

Dr Robert Crowcroft

We are all now accustomed to being assured that something called 'globalisation' has revolutionised the world over the last fifteen years or so, and is continuing to do so. Commentators, politicians and academics deploy the phrase willy-nilly, to frame an explanation for all manner of problems. 'Globalisation' is a catch-all. It seems sophisticated. People tell us that the phenomenon is changing everything, from the experiences of everyday life to the character of international politics itself. Trade, migration, and international organisations mean that the nation state system is weakening and being supplemented – or, according to some, even replaced – by a world of global governance, multinational companies and cross-border social movements. As a result, globalisation constitutes the most profound change to the Westphalian international system since its inception.

That all sounds very grand. Unfortunately, it isn't really true. It is a myth. More: it is a myth with a pernicious effect in misinforming and distorting public debate about contemporary international politics. Why is that? The theory of globalisation flows from an assumption that the key drivers of the international system are now non-state based entities and ideas. That could be the World Bank or it could be Burger King. And its advocates emphasise issues which generate a degree of international co-operation – like climate change, war crimes, economic crises and rogue regimes.

But the problem is that, when subjected to scrutiny, the evidence for such extensive co-operation doesn't really stack up. Still less does the co-operation that does occur constitute a systemic change in international relations. How much unanimity between nations has there really been on issues, like Iran, which present an obvious danger to much of the so-called 'global community'? Brokering agreement between separate polities remains as difficult as ever. Even the North Atlantic states, most menaced by Islamism, cannot agree between them on what to do and where. Remember Iraq. And for that matter observe Afghanistan, Lebanon and Pakistan today.

But the year 2010 has provided the most brutal evidence yet of the divided nature of international politics. The failure to agree on what to do about the international financial crisis – spend, cut, what and when – is an almighty nail in the coffin of the globalisation thesis. And if states can't agree amongst themselves on something like that, when are they going to? The answer, of course, is that they won't: nations have different interests. The response of Germany to the current troubles is instructive. When the Eurozone crisis broke, Germany – the nation, after all, with the strongest anti-nationalist, pro-internationalist public discourse – immediately reverted to a state-centred, 'Germany first' view of the continent.

It was made abundantly clear to the crisis-hit countries like Greece that if they wanted German financial support they would have to toe Berlin's line – or else. I wonder if you asked the people

of Greece if they would really say that we live in a new world, or an old one in which power is in the hands of states and the strong ones will dictate to the weak? And if the Euro were to fall, as some analysts predict it might, then it is a safe bet that it will be because Angela Merkel calculates it is not in Germany's national interests to prop up other states.

Take climate change, for a final example. The lack of co-operation on the issue of global warming is powerful. Might it be – surely not – that politicians simply engage in a rhetoric of co-operation on this issue, turn up to the summits to advertise their moral virtue to a domestic audience, and settle for gesture rather than action on a subject which, they repeatedly inform us, represents a grave threat to civilisation as we know it?

Perhaps that is being cynical; perhaps not. But anyway, shouldn't we expect a degree of international co-operation in the world as it is today? Most of the regions of the world are, after all, part of an informal American protectorate. The United States acts as a comfort blanket. The power of the US, and its consequent position as a sought-after balancing force in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and Asia is surely more significant as an explanation for what limited co-operation does take place than a mysterious phenomena known as globalisation. Does anyone really believe that the adherence of states like Russia, China and Saudi Arabia to prevailing international (translated: US sponsored) norms is anything more than verbal gesture or, alternatively, driven by the dictates of national interest?

It is difficult to hold that those states display a commitment to co-operation as a good in itself – not least when the principal concern of all those countries is security relative to their regional rivals. Most of the world does not consist of Guardian-reading intellectuals able to safely pontificate on the virtues of human co-operation. On the contrary, most of our planet is a brutal place; and it has got more brutal in the last two decades. The North Atlantic nations only enjoy the means to lapse into wishful thinking because, as Robert Kagan so memorably put it, the United States defends us from the dangerous Hobbesian jungle lurking just beyond the city walls.

Globalisation, then, displays a problematic understanding of even the dynamics that are claimed to support the thesis. More worrying still is that its advocates largely wish away those issues that do not. With the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the USSR led to the creation of many new states. Virtually all of them were formed on the basis of ethnic national identity. Nationalism was strong in those countries; it remains so. Think of the powderkeg that the Balkans is, even in peace. The states in that region continually seek to subvert one another by sponsoring minorities across the borders. Bosnia-Herzegovina and Macedonia are particularly unstable. Nationalists, not good cosmopolitans, are in power in the Balkans. Verbal pronouncements that 'we' are now 'European' rather than nationalist is, of course, maintained by the regimes in Kosovo, Albania, Croatia and Montenegro to keep EU money flowing in; but it is a fiction with little basis in political reality.

However much the leftist intelligentsia would like to pretend that nationalists are merely a dying breed of last-stand reactionaries, it is self-evidently the case that nationalism is not in decline in the Balkans, or anywhere else in Europe for that matter – as the elections to the European parliament repeatedly underline. Rather, it is flourishing, and the current internal political chaos

of the EU is evidence of that.

Is nationalism, or its concomitant political language of 'national interests', weakening elsewhere in the world? Hardly. It is increasing in potency throughout Asia – most strikingly in Japan. It is a uniquely powerful tool for the politicians of Latin America. And the parts of the world where 'nations' are historically weak – the Middle East and Africa – have witnessed a resurgence of their own identities: religious and tribal. Is the Islamic world transcending its past and becoming something 'new'? The claim is laughable. And what explains the virtual collapse of the African states system, conflict throughout that tragic continent over the last twenty-five years, and casualty lists in the millions? Poverty? AIDS? No. Rather, the willingness of states to interfere in their neighbours' affairs for fairly conventional reasons of resources, territorial aggrandisement and domestic popularity. How is this done? Like in the Balkans, by sponsoring one's tribal and ethnic brethren across the border. Recall Africa's 'great war' in the Congo, where Uganda, Zimbabwe, Angola, Chad, Burundi, Rwanda and Namibia all jockeyed for advantage. Tribal loyalties have proven more potent than the nation states drawn up by the white man. In the African wars, there have been hundreds of thousands of rapes of the Other; in the Congo, the pygmies were hunted as game and eaten. This is taking us further away from the harmony promised by globalisation, not closer to it.

Globalisation, then, is singularly unable to deal with issues of nationalism and ethnicity (i.e. the basic instincts of the human race, however much some Western elites do not like to admit that). There is, admittedly, much difficulty in identifying clear trends in the post-Cold War world, which may explain the popularity of the globalisation framework. But the one obvious trend is nationalism and ethnicity. Neglecting events that do not conform to a more optimistic vision favoured by those whose preoccupation in life is the eradication of 'discrimination' may make us sleep easier at night. But it does little to advance analysis of what is happening in the world.

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