JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

https://e-journal.uum.edu.my/index.php/jis

RESHAPING THE WORLD, RETHINKING ACTORS:
THE ROLE OF SUB-STATE ACTORS IN FOREIGN RELATIONS

Inass Abdulsada Ali

University of Baghdad, College of Political Science,
Department of International Studies Baghdad, Iraq

inass3a@copolicy.uobaghdad.edu.iq

ABSTRACT

International relations scholars have increasingly debated the evolving landscape of actors that challenge the traditional state-centric world order. A key element of this transformation is the rise of sub-state actors, which engages in alternative diplomacy parallel to the state, transcending traditional state-centric frameworks. This paper explores the significant shifts in international actorness over the late 20th century, focusing on the emergence and implications of sub-state diplomacy, or "paradiplomacy." First, the study introduces sub-state actors and their role in challenging the dominant state-centric discourse. It then examines the dynamic evolution of paradiplomacy, highlighting how sub-states have expanded their global engagement, the opportunities this presents, and the potential threats it poses. Through a multi-scalar analysis, the paper critically assesses paradiplomacy's impact on long-held beliefs about regions, states, actors, and the international political system. Furthermore, the study shows how states can leverage their sub-national entities to deal with problems that threaten their sovereignty and global standing. The findings suggest that both the state and sub-state actors can engage in ambitious international activities, fostering greater global cooperation within the complexities of modern governance and competition.

Keywords: Decentralization, sub-national government, power-sharing, paradiplomacy, international relations.

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, foreign relations have undergone a noticeable shift in terms of the actors involved. Conventional diplomatic activities, historically led by central governments and centered on "high politics" such as trade and security, are now complemented by emerging forms of inter-state communication. One significant development in this evolution is the increasing engagement of sub-state authorities, including regional and local governments, in international affairs. This phenomenon is widely referred to in academic literature as "paradiplomacy."

The literature on paradiplomacy has largely concentrated on defining the concept, establishing its boundaries as an academic field, and analyzing the international actions of sub-national governments. Some studies have investigated whether paradiplomatic activities should be fostered or regulated in terms of their effectiveness in advancing both state and regional interests. The most critical analyses have explored the extent to which regional paradiplomacy challenges the conventional state monopoly over international relations.

The article intends to address a fundamental question: how does the rise of sub-state actors in international affairs challenge the state-centric world order? To explore this issue, the paper is structured into three main sections. The first section explores the conditions that enable sub-state entities to act on the global arena, positioning them as emerging diplomatic actors. The second section traces the development of paradiplomacy, highlighting the diverse methods used to investigate regional diplomacy and identifying two key research trends: (a) the expansion of empirical studies and (b) the growing focus on agency-centric perspectives of regional diplomatic practices. The final section discusses the implications of paradiplomacy, weighing the challenges it poses to state sovereignty against the opportunities it creates.

SUB-STATE ACTORS AND GLOBAL ACTORNESS

The role of actors in world politics and international relations is a fundamental issue, as interactions, relationships, and communications shape connections between communities and nations across borders. Different international relations theories offer competing explanations of what constitutes an actor, particularly with realism and liberalism being the most prominent perspectives.

Realism asserts that the state is the central and sovereign actor in international affairs. Realists regard the state as a rational, unitary entity that operates in predictable ways. According to Wolfers (1962, p. 24), "States entirely grasp the space in international politics, each having authority over the land, people, and resources inside its boundaries."

In contrast, globalization has strengthened liberal pluralist ideas, particularly interdependence, which emphasizes the diversity of participants in international politics and their role in driving global political exchanges—especially in the economic sphere. Consequently, the nation-state no longer has sole authority over political decisions. Emerging actors now challenge the state's control over its functions, legitimacy, and allegiance, thereby weakening its centralization and uniqueness. These new players have become critical forces in shaping a country's foreign policy (Radhi & Hashem, 2016).

Singer (1961) argued in the early 1960s that the institution's inability to execute its tasks effectively would lead to its change or collapse, ultimately contributing to the decline—or even the eventual demise—of the progressive nation-state as a significant player in the international political system. He further noted that the international system continuously signals impending change, with one of the most significant indicators being the potential transformation of existing institutional structures or new organizations may emerge to take their place. Given the current reality of regional entities with distinct national identities, cultures, and geographies that challenge conventional state diplomacy, the status quo—state domination of global affairs—is coming to an end (Lecours & Moreno 2006).

The constructivist perspective takes a more moderate stance. While it adopts a pluralistic view of actors involved in international relations, it still designates the state as the primary unit of analysis in international relations. However, it also acknowledges the state's reliance on its broader social and cultural context by characterizing it as an "agent." Constructivist scholars argue that despite the existing institutional divisions across the globe, the state maintains its distinct and influential role in global politics.

For the state, acquiring and maintaining power remains the state's ultimate objective. Consequently, both states and other actors pursue specific strategies to obtain, sustain, and demonstrate "the modus operandi" of political achievement. In this context, regions perceive their efforts to expand their influence, power, and autonomy as a natural right, striving to establish themselves as legitimate actors capable of engaging and interacting within the international community (Jackson et al., 2019).

The increasing diversity of actors in international relations has sparked debates regarding who qualifies as an actor, the roles it can play, and the hierarchy among actors. Evans and Newnham (1990, p. 6) describe an actor as "any entity that plays a definable role in international relations." This definition assigns a generic, inclusive character to the term "actor" while also specifying its functional role. Young (1972, p. 140) provides a more precise definition, identifying the actor as "any organized entity consisting, at least indirectly, of humans, that is not submissive to any other player in the world system on ineffective terms and involves in power interactions with other actors."

Kaplan (1957) previously defined an international actor as a proactive participant—either a collective entity or an individual—within the field of international relations, possessing two key characteristics:

a) The ability to make decisions and carry out plans independently, based on its understanding of its own goals.
b) Recognition by other actors in decision-making and acknowledgment of the international system's significant and ongoing influence.

Young's concept aligns with the first characteristic, emphasizing that an actor must have complete control over its goals and interests, which requires adequate resources and the ability to mobilize support. The second characteristic highlights active engagement in power dynamics and effective participation in international affairs.

Comprehending the various roles played by different actors on the international stage is essential for understanding the definition of an actor and recognizing its features (Russett et al., 2006). Debates in international relations often revolve around determining the most significant actor in shaping power structures and identifying which entity holds the most authority and influence. From a realistic

perspective, actors in the field of international relations are structured hierarchically, while liberalism adopts a more polyarchic framework.

Sub-state actors express distinct identities within states, functioning as social communities seeking to assert themselves within the state-centric international order. When these communities influence international relations, exercise autonomy in decision-making, and receive recognition from states and governments, they can be considered international players. Sub-states entities such as regions, share several characteristics with states—such as sovereignty, territory, population, and recognition—blurring the distinction between the two (Kaplan, 1957). Some scholars argue that regions are increasingly overshadowing nation-states in significance as they redefine their roles within a deeply interconnected global economy (Hocking, 1999).

Undoubtedly, the structure of the state is undergoing significant changes and faces the risk of collapsing due to conflicting requirements. This instability endangers not only the states involved but also their neighboring countries, and occasionally, the global order. However, effective strategies exist to facilitate adjustments and adaptations.

The world has been evolving for decades, shaping new realities that redefine international dynamics. Globalization has revived sub-national identities, making states more vulnerable and challenging the traditional concept of Westphalian sovereignty. Faced with shifting power balances, and changing patterns of interaction, states have limited options but to retreat or adopt a more restricted role in the international system. To navigate these challenges, states are increasingly granting sub-state actors greater initiative, recognizing them as sub-Westphalian entities capable of acting on behalf of the central sovereign. In this way, states leverage sub-state entities to address globalization-related issues that could otherwise weaken its monopoly on power and lead to instability.

Sub-state diplomacy not only enhances the international representation of sub-state entities but also serves as a lens for analyzing contemporary international relations. According to traditional foreign policy, the rise of sub-state identities threatens the dominant structure of international relations, which has long been based on sovereign, independent states that reject any dilution of their authority or superiority (Wolff, 2007).

The extent to which sub-state entities influence international affairs largely depends on the political authority that empower them. These entities strive for recognition and authority both domestically and globally. As Criekemans (2008, p. 4) notes, "…the boundaries between diplomacy generated by states and paradiplomacy, generated with legislative powers, are visibly watering down," highlighting the increasing role of sub-state diplomacy in the global arena.

THE RISE OF PARADIPLOMACY AS A GLOBAL ACTIVITY
OF SUB-STATE GOVERNMENTS

The complexity of the global environment in which states operate has increased significantly since the late twentieth century. This shift is attributed to globalization, regionalization, and advancements in information technology, all of which have posed significant challenges to traditional sovereign powers. These advancements have not only facilitated the emergence of previously unrecognized entities but also enabled them to challenge the state's authority as the principal actor in international affairs.

Regionalization, both as an ideology and a political movement, seeks to politicize territorial challenges to realize, protect, or advance a region's interests. Alongside decentralization, is responsible for power redistribution across borders and strengthening a broader society's subnational capacity and function. Both have indirectly facilitated the expansion of "federalization processes" within unitary states (Zahrin & Mohamed, 2022, pp. 125, 131).

As a result, sub-state governments have become increasingly engaged in international affairs. Their participation takes various forms, through the establishment of permanent or ad hoc interactions with foreign public or private entities. This engagement, aimed at promoting socioeconomic and cultural issues, or addressing other foreign dimensions within their constitutional mandates, is known as paradiplomacy (Cornago, 1999, p. 40).

It is important to note that most studies on paradiplomacy dimensions have been conducted in Europe and America, with relatively few focusing on countries neighboring Asia (Wahid et al., 2023, p. 204). The primary objective of scholarly discussions regarding paradiplomacy is to establish a precise definition of the concept and determine its scope as a distinct academic field. Research in this area primarily focuses on foreign activities of regional administrations, particularly within federal and quasi-federal states. Researchers explore many aspects of regional paradiplomacy, including its challenge to the traditional state's control over international relations, the influence of constitutional and political perspectives on its effectiveness or limitations, and its role in promoting regional economic and political interests. Understanding these dimensions is crucial for grasping the broader role of paradiplomacy in international relations.

The concept of paradiplomacy was first introduced into social science literature in the early 1960s by Rohan Butler, who defined it as "the highest level of personal and parallel diplomacy, complementing or competing with the regular foreign policy of the minister, premier, president, dictator, or monarch" (Butler, 1961, p. 13).

While paradiplomacy is not new; the emergence of modern states with federal structures marked the first step in international representation of regional or local administration (Kincaid, 1999). Efforts to increase exports and attract foreign investment played a crucial role in its development which led to the revival of global competencies in the United States (U.S.). In the late 1950s, as southern U.S. states grappled with economic recession and federal pressure to abolish racial segregation and modernize their governments, they sought international opportunities. During the stagflation of the 1960s and 1970s, urban-industrial states in the north also experienced significant declines in manufacturing employment. With global economic competition intensifying, states beyond the southern region also began exploring international opportunities to mitigate economic challenges (Kincaid, 1984).

During the 1960s and 1970s, paradiplomacy emerged as a marginal phenomenon in North American federated states and Europe. Over time, it gained significant traction in various regions worldwide, extending beyond federal states to include unitary states with decentralized or devolved governance structures, such as France, Great Britain, and Spain. Furthermore, paradiplomacy has increasingly become more prevalent at the local level, particularly in major metropolitan areas such as London, New York, Paris, and Shanghai (Paquin, 2020).

In 1984, Duchacek introduced the term "micro-diplomacy" to describe this growing phenomenon:

> "Territorial components of federal and decentralized unitary systems have increasingly asserted their international competence. They have done so in matters concerning foreign investment, trade promotion, environmental and energy issues, cultural exchanges, human and labor rights, and tourism. A shorthand term, micro-diplomacy, will be used here to describe the concept and practice of such international ramifications of autonomous territorial politics."
> (Duchacek, 1984, p. 5)

Other researchers have referred to these predominantly economic, social, and cultural interactions as "low politics," distinguishing them from "high politics," which conventionally focuses on diplomacy and national security (Duchacek, 1984).

Panayotis Soldatos (1990, p. 34) later credited himself with coining the term "paradiplomacy" defining it as "a direct continuation, and to varying degrees, from sub-state government, foreign activities". Duchacek (1990, p. 32) also adopted the concept, recognizing it as distinct from his earlier idea of micro-diplomacy. From his perspective, the inclusion of the prefix "para" in the term "diplomacy" effectively conveys the concept of sub-state international policies. These policies have the potential to align with, coordinate with, or even integrate into the central government's foreign policy. However, it is important to note that these policies can also diverge from or even conflict with the overarching global strategies and political agenda of the state.

The concept of paradiplomacy emerged to emphasize the differentiation between central and sub-national governments, often framing their relationship as one of conflict. However, this perspective is somewhat misleading. A more accurate approach would be to place sub-national or non-central governments within their broader "diplomatic complex environment." Hocking (1993) argues that diplomacy should be seen as a distinct process involving actors within the same state. Rather, it should be comprehended as a system that encompasses actors from diverse levels of government and departments. These actors evolve in response to several factors, including specific issues, interests, and their capacity to navigate a complex political landscape. Hocking critiques the traditional concept of paradiplomacy based on the "imperatives of cooperation" which emphasize the need for collaboration between central governments and federated states. Hence, rather than viewing paradiplomacy as a separate phenomenon, it may be more appropriate to designate it as "catalytic diplomacy" or "multi-level diplomacy."

Paradiplomacy functions as a political authority that reflects the international engagement of constitutionally authorized sub-national units (Cornago, 2000). Keating (2000) supports this perspective, noting that one of the significant complexities of paradiplomacy from the viewpoint of international relations is its lack of sovereign status—whether juridical or empirical. This reinforces the traditional understanding of the international system, in which sovereignty remains a defining characteristic exclusive to nation-states. Lecours (2002) also emphasizes this limitation, arguing that paradiplomacy is inherently constrained by its lack of formal legal capacity.

The practice of paradiplomacy necessitates adherence to legal protocols and exhibits distinctive characteristics that define its role in international representation. Hence, this comprehension fosters a deeper understanding of regional diplomacy and encourages the classification of paradiplomacy within the broader, multifaceted framework of global affairs.

Traditional diplomacy has not understood paradiplomacy as a critique. Due to its orthodox and cautious nature, state-centric diplomacy remains largely indifferent to paradiplomacy, considering it a secondary phenomenon rather than a competing force. As a result, paradiplomacy has struggled to gain recognition within the diplomatic sphere, reinforcing the need to reposition it in a globalized world (Cornago, 1999).

Globalization plays a pivotal role in shaping national sovereignty, particularly in the realms of foreign policy and diplomacy (Kuznetsov 2014). The increasing involvement of regional and sub-state actors in international affairs has led to the advancement of diplomacy, fostering greater political, economic, and cultural exchanges. Indisputably, paradiplomacy has evolved to become a subject of security and survival since it seeks to safeguard the national interests of the entities it represents. Regions with strong nationalist tendencies and active separatist movements are particularly inclined to leverage paradiplomatic efforts to protect their national interests (Lecours & Moreno, 2006).

Kaiser (2005) classified paradiplomacy into three distinct models based on its role within global governance. The first, Transborder Regional Paradiplomacy involves formal and informal interactions between neighboring regions across national borders. The second model, Transregional Paradiplomacy, refers to cooperation between sub-national entities and regions within other countries. The third model, Global Paradiplomacy, encompass interactions of a political nature with foreign central governments, international organizations, the private sector entities, and interest groups.

PARADIPLOMACY vis-à-vis STATE SOVEREIGNTY: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

The increasing international involvement of non-central governments presents both conceptual and practical challenges. From a conceptual point of view, traditional international relations studies have largely overlooked sub-national entities, not recognizing them as subjects of international relations (Wolff, 2007). However, examining the emergence of new international actors is crucial, as understanding the global landscape without considering their role is increasingly challenging (Kuznetsov, 2014).

Nearly forty years have elapsed since paradiplomacy first became a subject of study. Yet, the analysis of non-central governments' internationalization using comparative politics or international relations theories remains relatively limited. Research in this field has been predominantly conducted by researchers in federal countries or within specialized contexts, often without fully incorporating paradiplomacy into either study field (Lecours, 2002).

A major obstacle to advancing paradiplomacy research is the absence of a unified theoretical or methodological framework. Despite numerous scholarly contributions, the lack of consensus prevents researchers from conducting meaningful comparative research or formulating generalized hypotheses. Even in the United States—where governors have played an increasingly influential role in foreign policy over the past sixty years—academics still lack a robust theoretical framework for analyzing paradiplomacy (McMillan, 2008).

Despite the abundance of descriptive literature on paradiplomacy, there remains a notable lack of theoretical studies on the phenomenon. This gap may explain the reason behind the shortage of comprehensive answers regarding the nature and implications of paradiplomacy (Kuznetsov, 2014). Furthermore, the traditional definition of a state—based on territory, population, and sovereignty—does

not fully reflect contemporary political realities (Thürer, 2003). Acknowledging this, McMillan (2008) highlighted the theoretical gap in foreign relations and emphasized the importance of examining how non-central governments influence international politics. However, in recent years, the study of diplomacy has increasingly focused on the evolving nature of diplomacy, particularly the increasing role of sub-national governments in managing foreign affairs. This shift has been driven by changes taking place at both the state and global levels, as well as political and economic developments within regions themselves.

The growing presence of non-central governments in international affairs raises fundamental theoretical questions about their role and the challenges they pose to the traditional state system, which has been the foundation of global politics since the Treaty of Westphalia. Some scholars attribute this shift to globalization, which has decreased the state's capacity to maintain full control of its territory, thereby prompting regions to engage internationally for economic, cultural, and political reasons (Keating, 1999).

One of the most important recent developments in this field is the study on how the diplomacy of sub-entities—through the decentralization of international relations—alters the traditional view of diplomacy as an exclusive domain of sovereign states (Cornago, 2010). Notably, traditional diplomatic studies have often overlooked the historical relationships between sub-national and local governments and external entities, whether national, sub-national, or local. However, these governments have historically played crucial roles in diplomatic representation and international communication.

From a practical side, the Westphalian system established a framework for rule that upholds the concepts of statehood and sovereignty, both of which remain central in political discourse. Since its inception, the system of sovereign states has played a crucial role in shaping world history, and its absence would significantly alter the course of global events. However, the emergence of additional actors, such as sub- state entities that engage in international interactions independent of the central government, presents a challenge to this system. In today's world, the dynamics of international relations appear to extend beyond state-to state interactions; rather, they are increasingly influenced by a diverse array of non-state entities, including those operating within and beyond the state territorial jurisdiction.

Traditionally, the management of foreign affairs has been the responsibility of the central government, under the constitution. This authority is considered superior to the sharing of powers, ensuring that the state presents a unified position in international relations. Therefore, the practice of foreign policy by sub- national governments undermines state authority in managing a coherent and consistent foreign policy (Aguirre, 1999). The constitutional structure plays a crucial role in defining the relationship between central and sub-national governments, shaping the mechanisms for consultation and coordination between central governments and independent entities on international issues (Wolff, 2007). This coordination is particularly significant when a state works to achieve its national interests without excessive ideological bias and prejudice (Radhi & Hashem, 2016).

Traditional theories of paradiplomacy emphasize that both external and internal factors constantly interact in shaping the international activities of sub-national entities. This complex interplay creates one of the main problems in understanding paradiplomacy because it involves both internal and external factors making it difficult to analyze within a single theoretical framework (Joenniemi & Sergunin, 2014).

The decentralization of power and the subsequent emergence of multiple levels of government have led to complex interactions between the internal and external domains, as well as between domestic and foreign policies, creating a dynamic network where various actors compete for influence. This overlap has revealed multiple dimensions of decentralized governments in global politics. First, sub-national governments can act as independent initiators or agents pursuing local or regional policy objectives on the international stage. Second, they can serve as channels through which other actors, especially NGOs, advocate for global issues—particularly environmental concerns—by using regional policies as a foundation to formulate broader global strategies. Furthermore, because their policies and actions can impact the interests of other international actors, sub-national governments may themselves become targets of international activity (Hocking, 1993).

The impact of sub-national governments' paradiplomacy on the state, its sovereignty, and its foreign affairs can be analyzed from two perspectives. The first is direct, in which sub-national governments actively manage their own foreign affairs. The second is indirect, where these governments influence national foreign policy through their international engagements. Both perspectives emphasize the importance of constitutional provisions in defining the distribution of powers and roles between central and sub-national governments as well as the realities that emerge from diplomatic practice. Finally, whether these relationships evolve into cooperation or competition can significantly shape domestic and foreign policy dynamics.

Rather than perceiving the rise of paradiplomatic activity as a challenge to state sovereignty, national governments should recognize it as a complementary force that enhances rather than diminishes state diplomacy. Embracing paradiplomacy as an integral component of governance can help mitigate long-standing tensions and prevent escalation of conflicts. Disregarding the needs and aspirations of sub-state entities could potentially intensify disputes. In fact, paradiplomacy can be effectively utilized as a strategic tool to manage conflict (Cornago, 2000).

Furthermore, engagement in the international arena does not imply that sub-national entities can practice their policies without regard to the constitutional frameworks to which they belong (Wolff, 2007). Decentralized entities that engage in international relations without state mediation are likely to face stiff resistance from national institutions (Lecours, 2002).

Given these dynamics, paradiplomacy must be redefined. First, regions with robust nationalist inclinations—such as Scotland, the Basque Country, Québec, and Catalonia—engage in paradiplomatic activities for economic and cultural benefits while also seeking international recognition for future independence declarations. Second, other regions focus solely on economic and cultural cooperation. The first category is often regarded by scholars as deviance in the international environment of inter-state relations (Lecours & Moreno, 2006). The presence of sub-national entities on the international stage has become an inherent aspect of global interconnectedness. Rather than being seen as either a blessing or a threat, it should be recognized as a natural consequence of evolving international engagement (Duchacek, 1984).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the era of globalization, the study of state centralization, the diversity of actors in global politics, and their influence on the structure of the international system has been approached through various methodological perspectives.

Some scholars interpret the disconnect between internal governance and external engagement as evidence of the state losing control over its bureaucratic functions, resulting in the rise of sub-state entities that participate in international exchanges independently of the state. Consequently, Slaughter (1997) argues that international relations are no longer determined solely by state actions and intergovernmental interactions; rather, a broader array of actors now shape global affairs. While some actors remain integrated within state structures, others remain outside it.

According to Rosenau (1990), the modern world is best understood through the lens of post-international relations, characterized by a division between governments, multinational entities, and identity-based interest groups. Later, in 1997, Rosenau further categorized international political relations into two coexisting but sometimes intersecting spheres: a state-centric world and a multi-centric world. His concept of complex interdependence highlights how the growing number and diversity of actors and the increasing complexity of their interactions, are transforming the global system.

The traditional international structure of sovereign nation-states is undergoing fragmentation, disrupted by modern, pre-modern, and postmodern divides. Friedrichs (2004) describes this transition as a shift towards a "new medievalism," a system marked by overlapping authorities and competing allegiances. In this evolving landscape, traditional notions of political order based on ethnicity, culture, and religion are reemerging, particularly in the peripheral regions and the Western world.

How does this evolving scenario influence the state-centric structure of the international system, including its mechanisms, values, principles, and rules governing interactions? Although the diversity of non-state actors has challenged the traditional sovereign nation-state system, we should not consider sub-state actors as a threat or challenge until they directly impact intergovernmental relations.

The nation-state remains the only authority capable of conferring popular legitimacy on international collective decisions. Unlike nation-states, non-state actors cannot claim to speak for the people in a universally recognized manner. The nation-state system continues to regulate the majority of legitimate international actions, ensuring political stability, social order, and coordinated collective efforts both within and beyond national borders (Friedrichs, 2004).

With the increasing presence of non-state actors and assume increasing responsibilities in global affairs, states must adjust to these shifting dynamics while maintaining their sovereignty. In this context, it is imperative to reassess the state's role to comprehend how states can respond effectively to the imperative of restructuring to drive progress and enhance performance levels within the evolving world order.

Given these debates, the question arises: who competes with the state for actorness, and where does this competition occur? Addressing this requires applying specific actorness criteria. As Hocking (1999) points out, these criteria extend beyond traditional state attributes such as sovereignty, territory, population, and recognition. They also include the ability to conduct an independent "foreign policy," which is a vital component of global engagement.

We can determine where the competition for actorness emerges among various actors by applying these criteria and linking them to different forms of sovereignty. All players contribute to the global political system and engage with foreign governments. The system (international policy order) is inherently pluralistic, recognizing that multiple types of players can influence political outcomes.

Unlike non-state, non-sovereign entities, sub-state actors operate within a framework permitted by the state, allowing them to execute certain sovereign functions. As a result, states adapt to non-state entities by delegating specific sovereign rights to internal actors. In doing so, sub-state actors, functioning as sub- sovereign entities meet Hocking's actorness criteria while with standard state characteristics.

With or without intent, all participants in the world order—whether state, non-state, or sub-state actors—contribute to shaping values, principles, and norms that govern conduct and interactions. The hierarchy of actors in the world order appears to be based on sovereignty, distinguishing between state, sub-state, and non-state entities.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced unprecedented challenges globally, extending beyond health-related issues to impact social, economic, political, and human rights domains. In response, nations implemented stringent measures such as lockdowns, curtailing the movement of individuals and goods across international boundaries (Ikhsan et al., 2024, p. 28–29). These disruptions posed a significant challenge to the structure of the international system while simultaneously strengthening the role of non-governmental actors, contributing to a more fragmented global landscape. However, some regimes leveraged the health crisis to tighten their external security controls, seeking to reshape the international system to their advantage (Almahdawy & Salih, 2022).

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the plurality of actors in international relations, with a particular focus on sub-state actors. Globalization has intensified both external pressures and internal pressures on states—external pressure arising from growing interdependence and internal pressure emerging from ethnic, sectarian, and racial disparities. To mitigate these problems, states often transition from a centralized system to a decentralized one, enabling regions to feel valued and participate in national development.

Despite these pressures, the state remains the key player in international relations because it is the only entity with the authority to control, direct, and balance interactions. Its ability to adapt to new developments and restructure itself enables it to reclaim lost responsibilities and maintain its strength. Strong states can navigate geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges while fostering constructive engagement with other actors, whether state, non-state, or sub-state.

States, as rational actors, seek to optimize benefits and minimize costs in achieving their objectives. The increasing diversity of actors in international relations has made it more practical for states to allow its sub- national units to interact with non-state entities. This approach introduces a new framework for managing sovereign authority—while the state retains its ultimate sovereignty, it strategically delegates certain responsibilities to internal entities while maintaining primary sovereignty control.

As international relations and the global system evolve, producing multiple sovereignties, states must continuously reorganize their functions and adjust their sovereignty to accommodate these changes. While sovereignty remains a fundamental principle, its distribution is neither uniform or absolute. The state must reconfigure its role and sovereignty framework in response to the growing diversity of actors, ensuring its relevance and adaptability in an increasingly complex world order.

As a cooperative force in international relations, sub-state actors play a crucial external political role in achieving the state's economic and political goals. They contribute to maintaining an optimal balance between control and strategic direction. However, the state faces challenges in maintaining its traditional Westphalian role amidst an increasingly complex international governance order, characterized by overlapping powers and conflicting loyalties.

The state's regional map is unaffected by the evolving role of sub-state actors. Sovereignty over its regional map persists, regardless of functional changes. Any shift in governance functions reflects the state's adaptation of its authority within established borders rather than a loss of control. By delegating specific responsibilities to sub-state entities, the state reinforces its ability to navigate international complexities while safeguarding its core sovereignty. While the functions of territory and boundaries may change, its fundamental significance remains unchanged. Neither globalization nor transnationalization diminishes its role in shaping human communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the state's capacity to manage crises effectively while preserving its structural integrity. Although the pandemic reshaped governance functions, it did not diminish state authority. Historical precedent suggests that epidemics during the early modern period contributed to the expansion of political authority. Public health measures implemented during both early modern and modern times played a pivotal role in shaping public acceptance of state sovereignty and defining the boundaries of people's expectations from political authority. Consequently, these measures reinforced and extended the state's authority over its population.

In many ways, this situation exemplifies how the state can leverage overlapping power structures and divided loyalties to maintain its influence over non-state entities. Within the global framework, the state permits partnerships to contribute to establishing principles and norms of conduct while maintaining its supremacy over the international system when such partnerships are absent.

The Westphalian system laid the foundation for a rule system that upholds the principles of state sovereignty, which remain central to political discourse. Consequently, there is no justification for a political order that excludes the sovereign state system. Spatial dynamics and processes continue to shape political influence, with geopolitical studies primarily concentrating on national and transnational interactions.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

REFERENCES

Aguirre, I. (1999). Making sense of paradiplomacy? An intertextual enquiry about a concept in search of a definition. *Regional and Federal Studies, 9*(1), 185-208.

Almahdawy, M. A., & Salih, Y. M. (2022). Transformation in international polar system: Study of the future of the nonpolar system. *Political Science Journal*, *63*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.30907/jcopolicy.vi63.586

Butler, R. (1961). Paradiplomacy. In A. O. Sarkissian (Ed), Studies in diplomatic history and historiography (pp. 12-25). Longman.

Cornago, N. (1999). Diplomacy and paradiplomacy in the redefinition of international security: Dimensions of conflict and co-operation. *Regional and Federal Studies*, *9*(1), 40-57.

Cornago, N. (2000). Exploring the global dimensions of paradiplomacy functional and normative dynamics in the global spreading of subnational involvement in international affairs. Workshop on Constituent Units in International Affairs, Hanover, Germany.

Cornago, N. (2010). On the normalization of sub-state diplomacy. *The Hague Journal of International Diplomacy*, *5*(1-2), 11-36.

Criekemans, D. (2008). Are the boundaries between paradiplomacy and diplomacy watering down? University of Antwerp and Flemish Centre for International Policy.

Duchacek, I. D. (1984). The international dimension of subnational self-government. *The Journal of Federalism, 14*(4), 5-31.

Duchacek, I. D. (1990). Perforated sovereignties: Towards a typology of new actors in international relations. In *H. J. Michelmann & P. Soldatos (Eds.), Federalism and international relations: The role of subnational units* (pp. 1–33). Clarendon Press.

Evans, G., & Newnham, J. (1990). The dictionary of world politics. Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Friedrichs, J. (2004). The meaning of new medievalism: An exercise in theoretical reconstruction. In *J. Friedrichs (Ed.), European approaches to international relations theory: A house with many mansions* (pp. 127-145). Routledge.

Hocking, B. (1993). Localizing foreign policy: Non-central governments and multilayered diplomacy. Palgrave Macmillan.

Hocking, B. (1999). Patrolling the 'frontier': Globalization, localization and the 'actorness' of non-central governments. *Regional & Federal Studies, 9*(1), 17-39.

Ikhsan, M. F., Shukri, S., Mohd Pero, S. D., Nasution, M. A., & Norman, M. A. R. (2024). COVID-19 and capitalist structure: Evaluating of working-class inequality and policy effectiveness in Southeast Asia. *Journal of International Studies, 20*(2), 27-63. https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2024.20.2.2

Jackson, R, Sørensen, G., & Møller, J. (2019). Introduction to international relations theory (7th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Joenniemi, P., & Sergunin, A. (2014). Paradiplomacy as a capacity-building strategy. *Problems of Post-Communism, 61*(6), 18-33.

Kaiser, R. (2005). Sub-state governments in international arenas: Paradiplomacy and multi-level governance in Europe and North America. In *G. Lachapelle & S. Paquin (Eds.), Mastering globalization: New sub-states' governance and strategies* (pp. 90-103). Routledge.

Kaplan, M. A. (1957). System and process in international politics. John Wiley and Sons.

Keating, M. (1999). Regions and international affairs: Motives, opportunities and strategies. *Regional and Federal Studies, 9*(1), 1–16.

Keating, M. (2000). Paradiplomacy and regional networking. Forum of Federations: An International Federalism. http://www.forumfed.org/libdocs/ForRelCU01/924-FRCU0105-eu- keating.pdf

Kincaid, J. (1984). The american governors in international affairs. *The Journal of Federalism, 14*(4), 95-114.

Kincaid, J. (1999). The international competence of US states and their local governments. In F. Aldecoa & M. Keating (Eds.), Paradiplomacy in action. The foreign relations of subnational governments (pp. 111- 133). Frank Cass Publishers.

Kuznetsov, A. (2014). Theory and practice of paradiplomacy: Subnational governments in international affairs. Routledge.

Lecours, A. (2002). Paradiplomacy: Reflections on the foreign policy and international relations of regions. *International Negotiation, 7*, 91-114.

Lecours, A., & Moreno, L. (2006). Paradiplomacy and stateless nations: A reference to the basque country. *Working Paper* (01-06). Concordia University and Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). https://digital.csic.es/bitstream/10261/1472/1/paradiplomacy_statelesspdf

McMillan, S. L. (2008). Subnational foreign policy actors: How and why governors participate in U.S. foreign policy. *Foreign Policy Analysis, 4*(3), 227-253.

Paquin, S. (2020). Paradiplomacy. In T. Balzacq, F. Charillon & F. Ramel (Eds.), Global diplomacy: An introduction to theory and practice (pp. 49-61). Palgrave Macmillan.

Radhi, S. J., & Hashem, N. J. (2016). Polarity and stability in the international system. *Political Science Journal, 52*, 47-64.

Rosenau, J. (1990). Turbulence in world politics. Princeton University Press.

Rosenau, J. (1997). Along the domestic-foreign frontier: Exploring governance in a turbulent world. Cambridge University Press.

Russett, B. Starr, H., & Kinsella, D. (2006). World politics: The menu for choice, Thomson Wadsworth.

Singer, J. D. (1961). The level of analysis in IR. *World Politics, 14*(1), 77-92.

Slaughter, A-M. (1997), The real new world order. *Foreign Affairs, 76*(5), 183-197. https://doi.org/10.2307/20048208

Soldatos, P. (1990). An explanatory framework for the study of federated states as foreign-policy actors. In H. J. Michelmann & P. Soldatos (Eds.), Federalism and international relations: The role of subnational units (pp. 34–38). Clarendon Press.

Thürer, D. (2003). Federalism and foreign relations. In R. J. Blindenbacher & A. Koller (Eds.), Federalism in a changing world: Learning from each other (pp. 26-32). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Wahid, R., Shukri, S., & Ahmad, M. Z. (2023). A bibliometric analysis on trends, directions and major players of international relations studies. *Journal of International Studies, 19*(1), 201-230. https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2023.19.1.8

Wolfers, A. (1962). Discord and collaboration: Essays on international politics. The John Hopkins University Press.

Wolff, S. (2007). Paradiplomacy: scope, opportunities and challenges. *The Bologna Center Journal of International Affairs, 10*(Spring), 141-150.

Young, O. R. (1972). The actors in world politics. In J. N. Rosenau & M. A. East (Eds.), *The analysis of international politics* (pp. 125-144). The Free Press.

Zahrin, Z., & Mohamed, A. M. (2022). Revising the unitary vs. federation classification. *Journal of International Studies, 18*, 125-157. https://doi.org/10.32890/jis2022.18.5