The age of continental politics

INTRODUCTION

Although globalization is portrayed as a culprit around the world, there is however also a persistent contrary trend: an ever-increasing scale in politics. After the age of city-states and then of nation-states, we are now in an age of 'continental politics'. And this brings changes to the organization of society.

KEY FACTS

- In 2015, China's population is 1.38 bn and India's is 1.31 bn. The U.S has a population of 325 million, Brazil 206 million and Russia 146 million. By contrast, the largest European country, Germany, has a population of 82 million.
- According to a 2010 Census, China has 145 cities with more than a million residents. Europe has 33 such cities and the Netherlands has none.
- The world's largest public squares, often in emerging markets like China, Russia, Mexico and Brazil are of a much vaster scale than those of early modern cities like Florence, Amsterdam or even London and Paris. All the world's ten largest internet companies are either American or Chinese.

ANALYSIS

The modern age began with the reign of city-states: Venice, Florence, the cities of Flanders, Amsterdam and Portugal: all small commercial polities that were flexible and experimental. They developed modern principles of seafaring, bookkeeping and finance, global trading hubs and urban lifestyles. However, the philosopher Machiavelli already warned the Italian city-states that they should unite, or larger powers would come to dominate them. In the next era of the nation-state, countries like France, England and Germany came to dominate and introduced new principles like parliamentary democracy, industrialization and colonization.

We are now in a third phase of 'continental politics'. In the 19th century, Tocqueville argued that the U.S. and Russia were destined to each rule half the world. The currently emerging countries China, India and Brazil are, like the U.S. and Russia, the size of continents. What characterizes continental politics?

Everything is bigger. Many cities in China and India are the size of average European states. Such cities are becoming political forces and they will also transform the experience of city-dwelling. That the Netherlands is marketing Zandvoort as Amsterdam Beach and the Muider slot as Amsterdam Castle illustrates the new scale of contemporary cities. Secondly, continental polities face greater risk of disruption and chaos, which is why they align with platforms to survey their population in much more extreme ways than traditional nation-states. Fast-growing internet platforms in such states can have hundreds of millions of users in their home country ('AGFA' in the U.S., 'BAT' in China and India's biometric system Aadhar), making them extremely powerful. Third is a different role for citizens. Public squares in the city-states of Amsterdam and Florence were meant for citizens to deliberate and discuss freely. The squares in London and Paris are more regimented, developed in the age of mass politics for soldiers to march on. The open spaces in squares in Beijing, Brasilia or Saint-Petersburg create another vast space in which an anonymous crowd is spectator of a powerful state. Finally, on the international front, city-states created trading posts, nation-states had colonies and continental states sought broad spheres of influence.

What does this mean for Europe? In crucial domains like security, energy and innovation, Europe's nations need to pool resources to realize a continental scale like their competitors. Another strategy is for strong urban delta regions to connect directly with their peers globally. Europe needs answers to continental politics, or it will face the same problem that Machiavelli warned the Italian city-states about.

POTENTIAL BENEFICIARIES

- ‘Early-mover’ continental polities, like the U.S. and China. Negative for polities that developed continental governance relatively late, like Europe and India.
- Well-organized urban regions with 10 million+ inhabitants as these will become central nodes of organization (against nation-states).
- Scalable tech-companies, like communication, security and financial companies, which facilitate the relation between continental polities and their subordinates.