

THE NATURE OF THE NATION-STATE SYSTEM

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Today international society consists of something like 120 units that we call states. The United Nations, with a roster expected to reach 110 in the Seventeenth General Assembly, is approaching universality; only a few nonmembers remain outside, such as divided Germany, Korea, and neutral Switzerland. This represents a marked increase in the size of the nation-state system over the past 20 years, largely owing to the liquidation of European-held empires and the emergence of so many countries in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Yet despite this growth, the international community remains an exclusive club. Each member-state has certain characteristics entitling it to admission—a defined territory, a permanent population, the capacity to enter into relations with other states, and most important of all, sovereignty. For every state is the supreme law-maker and law-enforcer within its defined territory, recognizing no external authority as superior to itself. It is this characteristic especially which has so much to do with determining the nature of the state system, as we shall explain below.

Now while there is a natural tendency for man to regard the territorial state as the center of his universe, and to attribute to its permanence and durability in the scheme of things, we should not overlook the fact that other political units have served man in the

past, disappearing from the scene as they have failed to fulfill his needs. Nor have all of these been identified with territory as is the modern state. Men in earliest times came together and organized their lives on the basis of kinship in the family, clan, or tribe. And in the evolution of Western civilization, the present territorial state was preceded by the extreme political fragmentation called feudalism, and before that by the empire and the city-state. All of these political units—the clan, the tribe, the city-state, the empire, the duchy and fiefdom, the modern territorial state—are alike in the fundamental objectives they have sought: (1) security and (2) prosperity. The preamble of the Constitution, for example, lists the provision of the common defense and promotion of the general welfare among the paramount concerns of the United States. As the course of history shows, failure to realize the aims of security and prosperity by any political unit has been responsible ultimately for its downfall. Also to be found in these political units, including the territorial state, are the same bedrock causes of conflict, both economic and political—the desire for food and resources unevenly distributed, and the drive for aggrandizement. Moreover, major changes have generally occurred through the use of force, the application of overwhelming power.

It will be instructive to examine briefly the world of the Greek city-state because, in microcosm, that world so much resembles our own. Like the nation-state system, the city-state system was pluralistic, made up of a number of units varying in size and strength but autonomous, subjected to no outside authority. Physical propinquity, different resource patterns, and economic needs, made for interdependence of the city-states. Some of them as maritime communities met the pressure of population upon a limited resource base by engaging in colonial enterprises, establishing settlements, and gaining access to food and raw materials away from home. Others sought security and welfare by imposing their control over adjacent states or peoples through a superior show of force. Thus the Greek city-states, too, practiced imperialism. That same mechanism, the balance of power, operated again and again to frustrate the ambitions of empire entertained by the larger city-states—Athens, Sparta, Thebes or Corinth. The hegemony established by any of these over the others was short-lived, galvanizing them into unified action against the source of danger. Leagues or alliances came into being only to disintegrate after the common threat was ended or because of internal discord. Intrasystem rivalries were forgotten when the Greek city-states banded together against the common enemy, imperial Persia, in the 5th century.

Yet the city-state ceased to be a viable political unit; it could no longer provide, singly, for the requisite security and prosperity of its people. It was too small; some kind of effective and lasting union was needed if the city-state was to survive. The inability, however, of the city-states to create a wider union led to their absorption by Philip and Alexander. The city-state, in short, foundered on the rock of something resembling modern nationalism—the

commitment of the people of individual city-states to their own way of life, their inability to rise above their narrow parochialism.

If pluralism was the central characteristic of the Greek city-state system, unity became the order of the day under the Roman Empire, a unity which eventually embraced all of the Mediterranean world. Through conquests, the Roman domain expanded; political genius was responsible for its longevity. Bringing with them law and peace, extending citizenship to subject peoples, the Romans carried through a program of gradual assimilation. They accepted many practices and institutions where they went. They built a lasting empire on the solid footing of consent. So large did these holdings become, however, that it grew increasingly difficult to maintain effective control from a single center. Countermeasures developed in both the North and the East, economic disintegration sapped the empire's strength, and internal clashes weakened the fabric of imperial society. Rome, no longer able to supply security and welfare, collapsed.

Still, the appeal of unity, though gone, exerted an attraction over the minds of men in the ensuing centuries. For once again pluralism characterized the political order. Briefly, it is true. Charlemagne dominated Western Europe. And in return for Charlemagne's military support, Pope Leo III revived the imperial idea, making Charlemagne the Emperor of the Romans in 800 A.D. The empire lasted only a short while, returning again, however, when Otto the Great was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in the 10th century. Thereafter the title was associated with one of the Germanic rulers. But the facts did violence to the pretensions of empire. At most, that empire was confined to a group of German principalities; beyond these, it exercised no real authority. In Europe there existed real political decentraliza-

tion, a multiplicity of duchies, fiefdoms, and principalities enjoying a large measure of autonomy, over which wider kingdoms had only a nominal control. Whatever limited unity there was grew out of a common religion centered in Rome and fostered by a joint effort of the various crusades against the Eastern infidel from the late 11th century beyond the middle of the 13th century.

Great forces at work in the 14th and 15th centuries, however, undermined the institutions associated with the Middle Ages and led to the formation of a new political unit, the territorial state. Contributing to this outcome was the growth of trade and urban centers accompanied by the rise of a new commercial class; the alliance between this class and the ruler, prince or king, bent on imposing order by force upon a congeries of petty principalities often at war with each other; and the schism within the Roman Church eventuating in the Reformation, the spread of Protestant sects, and an end to religious unity in Europe.

The territorial state, representing a centralization of political power where before there had been diffusion, was early associated with the personal ruler or dynasty who had brought this about. Starting in a small cluster of Western European states—England, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands—the new political unit has spread, attaining worldwide coverage over the past four and a half centuries. Situated as they were on the Atlantic, these first territorial states were in a position to convey their greater power via the ocean highways, and to impose that power upon the weaker societies found on the great frontier opened up by exploration in the Americas, Africa and Asia. The European overlords brought with them not only their superior technology and administrative techniques; they also introduced their methods of political organization. The subordinated groups gradually adopted the same claims made

by their rulers—the right to control their own affairs without interference. For there is a fundamental conflict between the assertion of sovereignty by the territorial state, involving in essence the rejection of any external authority, and the practice of imperialism, which means the extension of one state's control over another people and thus the denial of the latter's right to sovereignty.

The striking contrast between conditions within the territorial state and those obtaining outside in the growing community of states, lies in the order of the one as against the chaos of the other. That is, while sovereignty brought peace, regularity, and stability to the territorial state, the refusal of the state to recognize any authority above itself made for anarchy and conflict in the relations between states entertaining identical views about their sovereign rights. The great achievement of the territorial state internally has been its ability to bring about peaceful change, adjusting conflicts through a highly developed machinery of government. In international society, by contrast, that machinery is rudimentary, operating with nothing like the efficiency it has in domestic society.

The absence of a supranational law-making, law-interpreting and law-enforcing authority armed with a monopoly of force compels each state to rely on its own efforts in order to preserve its identity and to realize those aims which it considers vital. As a consequence every state is obsessed with maximizing the power, human and material, available to it in order to increase its security.

But power is always relative, involving a relationship between one person, group, or political unit and another. Thus one nation's increase in power is bound to be viewed as a threat by one or some neighboring states. Politics everywhere involve a struggle among competing groups for power, for control

by one or more groups, over the behavior of the other. That competition in turn is the inevitable outgrowth of the divergent—and unlimited—wants and needs impelling group organization and activity. The nation-state is simply the largest, most cohesive, and demanding of the many groups to which men belong. But just because peace-making and peace-keeping processes do not function nearly so effectively as they do within the territorial state, interstate relations come closest to resembling a naked struggle for power. Politics, while necessarily involving conflict among groups, also requires some measure at least of cooperation. In the international arena, obviously, elements of conflict far outweigh elements of cooperation. The great dilemma for the nation-state system has always been, and still remains, how to bring about peaceful change in a world whose only certainty is change, thereby making impossible any and all attempts to fix a given status quo permanently. In sum then, given an environment of international anarchy, the constant striving for security by each state only serves to intensify the storms of insecurity by which the world of nation-states is buffeted.

Reflecting these conditions, states have employed war as a means to further their important objectives. The very acceptance of the legality of war well into the 20th century was proof of the reliance on self-help and, ultimately, violence by states in resolving disputes. Not for nothing has war been termed the "endemic disease" of the nation-state system. The history of that system could almost be described as one of chronic warfare punctuated by brief respites of peace. This is not to say that the character of war has remained the same. Before the territorial state system had fully evolved, war became total as Europe was convulsed in the 16th and early 17th centuries by religious controversy. At last the Treaty of Westphalia

in 1648, accepting a pluralistic community of territorial states and the principle of religious toleration, ushered in a new age. During the next two centuries wars still occurred but they were, compared to the earlier religious conflicts, limited in their aims and prosecution, dynastic rivalries for the most part fought for modest stakes by practitioners schooled in the rules of the game.

All this was to change, however, after 1900 in what the French writer, Raymond Aron, has aptly called "The Century of Total War." Once more, and far more completely, war took on a total aspect, pervading every level of society, making immoderate demands upon its participants and seeking total, not limited goals. But owing to the introduction of a new factor it may well be that there shall never again be a total war. That new factor is, of course, the technological revolution in weapons achieved through the invention of thermonuclear bombs. It has profoundly altered the nature of war, precluding resort to the big war between wielders of this awesome power. If man's actions were always guided by rational motives, this belief in the elimination of total war might be soundly based. There is little in the record of man's behavior, unfortunately, to justify such confidence in his rationality. The big war which nobody wants, arising simply from human miscalculation, excessive ambitions, or sheer madness, cannot be ruled out. And even if it could, war would still have to be reckoned with as a very real possibility in its limited forms, both conventional and unconventional. In fact, the very unsuitability of total war in the modern world puts renewed stress upon adequate preparations for limited war in all its varieties.

An extremely influential force moulding the nation-state system and not to be ignored in any critique of this system is, of course, nationalism. Every

political unit in history has drawn strength from an emotion analogous to that of modern nationalism. For no political unit will endure for long unless it is able to arouse and maintain among its members a sense of loyalty and devotion. Now modern nationalism is distinguished from manifestations of pride in being associated with a tribe, city-state or empire, by its greater intensity and the extent to which it reaches and moves nearly all members of the nation-state. The rulers responsible for centralizing political power in the first territorial states won the active allegiance of only a portion of their subjects. The transition from the dynasty to the nation-state, starting with France in the late 18th century and thereafter gaining rapid momentum elsewhere, was marked by the identification of the masses, the people themselves, with the interests of the state under which they lived. They and their energies were enlisted in the causes of the state: they suffered and gloried in its defeats and accomplishments. A widely held expectation in the 19th century was that once the different peoples sharing this sense of identity, of common purpose, had satisfied their desire to run their own affairs, conflicts among national groups subsisting under their own governments would evaporate. But the triumph of nationalism almost everywhere has had no such result. In actuality nationalism has only abetted the drive for power and influence among the nation-states. It has magnified that sense of superiority over other groups which lies at its core. It has distorted the attitude of national groups in their relations with each other and justified any course of action that a people wish to pursue, however partisan and self-seeking their real motives might be.

A central question which must be asked about the nation-state is whether it has been able to meet the demands upon it, as upon all political units, for security and prosperity. For, after all, it

was the search for these prime goals and the failure of the preexisting system to provide them that led to the birth of the territorial state. The purpose of centralizing political power and of establishing the ruler's supreme authority was to achieve more security. And in this regard, the territorial state had some success. By augmenting its own power and refusing to acknowledge any higher authority, the state originally did bring security to its own defined territory and inhabitants. In effect, its territory became impermeable. Even in the economic realm everything was done to further the exclusiveness of the state. Dependence was undesirable, so each state in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries strove for self-sufficiency, an excess of exports over imports in trade and the accumulation of gold holdings. The colonial acquisitions of this imperial epoch were sought because they furnished supplies of raw materials required by the mother country and absorbed surplus products available from it. Thus the state, in both the political and economic spheres, followed a policy of exclusiveness.

But certain fundamental forces worked gradually to defeat this policy of exclusiveness. Under the impact of the industrial and communications revolutions, states became interdependent, their self-sufficiency destroyed by the vastly increased production and circulation of goods, greater specialization, and higher standards of living. The maintenance of prosperity within the state became hostage to economic movements over which the state could exercise little control. A single international economy had come into being; no state was immune from the influences exerted by that economy, and prosperity was indivisible. Nor has the state been able to insure the security of those under its jurisdiction. Thermonuclear weapons combined with accurate delivery systems have shattered the state's impenetrability. Territorial demarca-

tions and defensive measures afford no effective barriers against attack; the state no longer is invulnerable.

For these reasons, many observers of the international scene argue that the nation-state, like the political units that preceded it, is in decline, headed for inevitable demise. Left to its own resources, the state just does not have the capacity to produce the requisite security and welfare. Some wider political unit, it is argued, is called for in the face of such great changes. Yet, despite these syndromes of a fatal disease, it is one of those extraordinary paradoxes that the nation-state system at the same time exhibits great vitality, as its rapidly growing membership attests. Nationalism would still appear to be the most powerful current in international society, responsible for the emergence of more than forty nation-states in the past two decades alone. To the peoples of these newly independent countries, there is no higher value than their hard-won sovereignty. In the older nation-states, it is true, extreme nationalism has lost some of its appeal as a result of bitter experience, prompting some of them to move beyond the exclusive national grouping into a wider society, as in the European Coal and Steel Community and the European Economic Community. But no one would claim, even within these European states, that nationalism has ceased to be a potent force.

How has the nation-state system been able to endure for so long if the foregoing description of anarchy, chronic instability, and collective insecurity is accurate? The answer can be found in the operation of the balance of power. With all of its shortcomings, no other mechanism has functioned so well in restraining the unbridled quest for power by nation-states. As in the Greek city-state world so in the nation-state community, would-be dominators of that community have met determined—and combined—resistance from those

states imperiled by hegemonial ambitions. And all thrusts for extensive power over neighboring countries have eventually been frustrated by that massing of counterpower which is the essence of the balancing machinery. Whether it was a Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, Hitler or Stalin, each met failure in reaching his goal.

The attitude of the United States toward the balance of power has altered to fit its role in world affairs. During our long isolation from international politics, made possible by geographical factors and a European-maintained equilibrium, the American view was one of suspicion and distaste for the balance of power, as if it were not an inevitable corollary of the nation-state system. Even involvement in World War I did not change that view. According to President Wilson, his voluntary association of states, representing a concert of organized power, would do away with entangling alliances and competition for power. It took World War II and its aftermath, however, to convince the United States that there was no alternative to participating in the balancing process. The Soviet Union by its blatant attempt to change the postwar distribution of power in its favor, forced the United States to employ its considerable strength as a counterweight. Reduction in the number of truly major powers to two has in no sense destroyed the balancing machinery. Wherever there are two or more autonomous forces, the balancing operation will take place. Admittedly the balance of power worked best when there were six or eight states of roughly equal strength, with no single one strong enough to dominate the others and uncertainty as to what the alliance groupings might be. But today the greater inflexibility implicit in a direct confrontation of two superpowers is offset by the "balance of terror," the inability in the interests of survival for either great power to resort

to total war. To meet the Soviet challenge to the balance of power, the United States has used traditional devices, constructing an intricate complex of alliances and a great military establishment. It would appear then that as long as the nation-state system survives, knowledge of the balance of power and skill in making it function are essential.

Thus far we have discussed divisions in international society. Are there cohesive forces present, binding the states of that society together? As already mentioned, a world community has developed gradually over the past several centuries, and markedly so since 1900. It is commonplace today to say that the world has been made one, brought together by the scientific, technological, and industrial revolutions. But the degree of *political* integration achieved has been comparatively small. This is not to say that progress in the evolution of a more closely knit society has not occurred. It has been outpaced, however, by the high degree of integration so typical of the national society, overshadowing and even threatening the very real gains made in the international community.

One has only to consider, for example, the various organs of the United Nations. The Security Council has been given primary responsibility for maintaining peace. But it has not been able to discharge this function when the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, have been at loggerheads. It has no preponderant force to bring to bear in the absence of agreement between the superpowers and can be paralyzed by use of the veto. Still, we should not forget that permanent peace-keeping machinery has been an invention of quite recent origin. And the same thing can be said about the General Assembly with its quasi-legislative powers as well as the judicial agency, the International Court of Justice. Neither of these are effective governmental organs in the same sense that

legislative and judicial bodies are within the national society. Nor does the Secretariat of the United Nations have anything like the power of the executive branch in the nation-state. Nevertheless, rudimentary though these institutions may be, however restricted their strength, they have demonstrated their value in the handling of many international conflicts. Moreover, there is the hope that out of the experience acquired in operating these international organs, they will be endowed over time by their creators, the nation-states, with increasing power and responsibilities. After all, though the nation-state system is more than 450 years old, only in the past fifty years have there been any experiments in building permanent international government. It is far too early to dismiss these experiments in limiting the struggle for power as ineffectual. Until recently men were primarily concerned with devoting their full energies to their own nation-states; creation of a more stable international order tended to be neglected.

Today, the necessity for such an order is more pressing. Some see in the universal fear of annihilation an irresistible impetus driving men to erect a supranational government capable of regulating relations between states. This I regard as too sanguine a view. Men often do not act in their own best interests; men and nations cannot be presumed to be so rational that because destruction confronts them they will avoid it. Besides, the pull of nationalism remains so strong that any world government, no matter how compelling or logical the need for it may be, seems a long way off. Those essential elements of consensus upon which a lasting community is built just do not exist.

There are also many who believe that the way to world peace is through the development of world law. But if Professor Quincy Wright's analysis of the evolution of political society is correct, this is to put the cart before the horse.

Arguing by analogy to the domestic order, Professor Wright brings out that the first step, preliminary to the later growth of effective law, the legislative process, and administrative organs, is the bringing of peace to the society in question. Generally such peace has been imposed by overwhelming power. In the larger framework of international society, is any state capable of dominating the globe? Not even a superpower, the United States or Russia, seems likely to have that capacity or at least the ability to maintain the peace once established. Despite the instruments of control now available to a universal imperial power, the world is too large, too diversified to be ruled from any single center for long. The Soviet Union, bent on carrying through its design for world state, has run into serious difficulties already trying to dominate the narrow sphere of Eastern Europe. Moreover, its role as undisputed interpreter of Marxist doctrine has come under sharp attack within a communist camp torn by centrifugal tendencies. As for the United States, its democratic ideology, its commitment to the self-determination of peoples peculiarly unfits it for the task of world empire-building.

A review, such as we have made here, of the characteristics of the nation-state system might easily arouse gloom about its prospects. One is almost prompted to say, as does the title of an English musical play, "Stop the world, I want to get off." For international society does not appear headed toward any imminent and fundamental change. This means then that so long as there is a pluralistic society composed of sovereign units, there will be wide divergencies of interests and deep-rooted con-

flicts whose resolutions will not be easily found. Some broader political unit than the individual nation-state seems essential if men are to find the security and prosperity they seek. The creation of such a political unit or units would not represent a radical departure from the existing state-system. Moreover, there is a device at hand which might be used, a device particularly familiar to Americans and one which they have put to work with remarkable results in their own country. This is, of course, federalism, the creation of a central government of limited powers to reap the advantages of unity and, at the same time, retention of the political identity of the component states in order to preserve a desirable diversity. Transferred to the international scene, federalism could be adopted by those states of, let us say, the Atlantic Community, building upon shared values, beliefs and experience. The foundation stones for an edifice of federalism already exist in such notable advances as the European Economic Community, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. It would be foolish to minimize the obstacles in building this federal system. Such a venture calls for unusual vision, initiative and political genius, qualities always in scarce supply. What is more, time is running out. There are two further alternatives, but one seems impractical and the second grim. As we have pointed out before, creation of a world government is unlikely. On the other hand, continuation of the nation-state society along its present highly differentiated course impels us to move beyond the national community toward federation—and soon.