THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD

The nation-state is dead. Long live the nation-state

Readjust your expectations of the 21st century. Neither age of superstates, nor the end of all states, is about to happen.

The nation-state is not what it used to be. Ignored by the global money markets, condescended to by great multinational corporations, at the mercy of intercontinental missiles, the poor thing can only look back with nostalgia to its days of glory, a century ago, when everybody knew what John Bull and Marianne and Germania and Uncle Sam stood for. It seems inconceivable that so diminished a creature can much longer continue to be the basic unit of international relations, the entity that signs treaties, joins alliances, defies enemies, goes to war. Surely the nation-state is in the process of being dissolved into something larger, more powerful, more capable of coping with the consequences of modern technology: something that will be the new, stronger basic unit of tomorrow’s world?

No, wait; hold on a minute. As Bertie Wooster said, in telling a tangled story it is fatal to begin by assuming that the customers know how matters got where they are. They will simply raise their eyebrows, and walk out on you. The current argument about the role of the nation-state in world affairs is an excellent example of the danger Bertie was pointing to.

Why it isn’t what it was

For most people, the world is made up of 185 nation-states, on the current count of the United Nations: some huge, some tiny, some of them democracies, most of them not, but all equal in the eye of the world’s law. In fact, a majority of these 185 places are not nation-states in the strict meaning of the term, but survivals of older, crude forms of political life. Nevertheless, all 185 share two vital characteristics. They each cover separate portions of the earth’s surface; and each has a government whose claim to speak for it is recognised by most governments of the other portions of the earth’s surface. These are the basic units of geopolitics, the pieces on the international chessboard, the essential components of the fearsome game known as foreign policy.

The trouble is that, over the past half-century or so, these basic units have all, big or small, become less dominant, less independent and, in a way, less separate than they were in their prime. This is because of the arrival in the world of new forces, created by the technological discoveries of the 20th century, which have the power to move

meant of money. The markets’ ability to transfer cash anywhere at the push of a button has changed the rules for policy-making, introducing what sometimes seems like a sort of direct international democracy: when a government makes a false or ruthless decision, the markets vote against it with their money.

A more globalised economy is in many ways a more efficient one. Most people now live in the world than their ancestors ever were; and the faster discipline of today’s international financial markets makes national governments more dependent in the handling of their own affairs than at any time in this article’s purpose; the point is that the rise of new global forces tamed the nation-state’s old feeling of confident independence.

In military matters the change has been even more drastic. Until about 60 years ago, the only way in which one country could successfully use force to impose its will on another was to defeat its soldiers on the ground. But two countries of even approximately equal strength, that could be a long and hazardous business.

The little Heinkels and Dorniers that flew slowly over the English Channel to drop their tiny bomb-loads on Britain in 1940 were the messengers of a radical change in the nature of war. The use of force was no longer twodimensional; the third dimension had become available. Only a few years later, the means of imposing defeat from the air had moved from aeroplanes to missiles, and their cargo had changed from a bomb that would knock down a house to one that could obliterate a city.

For at least the first part of the coming century, very few countries—perhaps only America, plus anybody who can shelter under America’s protection—will have the remotest technological hope of acquiring anti-missile defences that can ward off the missiles with nuclear (or chemical or bacteriological) warheads which an enemy can aim at you from anywhere in the globe. Otherwise, the nation-state will be naked to such attacks.

The third technology-based challenge to the old picture of the nation-state is the information revolution. People in different countries now have the means to know far more about each other. They can see on television how others entertain themselves, or argue about politics, or kill their neighbours.
by the end of 1995, almost everybody has come to understand this. That fond post-cold-war illusion was the result of a failure to look clearly either at the lessons of history or at today's observable facts.

Ah, says a sharper-eyed band of optimists, but surely the past year's progress towards freer trade, under the aegis of the World Trade Organisation, shows that the nation-state can indeed be persuaded to obey a global set of rules. That is true; but only up to a clearly defined point.

Most countries accept the discipline of a free-trade system because they recognise that free trade is beneficial to everybody (which does not stop them bargaining ferociously over the distribution of those benefits). But, in general, countries draw a line between this pooling of economic autonomy and the pooling of political and military power. They want to hold on to the means of being able to decide for themselves, in the last resort, what suits them—whether including whether it suits them to go on obeying free-trade rules. That is why even the most miraculously smooth-running free-trade regime will not inevitably slide forward into a global political unity.

Nor is there much plausibility in a second suggested alternative to the nation-state. This is the idea that various new entities, each speaking for the culture or civilisation of its component parts. The most lucid and provocative version of the theory has been set out by Samuel Huntington of Harvard University, who has woryingly talked of a future “clash of civilisations.”

This idea, unlike the one-world dream, does rest on a basis of observable fact. Countries have grown out of a shared body of religious or philosophical beliefs, and a shared experience of history—similar in ways that originally shaped them. The ex-communist part of Europe, for instance, seem to find it harder to become democracies than those in the west, perhaps because the Orthodox Christian part of the world has not fully digested the Reformation, that great shaper of western civilisation. And the advocates of “Asian values”, with their special respect for authority, almost all come from the background of the Confucian culture. It will be well that, as the world works itself into a new, post-cold-war shape, these cultural connections will be the basis of some formidable alliances; and that the competition between these alliances will be a large element in the geopolitics of the 21st century.

But alliances are not single units of power. The problem with the civilisation-unit theory is not just that Mr Huntington's list of civilisations includes some rather implausible candidates—does Africa, or Latin America, really seem likely to become an actor on the world stage?—but that the component parts of even the more plausible ones are still profoundly reluctant to surrender their separate identities.

It is striking that the new wave of self-awareness in the Muslim world has not produced any serious moves towards a merger of Muslim states. Even the Arabs, sub-section of the Muslim world; with the advantage of a common language, has, after a series of abortive “unification” schemes, come up with nothing grander than the reunion of the two Yemens. In the Orthodox Christian part of the world, another arguably distinct culture-zone, the recent tendency has been for things to fall apart, not come together; this area now contains more separate states than it did a decade ago.

All the other culture-zones look equally unpromising, with one possible exception. Only in Western Europe is there any seriously conceived plan to dissolve existing nation-states into something bigger-and even
this European experiment may now be running into the sands. The world does not, in short, seem to be heading for the fearful-sounding “clash of civilisations”.

The only other sort of glue that might bind nation-states together, if the cultural glue proves too weak, is ideology. That may seem an odd thing to say while the dust still swirls from the stunning collapse of the communist edifice. But communism’s fall does not mean that ideology has ceased to exist. What demolished the communist idea was the superior strength of a rival body of ideas, free-market democracy, which was powerful enough to hold together the 16 countries of the West’s alliance through all the alarms and rigours of the cold war. Free-market democracy won that fight, but free-market democracy is in turn now challenged by two self-proclaimed rivals. One part of the back-to-basics movement that is sweeping through the Muslim world wants to accept the free-market bit, but believes democracy is a denial of the principle that God decides what should happen in the world. And the East Asian politicians who talk about “Asian values”, though they say a family—with themselves, naturally, as the firm but kindly father—so that it does not succumb to the anarchy they think is caused by too much western individualism.

It is not yet clear whether either of these challenges to the West’s picture of the future will endure. The Muslim one is already under attack from revivalists, who insist that there should be a more open-minded Islamic way of deciding what God wants for the world. Advocates of Asian values may come to be judged, by their fellow Asians, as just a bunch of politicians trying to hold on to the pleasures of power. But for now it is plain that arguments of ideology are still helping to shape the world. They pull people into rival camps, and give them more precise reasons for disagreeing with each other than the mere fact of belonging to different “civilisations”.

Unfortunately, ideologies suffer from exactly the same difficulty as culture zones when they offer themselves as a substitute for the nation-state. Nobody seems to want to join the proposed substitute.

The proponents of Asian values happily go on working inside their existing countries, because that is where they wield the authority they want to preserve. The Islamic anti-democrats in various Muslim countries have made no progress in breaking down the frontiers between those countries; indeed, they do not even seem to talk to each other very much. And, when the communist ideology collapsed, it became painfully clear that its component parts had been kept together by mere force, not by the vigour of an idea.

So the late 21st century’s maps will not show a handful of sprawling superstates with names like Democratia, Islamia and Leekuanewayia. Their dotted lines will continue to reveal large numbers of similarly familiar places, nation-states.

Why it stumbles on

Why is the nation-state so durable, for all the battering it has taken from 20th-century technology? Partly because, in its true meaning, it is a pretty recent arrival on the political scene, and has the resilience of youth; but mostly because it is still the sole possessor of the magic formula without which it is hard, in today’s world, to hold any sort of political structure together.

It was little more than 200 years ago, a blink of history’s eye, that men invented the nation-state as a better way of organising the business of government than any way previously available. Before that, the state-recognisable chunk of territory recognisably under somebody’s control had generally been one or the other of two things. Gall them the brute-force state, and the justification-by-good-works state.

A brute-force state came into existence when some tough took power by strength of arms and stayed in power by killing or otherwise silencing those who objected. That was how government began in most places, and the species is by no means extinct. You could hardly have a better example of such a state than Saddam Hussein’s Iraq.

The trouble with relying on brute force, though, is that however ruthless the ruler may be there will in the end usually be somebody angry and desperate enough to put a sword or a bullet through him. This most primitive form of state-system therefore evolved, except in the unluckiest places, into one in which those who sought control power sought to justify their control of it. The rulers did not ask the ruled for their consent to being ruled. But they did try to keep them happy—or just happy enough by providing for some of their essential needs.

In the arid empires of the Old Testament world, from Babylon to Persia, one essential need was the provision of a steady flow of water. Later the Romans, having built their empire by force, sought to justify it by providing the rule of law and a sense of order (the British did much the same in India 1,800 years later). By the Middle Ages, the implicit bargain between governors and governed had become a complicated network of mutual obligations between king, barons and the lower orders.

It was not perfect, but ‘it was better than plain thuggery or chaos. Even now, the world contains many examples of this second system. The Chinese government still seeks to justify its one-party grip on power by a claim to have produced order and good economic statistics; so, less convincingly, do the rulers of assorted Arab countries.

What this system still lacks, of course, is any organic link between government and people. Even the most conscientious prince of the pre-nation-state era assumed power by right of inheritance, not by the will of those he governed. “I am the state,” said Louis XIV, that most de-humane of men, in his speech in the old order. A century later, the inventors of the nation-state set out to provide an alternative to the lofty arrogance of his first person singular. As they saw it, a government should be able to say: “The state gives us our authority.”

A nation-state is a place where people feel a natural connection with each other because they share a language, a religion, or something else strong enough to bind them together and make them feel different from others: “we”, not “they”. The nation-state is the politics of the first person plural. Its government can speak for its people because it is part of the “we”. It emerges out of the nation.

There can be arguments about how the government does its emerging, by election or by some moro-
scur process. At many times in the 200-year history of the nation-state ambitious or obsessed men—Hitler was the worst of all—have claimed the right to power because they said they knew better than anybody else what their idea was or were different from the rest. But even they claimed their authority, truthfully or not, from the will of their people. One way or another, in the past couple of centuries the connection between people and government has become organic. The concept of the nation-state, like that of the concept of government by consent, is an idea. The sense of being “we” can come from a shared language, as it untingly does in most European countries, but divisively in places like Quebec, or from a shared religion, as in Ireland or Pakistan, or from the proud ownership of some special political idea, such as direct democracy in four-language Switzerland or the “American idea” in the multi-ethnic United States; or from the memory of a shared horror, as in Israel. Sometimes it comes from a mixture of these things. The hatreds of Bosnia are rooted both in difference of religion and in the memories of long-as-old frontier wars between different cultural areas.

However it comes about, it is the necessary foundation for any durable political system. No government, unless it is prepared to rely entirely on brute force, can do its job properly in the modern world if the people it governs do not have a clear-cut sense of identity that they share with the government—unless, in other words, they are both part of the “we”.

And it still seems that only the nation-state possesses this necessary sense of identity. It is nice to learn that you belong to such-and-such a civilisation, or are a believer in this ideology or that; but learning this is not enough, it appears, to pull people across the familiar boundaries of the nation-state and into the creation of some new, bigger sort of political entity.

This may not remain true forever. There was a time when Prussians and Bavarians did not smoothly think of themselves as “we Germans”, or Tuscans and Sicilians as “we Italians”; but the-you got rounds to it in the end. Perhaps, in the end, Muslims will smoothly be able to think of themselves as citizens of a wider Islamic state; or Chinese speakers will salute a neo-Confucian flag fluttering over Beijing or Singapore; or, who knows, some pan-African power may rise out of that continent’s present rubble. But it is not happening yet; and, until and unless it does happen, nation-states will be the only pieces on the geopolitical chessboard.

So watch Europe

The chief test of whether this might change will take place in Europe over the next few years. The countries of the European Union have come very close to the line that separates the pooling of their economic life from the merging of their politics. They will soon have to decide whether or not they want to cross that line. To cross it, they will need to be reasonably sure that the new Europe passes the first-person-plural test. They would have to be confident that its people now think of themselves in some serious way not chiefly as Germans or French, or whatever, but as “we Europeans”.

Twice in history, Europe, or a large part of it, has felt itself to be such a single entity and on both occasions there were solid grounds for such a sense of identity. The first time was when the Roman empire hummed much of Europe into a single entity that shared the blessings of Roman law, the Latin language and the peace of the legions. This was unquestionably a culture-zone: to the first-person-plural question, its people could reply: Give Romani sumus.

The second time began when Charlemagne was crowned as “Emperor of the Catholic Church of Europe” in Rome on Christmas Day 800. The political unity of the European Union created by Charlemagne did not long survive his death. Yet, for another six centuries after Charlemagne, Europeans went on believing, as Muslims believe today, that there ought in principle to be no distinction between God’s business and man’s business, and that politics should come under God’s guidance; and for most of that time they kept in existence institutions which tried to put this principle into practice. This was an ideological Europe. To the question of what “we Europeans” stood for, Charlemagne’s descendants would have replied, Credimus in unum Deum.

The problem for today’s unifiers of Europe is not just that Germany, France and Britain want different things out of a European Union. It is that none of their versions of a united Europe would be rooted in a distinctive ideology. The political and economic ideas by which Europe lives are much the same as America’s, and indeed America was ahead of most of Europe in making itself a democracy. Nor would it be a unique culture-zone. Europe and America come from the same cultural background; the-you are, with minor variations, subdivisions of a single civilisation.

The underlying argument of those who now pursue a separate European entity is that Europe either does not want to be, or does not think it can be, part of a wider union with its cultural and ideological cousin across the Atlantic. This is an argument of geography, and a circular one at that. Its answer to the “we” question is: We are Europeans because we are Europeans.

That need not rule it out. Tuscans and Sicilians joined each other to become Italians even though the Italy they created 134 years ago had much in common with the rest of Europe. People sometimes band together simply to be stronger than they were separately. The desire to be strong is a powerful force in politics. But not as powerful as the feeling that we are different from “them”. That is one reason why a growing question-mark floats over Europe.

The nation-state will last longer than most people had thought. Only in one part of the world, Europe, is there a possibility that it may give way to a bigger post-nation-state system; and even that possibility now looks fainter than it did a few years ago. Like the natural world, the world of geopolitics does not easily change its species. The coming century will still be the home of recognisable beasts: muscular-lions and fearful deer, lumbering rhinos and cunning jackals. That may be a pity; but the inhabitants of the jungle have to live with it.