

Asia and the West: The impact of globalisation and nationalism in contemporary world politics

There are three general points that merit consideration before we consider the more specific impact of globalization on nationalism in the West and in Asia.

First, the idea that the era of globalization differs qualitatively from the era of nationalism, and that the nation-state is now an anachronism, needs to be treated with great caution. If, from a modernist perspective, we concede that there was a time before the nation and nationalism, logically there is no reason why there should not be a time after it. But from where we stand now, we have no means of knowing what it will look like or what will bring it into existence. Indeed, in some respects the globalized nation-state is more controlling and intrusive than its merely nationalized predecessor. The Internet, which was viewed at the start as an emancipatory technology that would empower individuals, roll back the state and render international borders not only porous but superfluous, has also provided national authorities with an instrument of control and surveillance far more powerful than anything they possessed in the past.

Secondly, whatever the future holds, it is in any case wrong to see the nation-state as a way station to a system of global government. Nationalism – and its legal foundation, the doctrine of national self-determination, was from the start a globalizing phenomenon. Whereas

previously all manner of political and social forms – dynastic and liberal empires, mercantile and feudal societies, city-states, multi-ethnic and/or theocratic conglomerates, whose members recognized the distant suzerainty of an imperial centre provided it seldom challenged their *de facto* independence, and even stateless societies of various kinds, coexisted; after the French and American revolutions a single political form – the nation-state – came to dominate the political landscape. It still does. Even where other kinds of polity survive here or there, or where the social pre-conditions for successful state and nation-building are absent, those who hold power claim to represent a nation. Moreover, the rest of the world humours them, since the nation-state has effectively monopolized the language of modern politics everywhere.

Thirdly, globalization may be consistent with nationalist ideology, but in many countries it has nonetheless precipitated a legitimacy crisis. If, as the theory holds, the nation is an expression of popular sovereignty, those who act in the peoples' name will be held to account if they do not deliver on their promises. Until very recently, even the most liberal governments held in reserve powers to protect the national economy when their policies were likely to be undermined by events beyond their control. This was necessary because nationalism was a progressive ideology – even when nationalists looked back to a golden age, they justified themselves in terms of the future. These reserve powers still exist but as the pace of economic deregulation has increased, their effectiveness has been called into question.

If governments can no longer deliver economic progress, will they be able to guarantee political security? The low esteem in which politicians are held throughout the democratic world and the low electoral turn-out in most industrial societies is perhaps indicative of a general malaise.

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How will these general trends (if that is what they are) play out in the West and Asia respectively? It seems a plausible hypothesis that the rise of identity politics in recent years is linked with the legitimacy crisis of the nation-state. The link is forged roughly as follows: the governments of the first wave of industrial nation states, including Japan but not China, India or Korea, find themselves simultaneously grappling with the problems of aging populations and growing pressure to feed their labour markets through migration. However necessary it may be for their long run survival, in the short run the influx of large numbers of migrants from different cultural and/or religious backgrounds is likely to sharpen social tensions. Hence the paradoxical and conflicting demands for a redefinition of the nation along multicultural lines, and the adoption of policies that aim to stem the flow of illegal immigrants across international borders.

The first of these policies, only partially successful and arguably half-hearted at best – let us call it the Canadian solution – depends for its success on the government's ability to generate support for an overarching civic loyalty within which distinct ethnic and religious identities can happily coexist. The second is designed to cut off any resurgent ultra-nationalism at the pass, without depriving the country of the manpower and skills it needs, but currently lacks, to compete effectively in the global market place.

If this is a worldwide problem facing nation-states within the global economy, its impact on different countries in Europe, North America and Asia will depend on their separate histories, geopolitical location and even on the constitutional solutions they devise in overcoming the crisis of industrial nationalism in the course of the twenty first century. In Asia there are several major countries – China and India being the leading but not the only examples – which are still in the grip of a modernizing nationalism in which ideas of material progress and national pride combine in a fairly traditional way. To put it more bluntly, in these countries, the authorities can still mobilize the population by appealing to their nationalist sentiment against their opponents at home or abroad. It is partly for this reason that the Taiwan Straits and the line of control between India and Pakistan are amongst the most dangerous flashpoints in the contemporary political landscape.

At the turn of the century it seemed that the same could be said about the United States.

Indeed Robert Kagan's famous quip that Americans were from Mars and Europeans from Venus depended, for its plausibility, on America being a modern rather than a post-modern nation.¹ But in the aftermath of the 2008 election, which saw a revival of electoral enthusiasm unparalleled elsewhere in the industrial world, and elected a President whose first priority will be domestic rather than foreign policy, one cannot be so certain. Like the Titanic approaching the iceberg it will not be easy for a continental power of America's size and global reach to change direction quickly. If, for example, pressure were to build for a military solution to an Iranian nuclear crisis, it is no longer certain that any administration would be able to carry the American people with them, let alone their traditional allies. On the other hand, the major European nation-states and Japan, it seems to me, are struggling less ambiguously than the Americans with the meaning of post-modern nationalism. Britain, France and Japan are all former imperial nations, whose nationalism moreover was closely bound up with their imperial reach.

In all three countries the empire has struck back, but in quite different ways. Britain's nationalism was most immediately an imperial project – the fairly successful unions with Scotland and Wales, and the unsuccessful union with Ireland, were buttressed by opportunities offered by the empire. There was some truth in the adage that the British Empire was an outdoor relief system for the Celtic fringe. Without the empire, identity

politics has returned to the United Kingdom, and its survival, while probable, is no longer guaranteed. Meanwhile, what had seemed a reasonably successful policy of race relations has turned sour, as Muslim communalism has been imported from the Indian sub-continent in the wake of the Islamist attacks on the United States and the British decision to support America in Iraq and Afghanistan.

France is not threatened by incipient disintegration along nationalist or sub-national lines but its brand of nationalized and allegedly universal republicanism has been similarly challenged by North African immigrants, who have failed to turn themselves into Frenchmen. In both countries, the post-colonial communities are in direct competition with migrants from the new EU member states in Eastern Europe. So long as Europe seemed unlikely to slide into a major recession, their presence might be viewed as an irritant, leading to an occasional local crisis provoked by the French decision to ban headscarves in schools or the election of xenophobic local councilors representing the British National Party, but it did not represent a major political challenge. The growing consensus that the world economy is now facing the gravest crisis since the great depression of the 1930s opens up an altogether more sombre prospect. At the very least it seems likely to reinforce the almost pathological neurosis that EU enlargement has engendered about securing the Union's external borders against illegal immigration from outside the Union. It is not obvious that this is a climate in which a pan-European identity is likely to strike deep roots.

Nor is it clear how Japan will respond to the challenge posed by the combination of globalization and worldwide economic recession. There are two contrasts with the European pattern that may nonetheless act as a marker. The first is that Japan seems fortunate in not having to face the problems of a resurgent religiosity in political life. The monotheistic religions all had a militant and/or enthusiastic tendency, which until the eighteenth century was a major ingredient of much intra and international conflict. Its afterlife, primarily in the wider Middle East, including Pakistan, but not only there, is a major challenge to the achievements of western civilization and the legacy of the European enlightenment. The second contrast lies in the difficulty Japan has in dealing with its imperial legacy. Because the European empires were distant, they were able to rescue the disgraced nation-state (at least to some extent) by effectively creating a European confederation. Most European countries have tombs of the unknown soldier, a monument that at once celebrates the idea of national sacrifice but at the same time the general folly of war – the warrior could have come from any part of the continent. Judging by the political sensitivity surrounding the Yasukuni shrine and the furore in China and Korea that is regularly sparked off by any Japanese politician who visits it, a confederal solution does not seem to be a realistic option for Japan.

It might be reasonable to conclude, therefore, with Krishnan Srinivasan, that Japan, having risen to its current position as the world's second largest economy behind the protective shield provided by the United States, will fade into the background of world politics in step with America's gradual decline. It seems certain that Japan will yield its position in the economic hierarchy to China before long, and it is also true that the Japanese political class views America's relative loss of power with some dismay. This is essentially because the combined and long term effect of the US occupation after the second World War and Japan's bilateral security alliance which replaced it, was to demilitarize Japanese society, but also to some extent the Japanese mind. But I am not sure that Japan's influence on the evolving world order should be discounted. The Japanese have always had a highly developed sense of their unique place in the world and a determination to do whatever is necessary to preserve their independence. For the time being, as Masayuki Tadakoro explains, Japan will do what it can to support a reassertion of moderate US leadership. ' Japan's basic approach should be to make clear both internally and externally that it would support moderate and sensible leadership by the US, while trying to enhance its own ability to act independently.'ⁱⁱ Japanese military, particularly naval, power is being gradually built up and if Article 9 of the constitution is not formally repealed it may well nonetheless wither on the vine.

Over the longer run, it is conceivable that Japan will emerge as a key interlocutor and even balancer in the triangular relationship with China and the United States. Relations with

China have frequently been strained for historical reasons, but economically Japan has played a prominent part in China's rise and over time the potentially difficult flow of Chinese immigrants to Japan may nonetheless help to fill the gaps in the labour market caused by an aging population. Not only is it impossible for Japan and China to sever their relations with the US economy without triggering major economic dislocation, they also cannot afford to put their bilateral economic relations at risk. The last two Japanese Prime Ministers, despite their increasingly nationalist credentials, have deliberately refrained from visiting the Yasukuni shrine in an effort to improve relations with Beijing.

ⁱ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power, America and Europe in the New World Order*, (New York, Alfred A.Knopf, 2003), p.3

ⁱⁱ Masayuki Tadakoro, 'Financial Crisis marks end of US as a hyper power', *The Mainichi Daily News*, 5 November 2008