

Superstates

Empires of the Twenty-First Century

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polity

Contents

<i>About the Author</i>	vi
1 The Experiment	1
2 Empires Always Die	23
3 Are Superstates More Durable?	42
4 The United States: An Old Hazard Returns	60
5 India: The Centralizing Reflex	81
6 China: Authoritarian Dilemmas	102
7 The European Union: Cohesion without Coercion	121
8 The COVID Test	143
9 How to Rule a Superstate	163
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	173
<i>Notes</i>	174
<i>Index</i>	226

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

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