals – full domestic control and full control of borders.<sup>21</sup> These parts of sovereignty do not covariate strongly. A state may have Westphalian sovereignty – legally excluding any outside actors – but be unable to control borders, or it may be effective at domestic control while being unrecognized in the international arena.

As we've noted above, sovereignty is a bunch of interrelated legal claims on how things should be – a system of norms. We've already defined state as the sovereign over a territory because trying to define a state via territory, population or specific institutions is impractical and almost futile. So, if we equate state to sovereignty, then we say that state is first and foremost a bunch of norms, and goals to achieve. On this level, the state can never be destroyed, for norms and values exist as a possibility that cannot be truly eliminated. What can be destroyed is the compliance of empirical facts to these norms. However, it is a matter of interpretation to a degree.

The state may be viewed as a project, belonging to an individual or a group. It won't be an exaggeration to assume that every citizen may have her own version of this project. Despite the claim that sovereignty is popular and the state realizes the general will, every single

---

<sup>21</sup> Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 4.

person may have her own unique understanding of this will, therefore different opinions on the degree of sovereignty. The same ruler may be a popular leader or a usurper, depending on the point of view. The examples are abundant, from the National Socialist German Workers' Party (NSDAP) and Hitler in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reich to Saddam and Al Asad in Iraq and Syria respectively.

Therefore, an existential threat to a state may mean only a failure to realize a certain project. It doesn't necessarily make it less of a threat, yet it opens up a possibility for a more detailed discussion. We cannot speak of the state as a simple multitude of men and territories; probably we cannot assume that this multitude may have a single state project. Therefore, when we speak of the state, we should always keep in mind its structure, we should always check what group is currently in power and imposes its project over others.

By doing this, we can have more substantial discussions about actual risks to the interests of different groups, instead of trying to instill panic by reference to "existential threats." By no means do I claim that sovereignty loss never has any downsides, yet I want to stress that it may have various effects on different groups of the population, which should be discussed and evaluated in detail instead of rushing to war in an apocalyptic urge.

#### IV. Conclusion

As I've tried to show, the state per se is not a thing that can be truly destroyed. For the state is not a thing, but a myriad of social interactions, interpreted via a political project. The discourse of "existential threat" as a cause for war is almost meaningless if we look closer at a state. If the state is a project, pursued by a political party, it may be endangered by unexpected things. Let's return to the nuclear weapon doctrines: some of them say that the use of nukes is allowed when the very existence of a state is at stake – if its sovereignty is endangered. Yet, the sovereignty may be "endangered" by the results of Parliamentary elections. If the ruling party considers remaining in power vital for its project, then losing elections is more dangerous than losing a chunk of the population to an epidemic or a local conflict. Yet, is it a cause for using nuclear weapons?

I have tried to show above that an "existential threat" to a state is not a valid just cause for war. The state cannot cease to exist because it does not really exist in the first place. The state is a set of norms and values, a project pursued by someone. Every group, maybe every individual, may have her own project of the state – therefore her own criteria of what amounts to this state's death. And the "death" here means

a hindrance to the realization of a particular project, not a catastrophe for everyone. It is common to assume that loss of sovereignty means grave losses to everyone in a state, yet it is not necessarily so. Sure, the political party in power will definitely lose something, yet some groups of people will make gains or move on to the realization of their project. Iraq, mentioned in the very beginning, is a nice example. While some would say that it lost its sovereignty after the USA invasion, Al Maliki and his Shia government would definitely disagree; for them, it was Saddam and his Ba'ath party who brutally usurped power in Iraq and deprived the people of sovereignty. For them, the losses from the decades of oppression seemed larger (at least at the moment) than the destruction caused by the process of regime change.

Therefore, I claim that the “existential threat to a state” is a manipulative trope, not a valid reason to justify a war. It creates a false sense of urgency by appealing to the natural fear of death that every individual has. The notion of “existential threat” should be dropped completely in favor of the discussion of groups of interest within a state. It will help to keep in mind that the state is not a single unit, but a complex system, where different groups compete to realize their political projects. Thorough evaluation of potential gains and losses of different groups will make military decisions less hasty, while more proportional and prudent.

### Acknowledgements

In this work are presented the results of the project “Ethical mechanisms in the lawmaking process” carried out within the framework of the Basic Research Program at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) in 2023.

### References

Bodin, Jean. *On Sovereignty*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Bush, George W. “President Bush Addresses the Nation.” The White House Office of the Press Secretary, March 19, 2003. <https://georgew-bush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030319-17.html>.

Congressional Research Service. “2022 Nuclear Posture Review.” Congressional Research Service, 2022. <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1193838.pdf>.

Coppieters, Bruno, and Nick Fotion, eds. *Moral Constraints on War: Principles and Cases*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008.

Fazal, Tanisha M. "State Death in the International System." *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004): 311–344.

Krasner, Stephen D. *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999.

Kucherenko, Sergey A. "Existence of a State as a Value Problem in Political Realism." *Voprosy Filosofii* 7 (2021): 5-16.

Merriam-Webster. "State Definition and Meaning." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/state>.

Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Singapore: McGraw Hill, 1997.

Putin, Vladimir. "Executive Order of the President of Russia No. 355 of June 2, 2020 'On the Fundamentals of Russia's Nuclear Deterrence State Policy.'" June 2, 2020. <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202006020040>.

Schuetz, Alfred. "On Multiple Realities." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 5, no. 4 (1945): 533-576.

Steinhoff, Uwe. *The Ethics of War and the Force of Law: A Modern Just War Theory*. London: Routledge, 2021.

The General Assembly of the United Nations. "Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 16 September 2005 60/1. 2005 World Summit Outcome." Pub. L. No. A/RES/60/1, October 24, 2005. [https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A\\_RES\\_60\\_1.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/generalassembly/docs/globalcompact/A_RES_60_1.pdf).

United Nations. "Article 2 (4)." In *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. San Francisco, CA: 1945.

United Nations. "Article 51." In *Charter of the United Nations and Statute of the International Court of Justice*. San Francisco, CA: 1945.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Man, the State and War: A Theoretical Analysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979.