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THE PRIMACY OF THE STATE IN THE STUDY OF GLOBAL POLITICS:
An Epistemological Debate

ABSTRACT

Penelitian kepustakaan ini bertujuan untuk menjelaskan perdebatan epistemologis dalam studi politik global tentang peranan negara di tengah arus globalisasi yang semakin cepat. Kaum liberalis atau pluralis mengklaim bahwa negara sudah kehilangan pengaruhnya dalam politik global dibandingkan dengan actor-aktor lain seperti perusahaan multinasional (MNCs), lembaga-lembaga internasional dan organisasi civil society global. Penganut realisme dan neo-realisme tetap mempertahankan premis dasar mereka bahwa negara tetap merupakan actor yang menentukan perkembangan politik global. Untuk menjelaskan perdebatan epistemologis ini, laporan penelitian ini difokuskan pada perkembangan ekonomi politik global, perang melawan terorisme global dan kemunculan organisasi civil society dalam hubungan internasional. Apapun hasil akhir dari perdebatan ini, satu hal yang dibutuhkan Indonesia adalah meningkatkan kapasitas kelembagaan negara untuk memperjuangkan martabat bangsa.
The production of scientific knowledge in the study of global politics has always been characterized by an endless epistemological debate on the role of the state. There is a contestation of theories regarding the question of whether or not the sovereign state still plays a determinant role in an increasingly globalized world. On the one hand the liberalists or pluralists claim that compared to other non-state actors the role of the state is declining and no longer indispensable in the global politics. On the other hand, the realists or neo-realists still insist that the state remains an important actor in determining the course of events in international relations. This library research aims at highlighting this debate by referring to some empirical evidence from the current development in the global political economy, the study of the war on terrorism and the emergence of transnational networks of Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that are involved in various policy issues.

There are a number of reasons why some authors argue that after the end of the Cold War the state is no longer a dominant actor in the global politics. First, a growing economic interdependence has weakened the power of the state and strengthened the role of Multinational Corporations (MNCs) as the main agent behind the free flow of goods, services, capital and human resources. The globalization of finance and production has made government macroeconomic policies ineffective in managing their domestic economies in a turbulent environment. At the same time, the role of global agencies of market governance such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO) continue to set the liberal parameters of economic activities which are characterized by the primacy of efficiency, productivity and competitiveness. The decline of the state power in controlling the fluctuation of national currency and the indispensability of foreign capital in the achievement of economic growth are the real indicators of how politics has become a slave to economic rationality.

Second, the spread of some universal values like human rights, democracy, civil society and political freedom has changed the organization and implementation of power in many states. In other words, there are some external factors that affect the way state-society relations are developed. Countries that practice authoritarianism and repress the
political freedom of their citizens tend to be isolated by the international community. For instance, the military junta of Myanmar and the communist regime of North Korea have to manage the burden of economic sanctions imposed by the United States and the European Union as long as they reject the democratization of their domestic politics. Some Western governments even use the criteria of democracy and human rights record as conditionality for the eligibility of the recipient countries. The combination of market economy and liberal democracy is seen by Western governments as the standard ideology on which the modern world should base its politics and economy. Such idealism has become an important element in their foreign policies through which they urge other states to emulate the same ideological system.

Third, after the end of the Cold War pluralism has attracted the attention of scholars of international relations as more and more non-state actors determine course of events in global politics. Of special importance in this context is the role of global civil society movements whose activities bring significant impact in the transition and consolidation of democracies in many developing countries. The transnational networks of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) are active in policy advocacies and conducting campaigns in defending the democratic rights of grass roots people. In some cases they deliberately support the political struggle of separatist groups and even act as mediator in the peaceful negotiation between the government and the rebel groups. Governments of developing countries who want to build a positive image in their interactions with other international actors have to take into account the demands of these non-state actors. The failure of the Indonesian government during Soeharto’s final years in power to develop a more cooperative approach in dealing with global civil society movements led to Indonesia’s isolation by the international community and ultimately the collapse of the New Order political regime.

In fact, various authors have published books which focus on the declining role of the state along the process of globalization. For instance, Joseph A. Camilleri and Jim Falk argue that the world of sovereign states has ended despite the fact that many analysts still emphasize the indispensability of the state. The discourse of state’s sovereignty has lost its epistemological value and international actors other than state like international organizations, MNCs, and international NGOs have played determinant role in changing the fundamental nature of social life at all levels. Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi mention two global phenomena which affect the interaction of the state and non-state actors. They are
global interdependence and crises of authority. Global interdependence is particularly They argue that these two phenomena affect how the state defends its survival in three different areas: economy, security and identity. John Macmillan and Andrew Linklater edited a volume consisting of various articles which basically argued that after the end of the Cold War there emerged new directions international relations. The discipline had been increasingly characterized by the declining significance of state boundaries. Thus, traditional boundaries which define the national jurisdiction of a state did not really matter in its interactions with other international actors. It is also argued that “international relations can no longer be regarded as the analysis of relations between securely clearly and securely bounded sovereign states responding to the challenges of an immutable anarchy.”

These are just a few examples of how authors of international relations began to doubt the validity of the realist claim that we still live in a world of distinctively sovereign states. The main objective of this writing is to show that there is no fixed and definite epistemology about the primacy of any kind of actor in the global politics. The relative position of actors in the global politics is very much determined by the dominant discourse both among the epistemic community and policy makers. The growing threat of global terrorism since the tragic events of September 11, 2001 is of particular importance in the re-emergence of the state in the global politics due to the primacy of national and international security. In the following analysis I will show the contestation among different epistemological standpoints concerning the role of the state in the global politics and how such contestation may enrich our understanding of the discipline today.

**The State and Economic Globalization**

It is in the economic field that the primacy of state sovereignty is vehemently interrogated. The economic crisis that hit some countries in Asia in late 1990s was clear evidence of how national economies turned out to be vulnerable in facing the unexpected dynamics of global market forces. Indonesia stood out as an interesting example of how the economic crisis quickly turned into a multidimensional crisis that led to the collapse of Soeharto's authoritarian regime. Those who celebrate the triumph of neoliberalism argued that the only realistic option for the state is to push further the process of economic liberalization regardless of its political and social consequences. There is, however, a counterargument which tries to convince us that economic globalization does not necessarily lead to the declining role of the state. The realist approach which emphasizes the
indispensable role of the state actor argues that state power or interests remain an important variable behind the dynamics of economic globalization. Robert Gilpin, for instance, says that: This is still a world where national policies and domestic economies are the principal determinants of economic affairs. By developing this theoretical standpoint Gilpin and other realists reject the idea that the rising importance of global market has led to the end of the nation-state. According to the realists the process of financial globalization in the 1970s and 1980s had been made possible by the fact that major economies in the industrial world decided to liberalize the flow of capital across their national borders. Such policies were made on the ground that they served the economic interests of those states. Thus, globalization is supported by Western governments as long as it suits their economic interests and guarantees their dominance over the rest of the world. Even within the framework of free trade promoted by the World Trade Organization, the protectionist agricultural policies of the United States, Japan and the European Union remain unchanged as the three want to keep their respective farmers from the detrimental effect of global competition in that sector. It is a big irony that while the governments of these states urge developing countries to open and liberalize their agricultural sector, they continue to protect and subsidize their own in order to keep their economies competitive in the global market.

In explaining the causes of the Asian economic crisis, the realists saw it as a result of competition between Western developed nations and East Asia under Japan's leadership. In a book titled Rethinking Development in East Asia: From Illusory Miracle to Economic Crisis, Pietro P. Masina wrote: The volume will present the hypothesis that the forces governing the process of 'triadic globalization' might have considered an excessive growth in East Asia and more precisely the growth of China as a threat. Although it is difficult to prove the existence of any political plan to made by Western forces to orchestrate a crisis in East Asia, the attempt to use the crisis to achieve Western strategic goals (in other words to 'tame the tigers') has been clearly documented. In the eyes of the realists, regional economic cooperation never grows naturally. It is always the result of national economic policies which employ the regional cooperation for the accomplishment of national objectives of member states. The combination of the economic power of ten ASEAN countries plus Japan, China and South Korea constitutes a huge market that could change the global balance of economic power. Both the United States and the European Union cannot afford to stay indifferent to the potential of two billion consumers in East Asia. No wonder, the United States has always tried to avoid the emergence of regional grouping in East Asia which excludes its participation. Besides using its traditional
alliance with Japan and South Korea, the United States also relies on the mechanism of Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) to ensure its market access to East Asia.

If we look at the process of economic globalization from the perspective of international competition, we will realize that it is basically the contestation of three different national systems of political economy. The first model of political economy is that of the United States which is called the American system of market-oriented capitalism. The system is characterized by the primacy of the consumers and the maximization of wealth creation. The role of the state in the economy is to be kept at a minimum level but the government should guarantee the enforcement of some important laws concerning anti-monopoly and anti-trust practices. The second model is what has been practiced in Japan. It is called system of developmental capitalism. The main idea behind the model that was behind Japan’s successful industrialization after the second world war is that the state should take an active role in economic development by adopting appropriate industrial policies and providing incentives for the private sector to compete in the global market. Japan’s protectionist tendencies sometimes cause trouble with its trading partners especially the United States as it is difficult for American enterprises to enter Japan’s domestic market. The third model is called Germany’s social market capitalism which is characterized by the idea that a constant effort to create a balance between social concerns and market efficiency. It is also known as welfare state capitalism by which the state takes the responsibility to take care of those groups or members of society who are put in the disadvantageous position by the market competition.

When some Asian countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Philippine and South Korea asked the International Monetary Fund to bail out their economies, the liberalists perceived that decision as an act of submitting their economies to the ideology of market economy. The application of the principles of the so-called Washington Consensus which promoted free trade, privatization and the elimination of all subsidies was seen as the triumph of market forces over the sovereignty of the states. A closer look at how these principles were applied and endorsed by the international financial institutions led by the IMF and the World Bank indicates that it was the commercial interests of the industrial states that were being served at the expense of the poor people in Asia. The main objective of the effort to keep the budget deficit at low level in countries that were hit by the crisis was not so much to make their economies healthier as to enable them pay back their loans from donor countries and their commercial banks. Thus, there
was a synergy between the function of the IMF and the World Bank on the one hand and the strategic economic interests of the industrial countries.

Those who argue that the MNCs have replaced the position of the nation-state in determining course of events in the global political economy refer to the fact that economic globalization is driven by the activities of the MNCs in the transnational flow of goods, services, technology and capital. The rapid growth of world trade, Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), and the dramatic increase of the volume of transaction in the global financial market and stock exchange are the real indicators of the domination by the private sector in the global economy. Governments all around the world should take them into account if they want to promote economic growth and try to control the flow of economic resources for the benefit of their national economies. In his book titled When Corporations Rule the World, David C. Korten argues the endless quest for economic growth has led to the creation of big corporations whose economic power is beyond the control of government bureaucracies. The realist approach questions the idea that the MNCs are autonomous or independent actors in the global political economy. Robert Gilpin maintains his state-centric approach by arguing that the policies and strategies of MNCs can never be separated from their states of origin. According to Gilpin, “global firms are still national firms conducting international business.” On top of that, governments of industrial states often facilitate the marketing of big corporations by using diplomatic channels in a competition to win sales of strategic commodities including military equipment and weapons. It goes without saying that big corporations constitute tax base for their countries of origin.

**The state and the issue of global terrorism**

There are different ways of defining terrorism as an object of study in international relations. Before we define the concept let us look at the global and local contexts of the issue of terrorism. Since the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington D.C on September 11, 2001, global terrorism has become a hot issue not only in the debates among academicians but also policy makers. Indonesia becomes of focus of international attention because of series of bomb attacks that have taken place since the first Bali bombing in October 2002. On top of that, the terrorist groups have also built their inroads into communal conflicts in Maluku and Central Sulawesi. Another reason why Indonesia is seen as an important country in the war against terrorism is that it has the largest Moslem population in the world whose characteristics are more tolerant and open compared to the terrorist
groups who claim to struggle on behalf of Islam as a religion. The fact that terrorist attack remains an imminent threat here indicates how the extremist interpretation of Islam has taken root among Indonesian society and how violence is justified as a method to achieve political goals. Thus, as far as Indonesia is concerned, terrorism is both a domestic and international issue at the same time.

Terrorism is not an ordinary crime. It is defined as *politically motivated violence directed against non-combatants and designed to instill fear in a target audience.*\(^\text{11}\) The motivation behind any terrorist act is to conduct resistance against established authority. Such authority can be at the domestic as well as international level. For instance, when the Al Qaeda hijackers hit the aircrafts against the World Trade Center and Pentagon buildings in the United States, they actually wanted to declare a resistance against the American domination as a super power. At the same time, Al Qaeda also organizes resistance against the authority of Saudi Arabia government which is regarded as the prolongation of American power in the Arab world. Violence is an essential element of terrorist strategies because it is seen as the most effective way to spread panic and fear among the civilians and wider target audience. The difference between terrorism and other transnational crimes like arms smuggling, drugs trafficking and sea piracy is that the latter is driven by economic motives. However, overlapping between them does exist as the terrorist groups also need money to finance their activities.\(^\text{12}\) Therefore, any terrorist attack seeks to be covered as wide as possible by the international media in order to send their message throughout the world. No wonder, terrorism has become a crucial security issue for almost all states throughout the world. The global and national agenda today is very much affected by the terrorist threat as all governments want to mobilize their resources in order to deal with this threat. As far as this writing is concerned, the main question is related to the role of the state in the organized response against the threat. It can be arguably said that the issue of global terrorism has invited the return of realism in the literature of global politics as the national and international security is put in the top agenda of states' policy makers.

The events of September 11, 2001 marked a shift in the conceptualization of terrorism in the study of international relations. Conventional understanding of terrorism does not include the new characteristics of terrorism. The new concept of terrorism is characterized by its global nature. Al Qaeda has the capacity to carry out terrorist its attack all around the world as the group has developed networks of people and organizations with the same ideological orientation. Religious radicalism
and extremism is on the rise today especially among Islamic countries where there is a widely held perception that the world political and economic systems are dominated by the secular West and work against the interests of the Islamic world. Another manifestation of this global solidarity can also be seen in the quick spread of anti-American sentiments not only in the Middle East but also in Southeast Asia. The second characteristic of the new terrorism is that the terrorist groups take advantage of new technology in conducting their operations. The use of modern telecommunications helps the terrorist members to build their networks and carry out coordination. There is now fear among Western policy makers that the terrorist groups will seek to acquire the possession of weapons of mass destruction in order to kill an unlimited number of both civilian and military victims. Thus, the level of destruction the terrorists may cause today is not confined to small targets but they aspire to have a global impact. The main reason why President George W. Bush decided to topple down the political regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq was based on his allegation that the Iraqi government possessed weapons of mass destruction and that it had some links with the terrorist groups in the Middle East. The third characteristic is that the new terrorism has a great capacity to mobilize worldwide religious solidarity as if the terrorists want to justify Samuel Huntington’s thesis of the clash of civilizations. Religious hatred and anger is a massive political force which could spread intolerance and disharmony within the states and without. Thus, there is today a tug of war and competition for social legitimacy in Indonesia between the majority of religious people who are moderate and tolerant and the minority groups who develop the theology of hatred and anger. If Indonesia wants to maintain its image as a moderate and tolerant nation, the Indonesian government should encourage religious civil society organizations to counter the spread of radicalism and extremism in our society.

The primacy of the state in the era of new terrorism is not only endorsed by the increasing importance of national and international security, but it is also related to the fact that the main actor that responds aggressively to the threat of terrorism is the state. The state and its coercive institutions develop policies to counter the threat of terrorism in an unprecedented scale. Soon after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C., the UN Security Council enacted Resolution Number 1373 which, among other things, obliged all member states to submit annual report to the Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee (CTC) on the progress they had made in dealing with the issue of terrorism. The state today becomes the focal point of international response in promoting
peace and security. There are at least three kinds of response a state can choose in dealing with the threat of terrorism. The three are eliminating the root causes of terrorism, the establishment of an effective rule of law, and the use of repressive measures such as military attack. Let us look at each of these policy measures and how the Indonesian government and other states have applied them in reality.

It is not easy to reach a consensus on what constitute the root causes of terrorism. People develop different theories about this issue. The fact that terrorism is basically a resistance against political authorities tells us that terrorism has much to do with the existing political and economic conditions which are regarded as unjust, repressive and predatory. Terrorism might also be related to a struggle against illegitimate military occupation in a certain country or group of countries. Thus, it is the means of the weaker parties in society which desperately seek to radically change the political system through the use of violence and murder. The linkage between terrorism and religion is much more problematic. The conventional wisdom is that terrorism has nothing to do with any religion as all religions teach their followers not to kill the innocent people. The problem with this view is that it has to falsify the terrorists' claim that they get their inspiration from a particular interpretation of religious texts. On top of that, the terrorist groups continue to justify their activities by claiming that their interpretation is the most valid and authentic. This is precisely the reason why religious communities should take responsibility in endorsing the religious message of peace and tolerance. Whether or not religion contributes to the genesis of terrorism, it is all clear that the government should encourage the participation of religious leaders in eliminating all forms of secular manipulation of religion for the sake of political ambitions. The fact that the Indonesian government with the financial assistance from donor countries has empowered religious schools in promoting multiculturalism is an indication that the state recognizes the important role of religious institutions in eradicating the ideology of terrorism. Based on the above analysis the realists will argue that the only institution that has the capacity to eradicate the root causes of terrorism is the state. Other institutions like religion or NGOs are just lack of incentives to do the job. They are at best indifferent to the task and even tend to be cynical about the war on terrorism.

Both the liberalists and realists agree that it is the task of the state to ensure the rule of law. However, the two camps might have different views on how the state should do the task. As an illustration let us focus on the debate between the liberalists and realists concerning the importance of the
restructuring intelligence agency as a response to the increase of terrorist threat in democratic states. It is a common practice in many states today that the governments conduct a total review of their intelligence bills with a new emphasis on the strengthening of state's coercive power. The liberalists argue that the introduction of an intelligence bill should not sacrifice the protection of civil liberties and the promotion of human rights. The realists give a high priority to national security and tend to allow the state intelligence agency to have more discretionary power in order to counter the clandestine activities of the terrorist groups. For instance, the state intelligence agency is given the authority to detain people if there is a preliminary evidence of his or her involvement in any terrorist activity. According to the liberalists, such practice is against the principle of a democratic state because detaining people for interrogation is the task of the police as a law enforcement body. Despite the fact that there is a growing resistance from civil society organizations and human rights activists, it seems that more and more democratic states including the United States, Australia, and Indonesia adopt the realist view of strengthening the special powers of the intelligence agency for the sake of national security. Thus, in the eyes of the realists the growing threat of realism has given the justification of the state to play a decisive role not only in the domestic politics but also in the global interactions among nations.

The use of military power in addressing the growth of global terrorism is widely practiced by the United States under President George W. Bush right after the events of September 11, 2001. The US declaration of war on terrorism has affected the global agenda of global politics in which national security consumes most of states' strategic resources. The US government introduced a new national security strategy in 2002 whose essential elements included: the war against the global network of terrorism, defending the military supremacy of the US as the only superpower, deterring the use of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons against the US and its allies, pursuing regime change in Iraq and introducing democracy in the Middle East, mobilizing support for the US around the world, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by the American enemies, and maintaining US technological superiority. The US security policy is very much based on the Bush Doctrine which basically refers to the US right and might to defend its perceived self interests around the globe and carry out preemptive strike even without the approval of the United Nations and other states. Thus, when the US attacked Iraq in 2003, it did not depend on the authorization of the UN Security Council. The US unilateralist policy cost it the support of its European allies except the
United Kingdom under Prime Minister Tony Blair. Together with the United Kingdom the US aggressively conducted its interventionist policies in the Middle East and elsewhere even to the extent that it is willing to sacrifice the principles of democracy and human rights. This is again yet another proof for the realists to argue that the contemporary practice of global politics gives a primary role to the state and high priority to the agenda of national security.

The state and civil society

It is often said that after the end of the Cold War civil society movements have taken a prominent role in the global politics. The waves of democratization in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union were mainly driven by civil society movements which promoted the principles of democracy and human rights. At the same time the US foreign policy under President Bill Clinton endorsed the enlargement of democratic world and the growth of civil society organizations in many developing countries. As far as Indonesia's transition to democracy is concerned, civil society movements and NGOs have played in important role in the de-legitimization of Soeharto's authoritarian New Order regime. Thus, the capacity of non state actors in pushing regime change in developing countries is quite evident. At the international level the role of international NGOs like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and Greenpeace continue to exert pressures on governments who violate human rights and damage their environment. Both at the domestic and global level, civil society actors tend to play an important actor as a countervailing force vis a vis the state.

Jean Grugel rejects the exaggeration of the role of civil society actors in domestic and international politics. She argues that Western states still retain power and resources and therefore it is necessary for civil society activists to take into account the question of state power when designing strategies and responding to opportunities. Grugel's observation is quite relevant if applied for the Indonesian case study of democratic consolidation under President Abdurrahman Wahid and Megawati Soekarnoputri. There were at least four arenas in which civil society actors or NGOs tried to push forward democratic consolidation in Indonesia but they failed to achieve their goals. The four arenas included the drafting of the election legislation, the promotion of good governance, the investigation of past human rights abuses, and the issue of foreign debt diplomacy. The failure of the civil society actors was very much related to the fact that democratic
consolidation was transformed by politicians and military elite into an endless game of bureaucratic bargaining.}

It is also argued that global civil society movements have their own internal problems. First, civil society activism is still confined to urban educated elite and does not touch the grass roots in the remote areas. Second, there is a gap between civil society organizations based in industrial countries and those in the South where financial resources are scarce and difficult to appropriate. As a result, the Southern NGOs are very much dependent on the financial assistance from donor countries and Northern NGOs. Third, it is not really clear to whom the civil society organizations give their responsibility. If they fail in doing their job, there is no clear mechanism for the public to demand their accountability. On top of that, most of them have internal problem of democracy because they do not have a clear regulation on the succession of leadership. Finally, most NGOs tend to perpetuate the dependence of their clients in order to survive and ensure the flow of financial resources from the funding agencies.

When President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and Vice President Jusuf Kalla were elected in 2004, many people expected that with strong popular legitimacy the two leaders could re-activate the investigation into past human rights abuses. As it turned out, nothing has changed and the victims of human rights violations in East Timor, Aceh and other places got frustrated because the culture of impunity has taken roots in this country. Despite the endless efforts made by the wife of Munir, a well-known human rights activist who was assassinated in September 7, 2004, and Indonesian human rights activists in endorsing the total review of the trial over Munir’s death, so far there has been no real progress. As far as the realists are concerned, the persistence of the state to take care of its own interests even at the expense of its own citizens is clear evidence of its primacy as an actor not only at the domestic level but also at the global level.

**Concluding Remarks**

We have started this writing with an epistemological debate regarding the role of the state in the study of global politics. It is clear from the above analysis that the decline of the state as an influential actor has been exaggerated by the liberalists or pluralists. The paper has shown how the realists defend the idea that the state remains an important actor in at least three arenas of global politics. First, in the arena of global political economy the MNCs cannot separate themselves from the economic policies of the country of origin. It is also argued that it was the major industrial states like
the United States and Japan which decided to eliminate the policy of capital controls with the effect that financial globalization could take place and expand rapidly. Thus, financial globalization was supported by the Western states as long as the process served their national interests. There is even a close collaboration between the industrial states and the commercial interests of their major banks in liberalizing the economies of Asian countries that were hit by the crisis in late 1990s. Finally, the argument of the liberals that civil society actors play a prominent role in the domestic and global politics should be put in a perspective because the state remains immune to change that is imposed from outside. Whatever the final outcome of the epistemological debate between the liberals and realists regarding the primacy of the state in the study of global politics, one thing we all have to agree that the Indonesian state should increase its institutional capacity to promote the dignity of its people in the midst of an increasingly competitive external environment.

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End Notes:

8. For a detailed explanation about the characteristics of the three models see Robert Gilpin. op. cit. pp. 150-170.
12. Ibid. p. 175.