What is a strong state? When is a state weak? Many political scientists use the terms ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ states—sometimes precisely but more often with only a hazy sense of what they mean. *Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies* (forthcoming) advances our understanding of the concepts of weak and strong states within a state-in-society approach. The authors build in particular on the theoretical ideas of Joel Migdal, especially *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (1988) and *State Power and Social Forces: Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (1994, with Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue). The empirical chapters focus on Southeast Asia and Melanesia, areas that contain a rich variety of states and societies, from the apparently strong states of Singapore, Indonesia, and Vietnam to the seemingly weak states of the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Solomon Islands. This is ideal ground for studying the inherent strengths and weaknesses of states as well as the analytical advantages and disadvantages of using the concepts of strong and weak states.

The authors in *Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies* do not assume that the concepts of weak and strong states are necessarily useful labels or straightforward terms. Instead, they vigorously challenge these concepts, pointing out limitations, and suggesting parameters for their use. Each author has viewed states as part of their societies, although specific definitions—such as capacity, autonomy, legitimacy, effectiveness, weak, and strong—are left up to individual authors. Generally the authors define states in Weberian terms, as a multifaceted organisation with a legitimate monopoly over the use of violence. This organisation consists of an executive, legislature, bureaucracy, courts, police, armed forces, and when applicable, schools and public companies. States attempt to develop and impose uniform rules and norms. Societies are the arenas in which states and non-state organisations contest these rules and norms. Embedding the analysis in this perspective simultaneously adds a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of the concepts of weak and strong states as well as state-in-society approaches.

As in other state-in-society analyses, states are disaggregated and it is assumed that internal tensions and competition among state sections significantly shape state policies, actions, and capacity. In this view, states generally aim to preserve legitimacy and order, in part by raising
revenue, resisting internal and external threats, coordinating state agencies, and controlling or responding to societal pressures. They are not, however, monolithic organisations: state output is a result of struggles among state sections and with relevant non-state organisations. For this reason, Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies is not primarily concerned with the extent of state autonomy, but instead focuses on how states are woven into their society. States and societies are seen to be in constant flux, each altered continually by the structure and actions of the other.

Definitions of state strength vary somewhat, although most writers accept that it involves, at least in part, the willingness and ability of a state to maintain social control, ensure societal compliance with official laws, act decisively, make effective policies, preserve stability and cohesion, encourage societal participation in state institutions, provide basic services, manage and control the national economy, and retain legitimacy. Strength or weakness is seen as arising from how all levels of the state interact with various social groups. The particular features of a country—such as its political system, military and police, bureaucracy, pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories, economic structure, cultural traditions, and relative position in the regional and international systems—shape the extent of state control over social groups and the extent that social forces reshape, reinforce, or undermine state strength. Ties to social forces can be a key source of state strength; but they can also be a decisive source of weakness. In this view state strength is much more than just organisational cohesion, coordination, centralisation, or financial capacity—although of course all of these may help maintain a state’s ability to impose rules and norms.

Staying within the boundaries of a state-in-society approach, while still encouraging a range of questions and specific definitions, allows four related themes to emerge:

- states often labelled as weak can be remarkably resilient, allowing them to stay intact despite poor services, internal disorder and financial mismanagement
- even states that analysts consider some of the world’s strongest are not immutably strong, and in some areas and sectors they can be remarkably weak
- a dynamic view of state strength and weakness is essential—one that accepts the multiple dimensions of strength and weakness, the importance of perspective, and continual change over time
- a state-in-society approach provides a more refined understanding of state strengths and weaknesses than treating states and societies as dichotomous and undifferentiated, or as mere products of the dominant social group.

Together these themes provide a useful guide for further research on weak and strong states—one that hopefully will help avoid some of the more simplistic analyses and conclusions surrounding many previous discussions.

Weak states and hidden strengths

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, an increasing number of analysts started to paint a picture of vulnerable and frail states—of states on the verge of disintegrating, imploding, or breaking apart. The end of the Soviet Union seemed to confirm these predictions. Yet most states have survived and a world of Lebanons has not occurred. As time passes, it has become increasingly clear that even the weakest states contain areas of strength—strengths that allow
them to survive despite inefficient and ineffective services, and internal disorder and random violence. Within certain societal, regional, and international contexts, some of the world’s weakest administrative states—ones that often have weak administrative capacity, poor services, ineffective financial managers and tax collectors, and inefficient and wasteful officials—can be surprisingly resilient.

International factors, and organisational, allocational, and coercive characteristics partly explain the resilience and cohesion of states. Global institutions, international law, and the international society of states legitimise and reinforce state agencies and structures. The globalisation of capital, international financial organisations, and bilateral and multilateral aid provide crucial funds for many weak administrative states. For example, aid accounts for over 15 per cent of GDP in Papua New Guinea, over 20 per cent in Solomon Islands, and over 30 per cent in Vanuatu (Larmour: Chapter 5). Some states are also held together in part by state members effectively allocating goods and services to support allies and appeal to the rational self-interest of opponents. These states may be inefficient and wasteful; but this inefficiency is often crucial to maintain the loyalty of key societal groups. The stability of some states is also partly explained by the tendency of people to maximise gains and minimise risks. And states with coercive arms at their core can, at least for awhile, prevent their own collapse (Migdal: Chapter 2).

But these factors alone cannot explain the resilience and cohesion of many states. An important, and often overlooked, factor is that most states now have unquestioned meaning in peoples’ lives. For most people, states are more than just a source of services and material goods. They are also more than just an effective nest for patron–client units. This shared meaning has developed through the creation of law, public rituals, and informal interaction that constitute and reconstitute public space. Together, these factors can naturalise the state. In such cases, most people simply cannot imagine life without the state, in the same way they cannot imagine life without oceans and mountains. Even when a state becomes inefficient and corrupt, people generally imagine new leaders rather than a new organisational structure (Migdal: Chapter 2).

Of course, not all states are naturalised; there are, for instance, diverse, fragmented, and relatively new states like Solomon Islands. These states are not, however, inevitably unstable and ready to collapse. Other factors can reinforce cohesion in these states, such as leaders responding to societal demands and pressures through personal networks that provide particularistic benefits. Less common, and somewhat paradoxical, weak administrative states may also remain intact in part because people expect little from the state and do not depend on the state for their survival. In Solomon Islands, for example, the subsistence and semi-subsistence economies support about 85 per cent of the population. Although to some extent people rely on the state for roads, schools, medical clinics, and administrative support, most people, especially outside of the capital of Honiara, can easily survive without the state. Moreover, because non-state organisations—such as the Church, landowners, and big men—provide many typical state services, and because the services that the state does provide have been poor for so long, people expect little from the state. Inadequate state services do not, therefore, undermine state legitimacy in Solomon Islands in the same way as in countries where societal members expect high-quality state services. Low levels of
education, a weak sense of collective national consciousness, and fragmented and relatively small identity groups (such as kin, tribes, language and islands groups) further dilute any internal desire or moves to overthrow the state (Kabutaulaka and Dauvergne 1997).

The apparent resilience of weak administrative states may also in part be a result of analysts exaggerating actual weaknesses, perhaps because they perceive state–society interactions as part of a process of disintegration rather than as a natural process of mutual transformation. In Papua New Guinea, for example, many commentators have predicted that the post-colonial state will collapse. There are certainly signs of internal disorder and violence, growing economic hardship and disparity, and social disintegration. The state is unable to handle new and serious social and legal problems like gang crime (known as raskolism). Internal conflicts, deteriorating government services, and the increasing disillusionment with politics are also worrying signs. Of equal, if not greater concern, is the increasing tendency of the state to resort to coercion to control violent social groups. On close examination, however, the cumulative impact of these problems is unlikely to disintegrate the state. Compared to the colonial state, some sections of the post-colonial state have certainly become weaker. Others, however, such as the Ombudsman Commission and the superior courts, remain effective and strong. Moreover, the state is strong in terms of its control over and distribution of material rewards. Bilateral and multilateral aid, international organisations, and the integration of the economy into international markets also bolster the state from internal forces of disintegration. The imminent collapse of the Papua New Guinea state is unlikely, in part because analysts have exaggerated the problem, in part because of the innate strengths of some sections of the state, in part because of the resilience of older forms of social order, and in part because of its integration into the international community. Rather than the total collapse of the state, as the state and society transform each other, a New Order appears to be emerging in post-colonial Papua New Guinea, a highly contested order that is increasingly blurring the lines between the state and social forces (Dinnen: Chapter 3).

Comparing Papua New Guinea with the Philippines further refines our understanding of how state–society relations shape state capabilities and cohesion. Both states are generally considered weak. However, while the society of Papua New Guinea is generally seen as weak, Philippine society is viewed as strong. In Papua New Guinea, labour and non-government organisations have little influence, and political parties do not have mass followings. Churches shape social life, but have little political clout. In the Philippines, powerful patron–client networks, a plethora of nongovernmental organisations, an influential Roman Catholic church, a politicised academic community, and a strong left create a vibrant and often confrontational civil society. Despite these societal differences, in both countries compliance with state laws is low while societal participation is relatively high. Yet legitimation appears to be higher in Papua New Guinea. This is partly explained by the frequent turnover of political leaders, the absence of deep social cleavages, and the social expectation that national politicians deliver material benefits to constituents in Papua New Guinea. At different points in time, many people in Papua New Guinea may be indifferent to the state—or perhaps see the state as largely irrelevant to their everyday lives. But generally most people feel the
state is essential for providing basic public goods and services. Societal reactions to the Philippine and Papua New Guinea states are consistent with recent constitutional reforms and proposals to limit state powers in the Philippines and enhance state powers in Papua New Guinea (May: Chapter 4).

Recognising the recent construction of states and societies, such as those in Melanesia, also provides a more balanced assessment of strength and weakness. Pre-colonial Melanesia was effectively stateless, ruled by big men, elders, and chiefs. Colonial powers constructed Melanesian states, imposing a centralised bureaucratic authority. These states then played a key role in constructing larger overarching societies. Prior to colonial states, people generally lived in small, often incoherent, groups defined more in terms of relationships than identities. Colonial states invented traditions and delineated boundaries. Melanesian states and societies, then, are both relatively new. Weak post-colonial states with tenuous control over post-colonial societies are in many ways a natural outgrowth of this history, and assessing these states against an ideal of a centralised state and a wider society could well be misleading (Larmour: Chapter 5).

**Strong states and innate weakness**

Just as weak states contain hidden strengths, seemingly strong states often contain striking weaknesses. One reason this occurs is that the source of state strength can also be a critical weakness—such as relying heavily on patronage to appease opponents and maintain support. The structure of the state, and the way that leaders have manipulated the state apparatus, can also contribute to underlying weaknesses. For example, over the last thirty years Indonesian President Soeharto centralised control and eliminated opposition, in part through repression, strict laws, political manoeuvres, and economic management, but also in part through distribution of patronage. This route to a strong state—at least in terms of dominating society—has left Indonesia exceptionally vulnerable. Corruption is out of control. Policy implementation is often dismal as state officials ignore rules in exchange for personal gain. Despite Soeharto’s resignation as president in May 1998, his children and allies remain at the centre of monopolistic conglomerates, bad bank loans, and extravagant financial schemes. The sharp depreciation of the rupiah and the ensuing economic upheaval in the second half of 1997 exposed the inherent limitations of the Indonesian economy. The source of much of Indonesia’s current economic woes is the vast patronage network that underpins the political system. Indonesia’s indecisive and evasive response to the economic crisis was a natural outgrowth of this patrimonial state. Only intense pressure from the International Monetary Fund and virtual economic collapse finally pushed the state to announce far-reaching reforms in early 1998 (Crouch: Chapter 6).

Indonesia’s weakness, however, extend beyond policy failures and mismanagement. The military, which is still at the core of the political order, is fragmented and could destabilise a transition to a new political regime. Recent riots and political demonstrations indicate that societal anger can quickly bubble to the surface. Soeharto’s resignation and President B.J. Habibie’s promise of political reforms had relieved some of the pressure by the end of May 1998. But societal anger could well grow stronger, especially if unemployment and prices continue to rise in the wake of the 1997–98 economic crash. It is even conceivable that societal pressures along with internal state struggles for control of
state patronage could crumble this apparently strong state, suddenly making it one of the weakest in the Southeast Asian region (Crouch: Chapter 6; Dauvergne: Chapter 8).

Systemic and structural weaknesses such as those in Indonesia, then, could cause otherwise strong states to shatter in a crisis. But a crisis is not necessary to reveal weaknesses in strong states. Most states tend to be much stronger in the capital city and urban areas than in the outer regions. State control over societal rules and norms is much higher in Jakarta, Manila, Port Moresby, and Honiara than in the far-flung islands of Kalimantan, Mindanao, Bougainville and Choiseul. State services—such as transportation, communication, medical, and administrative—also tend to be far superior in the capitals. And the sense that states are a natural part of the landscape is stronger in urban areas where far more people attend the theatre of the state.

Most states also tend to be particularly weak when challenging traditional practices. States often face considerable hurdles trying to eliminate, for example, swidden farming, traditional marriage practices, land tenure, or patron-client exchanges (again, especially when these occur far from the centres of power). States face even greater problems confronting powerful business interests, especially when they are linked to political, military, and bureaucratic leaders. These problems are compounded even further when state policies or actions undercut corporate profits. Business resistance can be so resolute that states which are generally strong can have little capacity to act in a particular area or sector. In Indonesia, for example, loggers and plywood processors, protected and aided by webs of state officials, routinely evade environmental and tax rules, and ignore efforts by sections of the state to reform the industry (Dauvergne: Chapter 8).

Misreading the sources of state strength can obscure innate weaknesses. For example, to some extent cultural features, such as deference to authority and respect for elders, can reinforce state strengths. Yet, in the case of Singapore, pointing to culture as a source of state strength masks important weaknesses. Singapore is undeniably one of the world’s strongest states. The state dominates social groups. There is relatively little government corruption, and compliance with legislation is strong. The standard of living and educational levels are high. It is safe, clean, and everything runs on time. The government has even managed a peaceful and effective leadership transition from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong. Part of this control arises from élite manipulation of culture.

Élites use Confucianism to facilitate obedience and conformity. Confucianism also helps to justify the rejection of norms that underpin modern democratic politics, especially the principles behind an active and relevant political opposition. Yet Confucianism has no more cultural resonance in Singapore than many Western democratic ideas. It is instead a tool of the People’s Action Party to maintain control in a system that only superficially resembles a democracy.

Arguing that Confucianism explains why people conform and obey is therefore misleading, especially since this conceals the mechanisms of political control over social forces. The focus on Confucianism also obscures a critical weakness of the Singapore state: low or manipulated societal participation in state institutions that undercuts state legitimacy. Mystical Confucian values do not explain the passive obedience of many Singaporeans; far more important is the great personal risks of opposition, risks that do not seem worth it in a state that provides so many material benefits (Lawson: Chapter 7).
Dimensions and continuums of strength and weakness

The preceding themes point to different dimensions, sources, and kinds of state strength and weakness. It is therefore critical to define the elements of ‘strength’ and ‘weakness’ carefully and recognise the difficulties of making broad generalisations. A state may be strong internationally and weak domestically. It may have strong coercive powers but low technical and organisational capacity. It may overwhelm non-state organisations under one regime (defined as the current power holders) yet collapse during the transition to a new one. It may have a high level of legitimacy or a strong moral claim yet have little control over dissidents or insurgents. Or it may dominate the formulation of policies yet have little ability to implement them. It is therefore essential to take a dynamic view of state strength and weakness—to accept that state strength varies across sectors, dimensions, and time, as social forces that oppose or support state goals change, as the determination of state leaders to impose state rules fluctuates, and as different sections of the state undermine official policies (Dinnen: Chapter 3; Dauvergne: Chapter 8; Kerkvliet: Chapter 9).

It is also important to recognise the importance of perspective. A state action that one segment of society considers strong (perhaps urban elite), another segment (perhaps rural villagers) could well see as a sign of weakness. A state action may therefore simultaneously increase legitimacy in some segments of society and decrease it in others, which in turn simultaneously increases state strength in some areas and decreases it in others. A state action or inaction that some segments of society perceive as a sign of weakness may also increase overall legitimacy, and therefore strength, of the state (Kerkvliet: Chapter 9).

To maintain a dynamic view, it is best to conceive of strength and weakness in terms of a process. A state retreat or concession at a particular point in time may not demonstrate weakness. It could even be a sign of strength if it is part of a process that eventually leads to the state attaining its objective. Conceiving of states in this way also accepts that a strength at one point in time may become a weakness later (or vice versa). No state is all strong or weak. Sometimes their actions fall on the strong end of a continuum, sometimes on the weak end, although most states tend to cluster on one end of the continuum. Conceiving of states in this way also avoids the pitfall of defining states like Vietnam, Singapore, and Indonesia as strong, or the Philippines, Solomon Islands, and Papua New Guinea as weak without careful qualifiers. It also helps one understand and navigate the contradictory evidence that surround states like Vietnam, which some analysts label as strong while others label it as weak (Kerkvliet: Chapter 9).

Shifts along strong–weak continuums tend to occur in response to the extent of state determination (comprising the attitudes and commitment of state members), the extent to which societal forces have ‘colonised’ the state, and the level of societal concern and resistance. State capacity to make and impose rules tends to decrease as the level of state determination weakens and as societal opposition increases. The intensity and effectiveness of societal resistance is linked to the relative power of the social group and the extent to which this social group perceives state policies or actions as a threat (especially a threat to profits). Conversely, state capacity tends to rise when societal resistance declines, when powerful segments of society align themselves with the state, and when state determination is high. This is a key reason why states that generally overwhelm non-
state organisations can be strikingly weak in particular areas and at particular points in time. It also helps explain why generally weak states can at times exhibit remarkable strength (Dauvergne: Chapter 8).

Advantages of a state-in-society approach

Weak and Strong States in Asia-Pacific Societies demonstrates the analytical value of a state-in-society approach for analysing state policies, actions, strengths, and weaknesses. Valuable insights are gained by examining how pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial histories have transformed state-society relations and how these transformations have in turn shaped state strength and weakness. Further insights are gained by accepting that states and societies are not stagnant entities but undergo constant transformations. Disaggregating states also reveals internal tensions and disputes that shape particular state strengths. States are not unitary actors and sections of states often work at cross-purposes, undercutting control and stalemating action. These sections sometimes work more closely with non-state organisations than with other sections of the state. Because of the multiple ways that state sections and societal groups interact, all states are both strong and weak, depending on the dimension, sector, and time. As a state deals with various tasks it is also clear that the specific components of strength and weakness vary. By focusing on how states are woven into society—and how each continually reshapes the other—the authors are able to move beyond facile assessments of state strengths and weaknesses and ask probing questions about why so many inefficient and ineffective states stay intact, why apparently strong states are sometimes surprisingly weak, and why seemingly weak states can be remarkably resilient.

References


Note

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