

# THE SHAPE OF THE WORLD

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

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

**T**HE 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 arid 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?

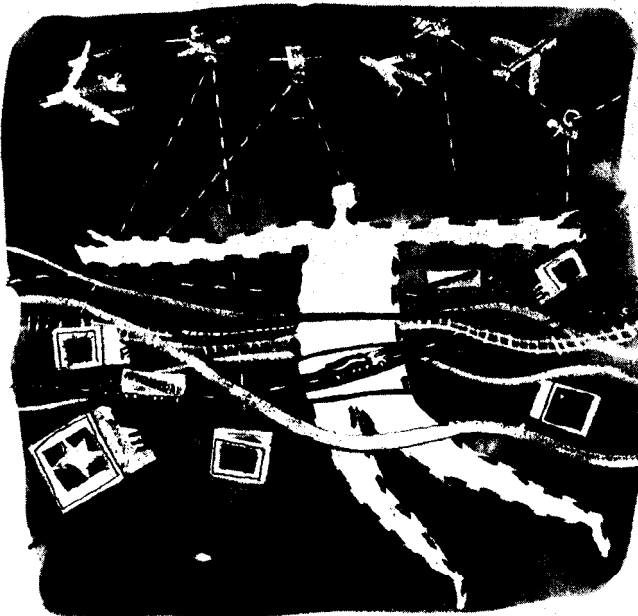
No, wait; hold on a minute. As Bertie Wooster said, in telling a tangled story it is fatal to begin by assuming that the customers know how matters got where they are. They will simply raise their eyebrows, and walk out on you. The current argument about the role of the nation-state in world affairs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

tial 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



things visible and invisible from one part of the globe to another whether any nation-state likes it or not. These forces take three main forms, all of which have to some extent eroded the nation-state's autonomy.

In economics, the growing ease and cheapness of moving goods from one place to another has demolished any lingering belief in national self-sufficiency. Almost every country now buys from abroad a larger proportion of what it consumes than it did 50 years ago, and a far bigger share of the world's capital is owned by multinational companies operating freely across national borders. This process has been accelerated by what electronics has done to the move-

ment 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 move, markets vote against it with ruthless speed.

A more globalised economy is in many ways a more efficient one. Most people in most countries are richer now than their ancestors ever were; and the faster discipline of today's international financial markets makes national governments more careful in the handling of their economies. But, for this article's purpose, that is not the point. The point is that the rise of new global forces has noticeably tamed the nation-state's old feeling of confident independence.

In military matters the change has been even more dramatic. 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 even 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 even 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, then, 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 neigh-

bours; and on the Internet, or on ever-cheaper telephones, they can then exchange opinions about it all. Even if the number of people who make active use of the information revolution is still fairly small, as the sceptics claim, this is a startling contrast with what most Englishmen and Germans knew about each other in the 1930s, let alone most Frenchmen and Englishmen in the 1790s.

Like the new forces of global economics, the globalisation of knowledge is in general an excellent thing. It is always better to know than to be ignorant. But, like those economic forces, this change blurs the sense of national separateness. The similarities between people, as well as the differences, become more apparent; the supposed distinctiveness of nations grows less sharp-edged; one day, perhaps, it may even become harder for tomorrow's equivalent of Serb politicians to persuade their people that tomorrow's Bosnian Muslims are an inferior breed.

Between them, these three challenges to the nation-state look pretty powerful. So is the nation-state, as the tongue-in-cheek first paragraph of this article suggested, inevitably about to be replaced as the basic unit of global politics? The answer is no, for two reasons. None of the possible replacements, when you take a closer look at them, seems to have much real solidity. And the nation-state may have more durability than people realise, because it is still the sole possessor of what is needed to be that basic unit. Take the two points in turn.

### Why the alternatives won't work

One dreamy successor to the nation-state is certainly not going to happen. The disappearance of communism has not opened the door to the emergence of a one-world system. Until the final failure of the "world community" in Bosnia in 1995, many people still clung to the belief that, after the cold war, the "end of history"—in Francis Fukuyama's misleading phrase—was at hand. Such people reckoned that most countries would no longer have any serious differences of opinion with each other about politics and economics; that they could therefore, seeing things in broadly the same way, use the United Nations as their instrument for solving minor disputes and so keeping the world tidy; and that in this way the foundations would be laid of an eventual system of global government.

It could not be. Countries have long quarrelled, and will continue to quarrel, about many things besides ideology. Anyway, the end of the cold war's particular clash of ideas was not the end of all ideological argument; consult any ardent Muslim, or any earnest exponent of "Asian values". The world remains explosively divided.

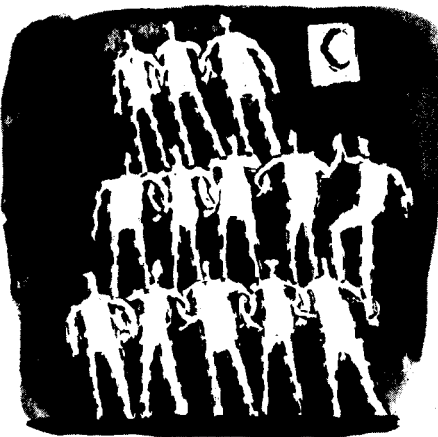


By the end of 1995, almost everybody has come to understand this. That fond post-cold-war illusion was the result of a failure to look clearly either at the lessons of history or at today's observable facts.

Ah, says a sharper-eyed band of optimists, but surely the past year's progress towards freer trade, under the aegis of the new 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—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 glide forward into a global political unity.

Nor is there much plausibility in a sec-



ond suggested alternative to the nation-state. This is the idea that various groups of today's nation-states, wanting to belong to something stronger, will gather together into big 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 worryingly talked of a future "clash of civilisations."

This idea, unlike the one-world dream, does rest on a basis of observable fact. Countries that belong to the same "culture-area"—meaning that they have grown out of a shared body of religious or philosophical beliefs, and a shared experience of history—often behave in similar ways long after the event that originally shaped their culture has passed into history.

The ex-communist countries in the Orthodox Christian part of Europe, for instance, seem to find it harder to become free-market democracies than those in the Protestant-Catholic part, perhaps because the Orthodox area never 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 may well be 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 alliances, 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 move towards a merger of Muslim states. Even the Arab 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 that 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 seems to accept the free-market bit, but believes that 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 they accept democracy, want to run it like 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 more open-minded Islamic revivalists, who insist that there should be a democratic 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 Leekuaneyewia. Their dotted lines will continue to reveal large numbers of those boringly 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 controlled 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 reliable 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-haut-en-bas* specimen of 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 more ob-



scure 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 nation wanted. But even they were different from Louis XIV. 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 shakes hands with the concept of government by consent.

The sense of being “we” can come from a shared language, as it unitingly 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 differences of religion and in the memories of long-ago frontier wars between different culture 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 they got round 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 sepa-

rates 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 would 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 place, and on both occasions there were solid grounds for such a sense of identity. The first time was when the Roman empire hammered 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: *Cives 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 Europe 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 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; they are, with minor variations, subdivisions of a single civilisation.

The underlying argument of those who now pursue a separate European unity 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.

