Can superstates survive?

Alasdair Roberts
School of Public Policy
University of Massachusetts Amherst

15 January 2019

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

**Macro-level**: Study of the governance strategies that are devised by leaders to advance critical national interests, and the ways in which these strategies influence the overall architecture of the state.

**Meso-level**: Study of the design, consolidation, administration and reform of specific institutions, networks of institutions, and programs within the public sector.

**Micro-level**: Study of the attitudes and behavior of citizens, employees and other people within the public sector.

An age of superstates

- Post-World War II "world of states"
  - 195 states; formal equality and sovereignty
- But varied in size, and size matters
  - Average about 40MM people, but wide variation
  - Literature on small and micro-states
- But what about superstates?
  - Population of 300MM and over
  - US, EU, India, China
  - Half of world’s population, 60 percent of global GDP
- Comparable to empires
  - Dominant form of political order before WWII
  - "Age of European empires" 1870-1914

Without precedent

- Population of China or India equal to world population in 1875
- China has three times more urban dwellers than planet in 1918
- More literate people in India today than on planet in 1960
- Delhi & Mumbai have more people than "great nation" of France in 1850
- In 2017, Chinese airlines carried more passengers than all world's airlines in 1975
- Energy needs of China today are 15 times that of British Empire at its peak
Empires always die

- a “natural life span like individuals” (Ibn Khaldun)
- “like waves in the ocean, successively rising and disappearing again” (Horne, 1775)
- "No empire is permanent" (Doyle, 1986)
- Challenges:
  - Diversity of population
  - Political and economic inequality
  - Over-extension
  - Factionalism and dissipation within leadership group

Signs of mortality

- Relatively young political orders
- Three of four have suffered civil wars
  - India: Partition, 1971
- India and China at "elevated warning" in Fragile States Index
- Questions about survival of EU
- Concerns about polarization, dysfunctionality in the US

Superstates vs empires

- Similarities:
  - Scale
  - Heterogeneity
- Differences:
  - Better knowledge, technologies of control
  - Restrictions on war
  - Larger populations
  - More restless populations
    - Literacy, urbanization, connectedness, mobility, marketization
  - More complex and dynamic economies
  - Higher expectations of states
    - Understanding and control of territory
    - Attention to human rights of population

Empires rise and fall, flourish and decay. They have their day, which may be long and prosperous, but which is followed by a black night of ruin. A perpetual empire which shall stand through the revolutions of time and the changes of opinion, may be the dream of the warrior and statesman, but will never be realised in fact. Whatever human hands may build, time will shake down in its restless march.
Four strategies for governing

- The era of convergence is over
- China: one-party authoritarianism
- European Union: diplomatism, technocratism
- United States: liberal democratic federalism, weak center
- India: liberal democratic federalism, strong center

Problems of cohesion

- Definition of purpose/mission
  - The unifying "idea of . . ."
  - Difficulties with appeals to nationality, culture, race
- Architecture of control
  - Extent of control over daily life
  - Direct or indirect control
- Integration of economy
  - "Single market" as device for unification, inclusion
  - Capacity to shape market activity, control "market forces": capitalist impulses vs. considerations of state

Problems of citizenship

- Rejecting the formal distinction of citizens and subjects
- Citizenship as a unifying idea; bolstering support for the center
- Defining the content of citizenship
  - Thick or thin?
  - Equal or differentiated?
- Implications:
  - For extent and mode of control
  - Capacity, stability

Problems of leadership

- Debate: is democracy possible at scale?
- Multiple considerations:
  - Representativeness
    - Of sections as well as people
  - Competence
    - Substantive and diplomatic aspects
  - Discipline/Focus
    - Constant attention to survival
Problems of external relations

- Self-absorption
  - Risk of distraction with internal challenges
  - Bias toward internal markets / protectionism
  - Sense of exceptionality
- Risk of over-extension
  - Impulse to "civilize" / extend the unifying idea
  - Demand for energy, other resources, markets

Problems of adaptation

- No “static, idealized Aristotelian model of empire” (Parsons, 2010)
- Delaying the day of reckoning
- Preserving creativity
  - Toynbee’s concern
- Balancing institutionalization vs. flexibility at scale