

ALASDAIR ROBERTS

SUPER

STATES

**EMPIRES OF THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

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Superstates

Empires of the Twenty-First Century

Alasdair Roberts

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Epigraph

Sometimes I like to compare the European Union as a creation to the organization of empires. Empires! Because we have the dimension of empires.

José Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission, 2007

India is such a huge country. It is not a scooter whose direction you can change easily. A forty-compartment train takes time.

Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, 2015

One should be mindful of possible danger in times of peace, downfall in times of survival, and chaos in times of stability.

Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China, quoting the *Book of Changes*, 2014

The forces that divide us are deep and they are real.

Joseph Biden, President of the United States, 2021

Notes

“Barroso: European Union Is ‘Non-Imperial Empire,’”
Euractiv, July 10, 2007.

“PM Modi Townhall with Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook Headquarters,” NDTV, September 27, 2015.

Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China, Volume 1* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 304.

Joseph Biden Inaugural Address, January 20, 2021.

1

The Experiment

In this century, the world will conduct an extraordinary experiment in politics and government. By 2050, almost forty percent of the planet's population will live in just four places: India, China, the European Union, and the United States. These are superstates: polities that are distinguished from normal states by expanse of territory, number and diversity of people, and social and economic complexity. Never in human history have so many people been crowded into such a small number of polities. The least populous superstate - the United States - will contain almost as many people as the vast British empire did at its peak in 1914.

How should these immense and complex polities be governed - and can they really be governed at all? There are no easy answers to these questions. The superstates themselves do not have much experience to draw upon. The European Union is scarcely thirty years old, and the republics of India and China are less than eighty years old. In the sweep of history that is not much time. Moreover, that short history is not reassuring. Modern India and China suffered from internal upheavals for decades after their creation, governing much smaller populations than they have today. The United States is the oldest of the four superstates, and for most of the last century it has enjoyed political and social stability. But the United States, as the least populous and wealthiest superstate, might also be the easiest to govern. And recently even it appears to be coming apart at the seams.

Looking to other modern states for lessons on governance does not help much either. Political scientists often hold up Denmark as a model of good practice, but it is not immediately obvious how anything we might say about Denmark would apply to China, which has 240 times as many people and 230 times as much land.¹ The Indian capital of Delhi by itself has three times as many people as Denmark. And Denmark is not an unusually small country. As we shall see later in this chapter, the typical modern state has roughly the same population and territory. There is an immense disparity in circumstances between the four superstates and most countries.

We might also look to history for advice on how to govern big and complex polities. In the two millennia that preceded the early twentieth century, empires rather than states were a common form of political organization. Like superstates, empires encompassed vast territories and diverse populations. But anyone looking to empires for lessons on governance will be disturbed by what they find. Empires were fragile enterprises. Imperial rulers were always struggling to prevent collapse. Rulers were fortunate if their empires lasted more than three or four generations.

Of course, superstates are not exactly like empires. The rulers of modern-day China and India have access to technologies that make surveillance and control of people easier than in the age of empires. But rulers of superstates carry heavier burdens too. Imperial rulers did not worry about improving the welfare of ordinary people by providing public services like education and healthcare. The people they governed were not crowded into cities where it was easy to organize against central rule. Subjects of empire could not read or write, they did not have the internet and cell phones, they could not travel and assemble easily, and they were not brought up on the

modern-day doctrine of human rights. Leaders of superstates must manage populations that are more restless and demanding.

Superstates are a hybrid form of polity. They carry the old burdens of empire, such as holding diverse communities together and managing other hazards to which empires were unusually susceptible because of their scale and complexity. Superstates also carry the burdens of modern statehood, including the duty to govern more intensively, provide more services, and respect human rights. Superstates are different from other states because they carry these twin burdens.

The aim of this book is to provide a framework for understanding how leaders of superstates might carry this heavy load in theory, and then look at the history of each superstate to see how they have carried it in practice. While doing this, I will try to overcome two divides in scholarship. The first is a divide between countries. Within academia there are China scholars, Americanists, India scholars, and Europeanists. Each group tends to use a distinct vocabulary to examine what are sometimes imagined to be exceptional problems of governance. I will try to bridge this divide by showing how leaders in each superstate grapple with similar problems and sometimes experiment with similar solutions.

The second divide is between past and present. Even though the age of empires has passed, the scholarly literature on the governance of empires has burgeoned in recent years. But this scholarly work is often regarded as a form of purely historical inquiry. The possibility that there might be lessons for the governance of modern states is not recognized. I will suggest that features of empire survive within superstates, and that we can draw on our growing

knowledge about empires to understand the tensions that operate within extensive and complex polities today.

Imperial rulers experimented constantly with different ways of holding their empires together. Central control over everyday life would be tightened or loosened, power within the imperial court would be concentrated or diffused, and the imperial creed would be revised and applied with more or less dogmatism. The same sort of restless experimentation goes on within superstates. No superstate is governed as it was one or two generations ago. Moreover, no two superstates are governed in the same way today. China is structured as a centralized authoritarian state. By contrast, the European Union is a highly decentralized polity with a little democracy at the center and a lot of democracy below. India and the United States fall somewhere in the middle, but still with important differences in the structure of government and practice of democracy.

These differences in governing strategy are shaped but not determined by the history of each superstate. Every day, leaders in each superstate make complicated choices, under conditions of immense uncertainty, about the best way of managing hazards that are compounded by scale, diversity, and complexity. Most of the time, leaders appreciate that the wrong choice about regime design could have fatal consequences. Like empires, superstates are perceived as inherently fragile structures. They never achieve the level of stability that is considered the hallmark of successful modern states. Awareness of this persistent fragility is essential to survival because it makes leaders vigilant about new dangers.

Imperial rulers were often tempted to close ranks and tighten control so that they could respond decisively to new threats. This tactic sometimes had the unintended

consequence of undermining empire, by overwhelming the capacity of central authorities to make and execute intelligent decisions.² The same temptation operates within superstates, accompanied by the same danger of perverse results. But this centralizing tendency poses an additional danger within superstates, which did not trouble most imperial rulers. Democracy and individual freedom might be sacrificed in the attempt to improve the odds for survival. In the eighteenth century, Montesquieu argued that liberty was only possible in states of “mediocre size.”³ Some wonder whether China is proving Montesquieu right today.

We are entering the age of superstates. This book will explore the governance challenges that will dominate this age. We want to understand how leaders hold superstates together in the face of extraordinary strains and shocks. We want to speculate about what life within superstates will be like for ordinary people, and how modern ideas about democracy and human rights can be squared with the pressures of governing vast and complex polities.

I will begin by explaining the difference between the states and empires, and how the age of empires gave way to the age of states and next to the age of superstates. Then I will describe the plan for the rest of the book.

Defining States and Empires

Today, states are the most familiar form of rule. Almost all the world’s land is claimed by states, and almost all of us are citizens of at least one state. A state is typically defined as an assemblage of institutions – consisting of a leadership group, a civil bureaucracy, an army and police force, and so on – which has effective control over a defined territory.⁴ The international community – the “society of states” –

generally acknowledges the right of each state to govern its territory as it likes. Recently, though, expectations about the kind of control that states will exercise within their territory have risen. Leaders lose the respect of other states if they fail to maintain internal order and control of their national borders, if they abuse their citizens, and if they cannot adequately monitor economic and social life inside their country.⁵

There is no minimum size requirement for states. Tuvalu is recognized as a state even though its three south Pacific islands account for only ten square miles of land and eleven thousand people. However, there is some expectation that people living within a state will share a culture, language, and understanding of history. That is, people are expected to constitute a nation, or at least to have the potential to become a nation. Strictly, this is not a prerequisite for statehood: multinational states do exist. But multinational states are regarded as exceptional and fragile.⁶ The world looks sympathetically on ethnic communities within multinational states that demand autonomy because they have been maltreated by the central authorities of those states.

There are no empires in the world today, so we talk about them in the past tense. Like states, empires were constituted by an assemblage of institutions that maintained control over a territory and population.⁷ But empires were distinguished from states in five ways. First, size mattered. The territory contained within an empire was vast, by the standards of the time when the empire existed. Indeed, empires tested the limits of how much territory could be governed by a central authority, given the available methods of travel and communication. Over-extension – claiming more territory than it was possible to

hold – was a common explanation for the collapse of empires.⁸

Empires also differed from states with respect to the intensity of control exercised over territory. The standard for empires was lower. Often, imperial leaders exercised control over parts of their domain indirectly. When new territories were acquired, local elites were allowed to stay in power so long as they recognized the empire's ultimate authority.⁹ One result was that methods of local administration often differed substantially across an empire. Ordinary people might see little difference in everyday life after they had been absorbed into an empire, because local elites and traditional political structures remained in place. Unlike the leaders of modern states, imperial rulers rarely felt a strong obligation to improve the lives of ordinary people throughout the empire. They were not encumbered by the obligation to respect and advance human rights.

Control became even more tenuous at the edges of every empire. This produced a third difference between empires and states. Modern states aspire to have well-marked, well-defended, and stable borders. The edges of empires were often more ambiguous, permeable, and changeable. They were frontier zones that shifted as imperial fortunes waxed and waned.¹⁰

Empires were also distinguished from many modern states by their sense of self-importance.¹¹ Elites and denizens of empires often shared the belief that they were charged with propagating a particular vision of social order.¹² In the nineteenth century this was called the civilizing mission of empire. Sometimes this mission was founded on religion, but not always: for example, the British empire was said to be founded on the secular ideals of law, representative government, and free trade.¹³ Imperial authorities tried to

civilize people already living within the borders of their empire, and they justified imperial expansion as a way of bringing civilization to the broader world.

The civilizing impulse should not be exaggerated. It varied between empires, and over time within empires, depending on circumstances. Furthermore, imperial rulers had limited ability to impose their way of life on subjects. Commands from the seat of empire were often ignored or resisted.

The civilizing mission was especially difficult because of the fifth distinctive feature of empires: the size and diversity of their populations.¹⁴ People living within an empire did not constitute a nation. They were divided in many ways - by culture, religion, language, historical animosities, or race. Imperial rulers might try to temper some of these differences, or to inculcate some sense of a higher common purpose among disparate peoples. But there was no expectation that all differences would dissolve and that a single nation would eventually emerge. Persistent diversity in ways of living was an inescapable aspect of empire.¹⁵

The Long Age of Empires

“Empires,” the American writer Irwin St. John Tucker observed in 1920, “are as old as history itself.”¹⁶ More recently, historian John Darwin has described empire as the normal form of political organization throughout most of history.¹⁷ One of the earliest, the Akkadian empire, was formed when Sargon, ruler of Akkad, conquered other city-states in the Tigris-Euphrates valley in present-day Iraq over four thousand years ago. It collapsed within two centuries, maybe because of climate change.¹⁸ Later empires were bigger and sometimes more durable.¹⁹ The Roman empire survived for five centuries and at its peak was seven times larger than the Akkadian. The Mongol

empire, which arose in the thirteenth century, was five times larger than the Roman empire but held together for scarcely sixty years. The British empire at its peak was even bigger, spanning oceans and governing one-fifth of the world's population.

Little more than a century ago, empires were still the dominant form of political organization on the planet. Around 1910, Britain and other European imperial powers asserted control over more than eighty percent of the planet's land surface.²⁰ (See [Figure 1](#).) The Qing and Ottoman empires accounted for much of the remainder. The Qing empire collapsed in 1911, followed by the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, and the Ottoman empire in 1922. But other empires survived and even thrived. Tucker, writing in 1920, was certain that empires would continue to play the "leading role" in human history. The British empire reached its zenith in the 1920s. Three states - Germany, Japan, and Italy - tried to construct new empires in the 1930s and early 1940s.²¹ World War II put a stop to these projects and led to the collapse of the other European empires as well. But not immediately: Britain was still shedding colonies in the 1980s. Some argue that the long age of empires only ended in 1991 with the demise of the Soviet Union, which had taken over the lands of the Romanov dynasty in 1917.

The World of States

Today we live in a "world of states" rather than empires.²² The transformation from one dominant mode of political organization to another was gradual. The modern concept of the state began to form in Europe in the sixteenth century. As kings battled one another they tightened their hold on territory and improved their ability to raise armies and collect taxes. The principle that kings were sovereign

within their borders was recognized.²³ By the end of the eighteenth century, central authorities in emerging states were busy mapping land, counting people, encouraging industry, and cultivating a common identity among subjects. In the nineteenth century, this process of statebuilding accelerated. The state we know as the United Kingdom was established in 1801, Italy was finally unified in 1870, and so was Germany the following year.

The nineteenth century was a period of transition between the age of empires and the age of states, and terminology was often jumbled.²⁴ Some European empires of that era were conceived as hub-and-spoke arrangements, with a European state at the hub and colonies at the end of each spoke. This hub-and-spoke model made sense for transoceanic empires, because colonies were thousands of miles away from the imperial seat. But this model did not fit land empires like Russia and Austria-Hungary. These were described simultaneously as empires and states. Similarly, Germany defined itself as an empire after unification in 1871 but was conceived as a single state at the same time. After acquiring overseas colonies in the 1880s, the German empire was also regarded as a hub-and-spoke enterprise with the German state at its center.

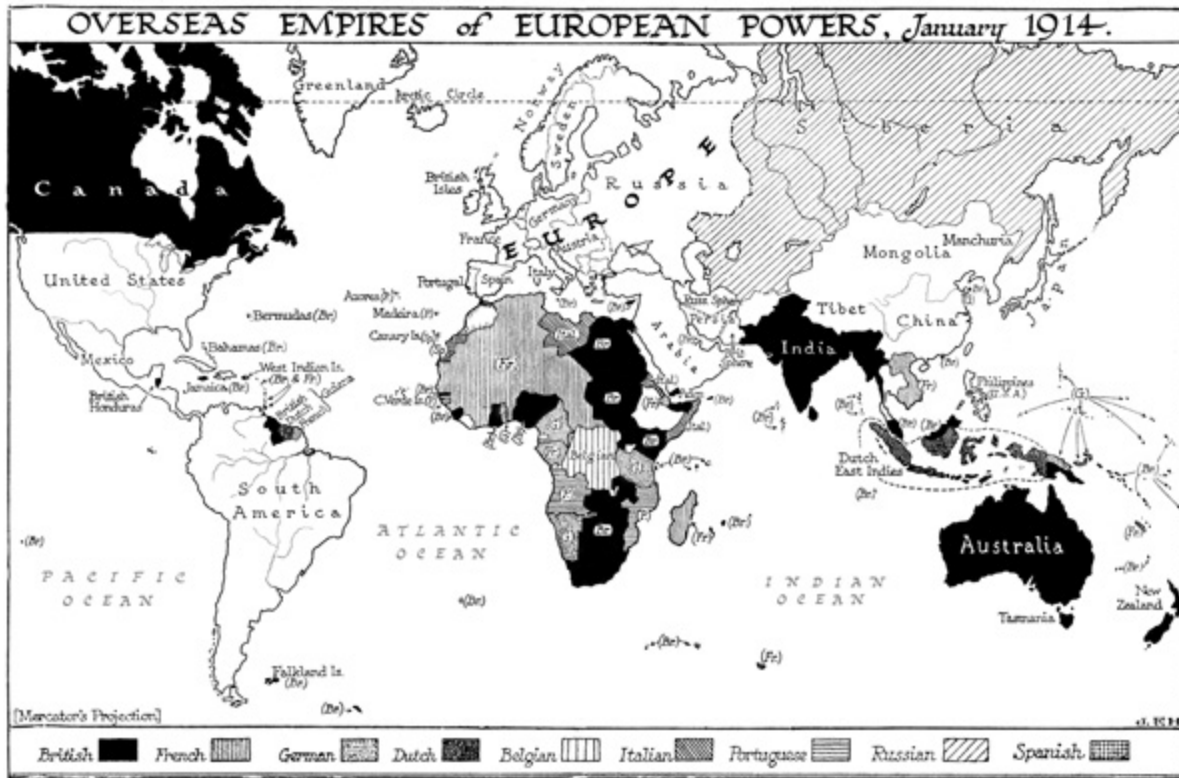


Figure 1 Overseas Empires of the European Powers, 1914.

Source: H.G. Wells, *Outline of History* (New York, Macmillan, 1921).

Terminology became simpler after the extinction of empires in the twentieth century. States were recognized as the “basic building block of the world political map.”²⁵ The overseas possessions of hub-and-spoke empires were transformed into states, while provincial boundaries within land empires turned into borders between newly formed countries. More than sixty states were formed as the British empire shrank throughout the twentieth century. Fifteen more were created when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. In 1945, when the United Nations was established, there were seventy independent states on the planet; today, there are almost two hundred. Flags of all states now fly in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York City. Most of these flags are less than sixty years old.

Since the turn of the nineteenth century, there has been debate about whether states needed to have some minimum size. This was an argument about what was necessary for a state to thrive, not about legal requirements for statehood. Over the course of two centuries, the dominant view about minimum size has shifted dramatically.

In nineteenth-century Europe, bigness was considered a virtue. European countries were divided into two groups at that time. There were six “great states” - Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Italy, and Russia - and several “lesser states” like Belgium, Denmark, Holland, Portugal, and Sweden. The distinction was based on territory and population. Denmark had only two million people in 1880, and Switzerland four million; by comparison, France had forty million and Germany, forty-five million. Many believed that lesser states would eventually be swallowed up by the great states. A French politician claimed this was an inevitable phase of social evolution.²⁶

An obvious weakness of small states was their inability to resist the mass armies of great states that swept across Europe throughout the nineteenth century. France mobilized an army of two million men when it declared war on Germany in 1870, and Germany replied with an army of 1.5 million men.²⁷ By contrast, Denmark marshalled only 70,000 men when it went to war with Germany in 1864 and was crushed as a result.²⁸ Even in times of peace, small states had little influence. They were doomed to be “nobodies” in international affairs, British journalist Walter Bagehot declared in 1866.²⁹

Small countries also suffered from economic vulnerability, especially as great states put up tariffs to protect their own industries. This policy of industrial protection had been recommended by the economist Friedrich List in the early

1800s. The goal, List explained, was “perfection . . . [of] the various branches of production” within national borders. List warned that his policy could only succeed in states with “a large population and an extensive territory.” Small states, lacking a large internal market and access to neighboring markets, could never become rich.³⁰

Nor could small states achieve cultural excellence. Bagehot believed that they lacked the numbers necessary to sustain a “vigorous intellectual life.”³¹ Too many of the best minds would be tied up in government - and even there, a shortage of talent would produce inferior results. “Small politics debase the mind,” Bagehot said.³² Bagehot’s compatriot Lord Acton agreed, dismissing small states as “impediments to the progress of society.”³³ A small country, said Friedrich List, “can only possess a crippled literature, [and] crippled institutions for promoting art and science.”³⁴

By the end of the nineteenth, the lesser states appeared to be doomed. “The day of small nations is gone forever,” a British diplomat pronounced in 1894.³⁵ A German economist predicted that the world would be preoccupied with the construction of large states for years to come.³⁶

Indeed, some intellectuals speculated about how big countries could be. In 1883, the British historian J.R. Seeley predicted the emergence of “a larger type of state than any hitherto known.” Seeley was thinking about the United States and Russia - countries that had ten times as much territory as the great state of France, and twice as many people. New technologies like the railroad and telegraph made it possible to build these new super-sized states. Seeley warned that they would upend international politics. “The old level of magnitude” would no longer be adequate for security, prosperity, and cultural achievement. The great states of the nineteenth century would become

“unsafe, insignificant, [and] second rate” in the twentieth century.³⁷

The futurist H.G. Wells had a similar vision and thought that the United States was a model of where the world was heading. “This new modern state,” Wells said, was “an altogether new thing in history”: there had never been “one single people on this scale before.” And Wells did not expect the United States to be alone for long. He predicted that Russia, China, India, and a unified Europe would gain similar status by the twenty-first century. “We want a new term for this new thing,” Wells said. But he did not say what the new term should be.³⁸

States Get Smaller

Seeley and Wells were right in the long run. In the short run, however, gloomy predictions about the prospects of lesser states were mistaken. The “world of states” that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century was very much a world of small states. The median population of the world’s states in 2020 was just 8.5 million people – roughly that of Switzerland, which counted among the lesser states in the nineteenth century. Half of the world’s states have less territory than Portugal, another of the nineteenth century’s lesser states. Some researchers even specialize in the study of micro-states, which have a population of less than a million people.³⁹ There were only two micro-states in 1960 – Luxemburg and Iceland – but now there are almost forty.⁴⁰

Why were predictions about the demise of lesser states off the mark? Because circumstances changed, so that the disadvantages of smallness were reduced. At the same time, some burdens of bigness became more obvious.

Granted, small states still worried about national defense in the late twentieth century. As in the nineteenth century, they lacked the money and manpower to maintain a strong military force. Even if Estonia conscripted every adult into military service, it would still be outnumbered by the present-day armed services of neighboring Russia; and even if it spent every penny of its national income on defense, it could not match Russia's current military budget. Other small states are outgunned just as badly.

But the odds that powerful neighbors would take advantage of this vulnerability were lower in the decades following World War II than they were before World War I. There were critical changes in attitudes, institutions, and military technologies. Before 1914, national leaders saw war as an acceptable way of advancing national interests. War was more easily justified under international law and soldiering was celebrated in popular culture.⁴¹ Technological limitations meant that wars unfolded slowly. Rulers did not worry that military engagements would turn into total wars threatening the very survival of state and society.

By 1950, the world had changed. New technologies increased the pace of conflict and the risk of escalation. Rulers and citizens understood the horror of total war. As a result, attitudes about the legitimacy of war as an instrument of policy changed radically. International law now defined aggressive war as the "supreme international crime."⁴² The principle of non-aggression became a building block of the post-World War II international order.⁴³ The overall result was a dramatic decline in wars between states after World War II. Small states thrived in this new and more peaceful environment. Of course, Russia's attack on Ukraine in February 2022 might make us wonder whether this environment is collapsing. It is too soon to know. The Russian invasion might prove to be an

exceptional case that demonstrates the illegitimacy of aggressive war in the modern age.

The economic challenges of smallness also diminished in the late twentieth century. Consider the case of Singapore, a city-state with a population of only five million people. It cannot produce many of the goods and services that are required by its people. Singaporeans are more dependent on foreign trade than almost any other country in the world. In the nineteenth century, this seemed like a recipe for economic failure. But Singapore prospered after World War II, transforming itself into one of the richest countries in the world, measured by per capita GDP.⁴⁴

This transformation was made possible by changes in the international economic system. Protectionist policies were discredited after the economic crisis of the 1930s. After World War II, leaders of the major economies created international institutions that curbed the ability of governments to impose tariffs and other protectionist measures.⁴⁵ This free-trade regime became more robust over the following decades. The average tariff imposed by major trading countries declined from thirty percent before the 1940s to less than four percent by the early 2000s.⁴⁶ In this new world, small countries were able to prosper.

Similarly, it was no longer obvious that small states must be cultural backwaters. Because of technological improvements, smallness no longer meant isolation. Intellectuals and artists from small states connected easily with peers in other countries. Citizens could import books, music, and movies, while the cost of producing these things domestically also declined. Because of the boom in international migration, many small countries had large diasporic populations in other countries that were connected to their homelands by the internet and inexpensive air travel.

While the disadvantages of smallness declined over the twentieth century, problems of bigness became more obvious. In particular, the work of unifying big countries – of fusing people into one nation – proved more difficult than expected.

Here, we must remember to be precise about language. Sometimes we talk as though states and nations are the same thing. They are not. A state is a political structure that exercises control over a defined territory, while a nation is a population that recognizes itself as a single community, sharing a language, culture, and understanding of history.⁴⁷ A state whose population is unified in this way is called a nation-state. All the great states of the nineteenth century aspired to become nation-states. Their model was France. In the eighteenth century, most people living in territory claimed by the French state did not speak French and knew little about life beyond their own villages.⁴⁸ Rulers of the French state worked deliberately to forge a nation by establishing a universal system of primary education, standardizing the language, and many other measures.

At the time, it was widely believed that states could not endure unless their people constituted a nation. German philosopher J.G. Herder dismissed states containing mixed nationalities as “patched-up contraptions” that would inevitably fall to pieces.⁴⁹ British philosopher John Stuart Mill maintained that states with diverse peoples could survive only when ruled with an iron fist. “Free institutions,” he insisted, “are next to impossible in a country made of different nationalities.”⁵⁰ But European leaders in the nineteenth century were confident about their ability to avoid such dangers. France, they thought, had shown how to forge a diverse population into one nation.

This confidence was shattered by the late twentieth century. Although states often achieved some degree of commonality among their people, minority cultures were often stubbornly resilient. Scotland still defined itself as a separate nation three centuries after its formal union with England in 1707. In Spain, years of repression could not erase the distinct identity of people in Catalonia and the Basque Country. The authoritarian rulers of Yugoslavia could not forge a common identity among Serbs, Croats, Bosnians, and Slovenes. Old identities persisted in regions of the Soviet Union despite decades constructing a “new Soviet man.”

Before World War II, states sometimes used violence as a tool for nation-building. They tried to exterminate minorities or to dissolve their culture by forced resettlement. However, states found it harder to use such tactics after World War II, as ideas about human rights were popularized and entrenched in international law.⁵¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, promises protection against state violence and respect for the cultural rights of all people.

Another tool for the integration of great states, economic policy, also proved to be less effective than expected in the late twentieth century. National leaders thought that large countries would hold together if they had a single, integrated economy. This meant careful economic planning. Faith in the capacity of governments to undertake economic planning was strong in the first half of the twentieth century but dissolved in the second half.⁵² As capitalism developed, market dynamics were harder to monitor and regulate. After the 1980s, many governments stopped trying to guide their economies so closely. The implications for cohesion within large countries were substantial. Free-market policies produced more inequality

between social classes and regions, which fueled political polarization and instability.⁵³

The collapse in faith about economic planning was one aspect of a larger problem with big states. Leaders struggled because of the scale of decision-making. The center of government was deluged with problems that were complex and interconnected. This was not an entirely new problem: in 1913, journalist Norman Angell had observed how the Russian empire suffered from “the stupidity of giants.”⁵⁴ In the mid-twentieth century, leaders in many large states believed that they could overcome this handicap by building computer-powered bureaucracies to tame the tsunami of information. But these bureaucracies often proved to be slow and clumsy. Stress, exhaustion, and distraction at the apex of government often led to bad decisions.⁵⁵ Overload within the centralized Soviet state contributed to its eventual collapse.⁵⁶

By the late 1990s, the typical state was not only small; it also appeared to be increasingly inconsequential. Cross-border trade and finance was growing so rapidly that national economies seemed to be melding into one global economy. The internet was knitting together social movements in many countries, producing a new kind of integrated global politics. It seemed that emerging problems like climate change could not be solved by national governments acting independently. States appeared impotent under these new conditions, and some experts predicted that they would simply “wither away.”⁵⁷ In 1995, Kenichi Ohmae described states as “bit actors . . . [in] today’s borderless world.”⁵⁸ French diplomat Jean-Marie Guéhenno said states had been “bypassed” and no longer functioned as “the natural space . . . of political control.”⁵⁹

Even the most powerful state, the United States, seemed to be diminished by globalization. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States was sometimes described as the sole remaining superpower, and even as a hyperpower. But many disagreed. “Globalization affects the United States as it does other countries,” the sociologist Anthony Giddens warned in 1993. Giddens believed that the United States was weaker than it had been during the Cold War, and that its power would continue fading away.⁶⁰ International law had always recognized the formal equality of states, but globalization appeared to be making them more equal in practice, inasmuch as they were becoming equally irrelevant.

The Age of Superstates

In the new millennium, however, history took another turn. It became clear that reports about the death of the state were premature.⁶¹ After a wave of terror attacks in the early 2000s, governments tightened border controls, extended surveillance activities, and policed their territories more severely. The global financial crisis of 2007 to 2009 led to another bout of governmental activism, involving closer supervision of banks and international capital flows. Pressure from populist movements after 2010 led to further retreats from open-border policies. There was even more governmental action because of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. “The state is here, the state is present,” Italy’s prime minister reassured citizens during the pandemic, as he promised “extraordinary measures” to protect lives.⁶²

Power inequalities between states were also accentuated in the new millennium. Following the terror attacks of 2001, the United States asserted its prerogatives more forcefully. It invaded Iraq despite international protests and

opposition of allies such as France and Germany. The American political scientist Michael Mandelbaum declared in 2005 that the United States would serve as “the world’s government” on matters of security and economic policy. Mandelbaum argued that the United States in the twenty-first century should act like “great empires of the past” by imposing order on world affairs.⁶³ President Donald Trump retreated from international commitments after his inauguration in 2017, but not because he disagreed about America’s pre-eminence within the world of states. The United States, he insisted, was still “the greatest and most powerful Nation on earth.”⁶⁴

The United States is not alone in making claims to greatness. So does China. In the first half of the twentieth century, China was a troubled country, debilitated by civil war and foreign invasions. It continued to suffer from economic backwardness and political instability after the proclamation of the People’s Republic in 1949. In 1975 China had a smaller economy than Canada, but forty times as many people.⁶⁵ Today China has been radically transformed. By some measures it has already surpassed the United States as the world’s biggest economy.⁶⁶ China’s leaders are becoming bolder in celebrating their system of authoritarian rule and claiming a leading role in international affairs.

India, too, is claiming its “rightful place” as a great power.⁶⁷ Like modern China, the Indian Republic was born in a moment of violence and struggled to hold itself together for years. A million people may have died in Hindu-Muslim conflict when British-controlled territory was divided between the new states of India and Pakistan in 1947.⁶⁸ Fears about “centrifugal forces” – religious, regional, and caste divisions – persisted for decades. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi maintained a state of emergency for