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Ungoverned Spaces Presents New Perspective for Policy Makers

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Ungoverned Spaces Presents New Perspective for Policy Makers

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Article by Kate Lamar, Photos by Javier Chagoya

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Under what conditions should the government collaborate with warlords? A new book, edited by two Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) professors, explores the idea that alternatives to the rule of sovereign states could be beneficial and, at times, inevitable. In *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, Anne Clunan, Director of the Center on Contemporary Conflict, and Harold Trinkunas, Chair of the National Security Affairs department, explore existing ideas about what constitutes an ungoverned space, what threats arise from these areas and how states should approach them.

"This project started because we kept hearing about a lot of interest in ungoverned spaces within policy circles in Washington," Trinkunas said. "Policy makers were interested in knowing how widespread these areas were, because they were working under the assumption that the spaces were providing safe havens for bad guys."

"The problem was the way they were defining this concept of ungoverned spaces was so vague and so broad that virtually any space could be called ungoverned," said Clunan. "We wanted to unpack the assumptions about these spaces to determine which ones were actually posing a threat to U.S. and international security."

The book explores several different types of ungoverned spaces, including failed states - like Somalia, areas run by tribal groups - like Pakistani Waziristan, communities within a governed territory that are effectively run by criminal gangs - like the *favelas* in Brazil, and non-physical spaces run by private entities - like offshore banking or the Internet. The book debunks several commonly held misconceptions about these spaces.

"What we found is that there are really no ungoverned spaces. There are just some spaces governed by alternative entities," said Trinkunas.

It turns out many ungoverned spaces simply have privatized regulation or hybrid systems of public-private control rather than traditional models of government control. This is a trend that is expected to increase in prevalence as globalization expands and empowers more non-state actors relative to governments. According to Clunan, some of the existing ungoverned places were intentionally designed by governments to be unregulated because those governments saw the value in creating free global markets.

"In many cases the states got these ungoverned spaces started," said Clunan. "In the case of offshore banking, it was very profitable for governments' to have an unregulated space. It allowed for a much freer flow of money."

The problem with ungoverned spaces arises when the lack of regulation leads to activities that threaten national, international or human security. For instance, in order for offshore banks to remain profitable, they interact not only with legitimate businesses but also with arms traders and warlords. They may facilitate the flow of money toward these groups, who may actually be fighting against government forces in a given state. That is clearly a threat to that particular government, but it might not be a threat to the international community, and depending on the nature of the government, even to some of its own citizens.

Clunan and Trinkunas suggest that sometimes the threats from ungoverned spaces can be complicated: "The issue of the threat posed by ungoverned spaces depends on whose security you're looking at," said Clunan. "A warlord may be perceived as a threat to the national government, but he may also be a protector and provider for the people living in the area against state forces that prey on them. If a state were to go in and remove that warlord, they would lose the support of the people. Such situations may produce additional friction and violence if the international community or outsiders decide to intervene in such a conflict without understanding local dynamics."

Another misconception Clunan and Trinkunas try to debunk in their book is that failed states like Somalia pose the most significant global security threat from ungoverned spaces.

"Many people think failed states are the greatest threat out there from ungoverned spaces, but the ones that are actually more threatening are those located within otherwise reasonably well-governed countries," said Trinkunas.

The book includes studies of several cases that fall in this category, including chapters on urban slum areas that are controlled by drug traffickers in Rio de Janeiro; communities of illegal immigrants in South Africa where differences in language, ethnicity and legal status have led to fear of the authorities; and illicit networks trafficking in nuclear materials throughout Europe and Eurasia. According to Clunan and Trinkunas, Terrorists and other criminal non-state actors would rather operate in functioning states with decent infrastructure, while taking advantage of gaps in governance to pursue their ends.

"In such spaces, many of the resources needed for terrorists to find cover and to execute their operations - logistics, financing, transport, communication - are easily accessible and are situated right next door to their targets, but the state has little grasp of what is going on in these areas," said Trinkunas. "These pockets of un-governance within governed spaces are a real potential threat that policy makers need to be looking at - and that runs counter intuitive to conventional thinking."

"Policy makers need to take seriously the way they look at the world - through this prism in which sovereign states control the world and need to take control of spaces where other states are failing," Clunan said. "That is a very western-centric prism to be looking through. We argue that some of these spaces in question are effectively governed, just not by an entity that matches our notions of a western territorial state system."

"In the current situation of softened state sovereignty, it's important to realize that there are a whole new set of actors for leaders to influence and work with to behave in ways that are less threatening," said Trinkunas. "In some cases, policy makers need to tailor their responses to work directly with non-state actors to solve problems in these alternatively governed spaces."

Ungoverned Spaces was released in May by Stanford University Press. Other NPS contributors to the book include Anne Marie Baylouny, faculty member in the National Security Affairs department, and Lt. Col. Ty Groh, NPS alumnus.

