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Aims of this presentation

- Briefly describe shifts in the “world of states” over 19th and 20th centuries
- Describe the emerging era of superstates
- Identify four problems of governing at scale
- Ask about challenges in the Indian case

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19th C: The era of great nations and empires

The present age . . . is no doubt an age of great empires.
-- F.S.B. Skinner, 1889

The European world is to be made up of great nations.
Small nations do not mingle in the mighty strife of Europe.
-- Walter Bagehot, 1866.

The day of small nations is gone forever.
-- Sir George Grey, 1894.

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Late 20th C: The era of small states

- Increase in states: 60 in 1906 → 194 in 2019
- Most states have
 - fewer people than Switzerland
 - less territory than New Zealand
- Forty micro-states of under one million
- Why the change?
 - Declining costs of smallness
 - Rising costs of scale / problems of “giantism”
- States irrelevant? “Borderless world”

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21st C: The era of superstates

- Politics of unprecedented size
 - India, 1.7 billion people by 2050
 - China, 1.4 billion
 - European Union, 550 million
 - United States, 390 million
- Forty percent of the world's people will live in these four polities
- India, China will each exceed world population in 1880
- Median population of other 162 states: 12 million

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An experiment in governance

- Can these superstates be kept intact?
- Can they thrive?
 - Maintaining national security
 - Providing personal security and basic services
 - Promoting economic growth
 - Maintaining democratic institutions and promoting human rights
- Looking at the long run

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Why might superstates differ?

- Expansiveness
 - Complicates communication and control
- Diversity
 - Transformation into nation-states unlikely
- Scale/complexity of social and economic interactions
 - Complicates monitoring, top-level decision-making, regulation

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Signs of strain

- United States
 - Jill Lepore: "a domestic cold war"
 - Red-blue polarization, sclerosis, incompetence
- China
 - Leadership "obsessed with stability"
 - Xinjiang, Hong Kong, "mass incidents"
- European Union
 - Brexit, Italeave, Greece
 - Article 7 proceedings against Hungary, Poland

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Divergent strategies for governing at scale

- China: authoritarianism, centralism, state-led capitalism
- India: liberal democracy, “centre-heavy” federalism, parliamentarianism, planning legacy
- US: liberal democracy, weak-center federalism, presidentialism, anti-statism
- EU: technocratic/diplomatic confederalism, economic “regulocracy”

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The end of the end of history

- Fukuyama, 1989: “the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government.”
- Bush, 2002: “a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise.”

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Lessons from history?

- Large empires as a better benchmark than small nation-states?
- A dominant form of political organization until 20th century
- Often characterized by confidence at peak
 - “The British flag has never flown over a more powerful and united empire.” -- Lord Curzon, 1918
- But empires are inherently fragile
 - Average duration: 200 years

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Problems of empire (1/2)

- Problems of control
 - Building an architecture that allows sufficient control within territory
 - Determining the tightness of central control
- Problems of purpose
 - Defining the “civilizing mission” or vision of social order that justifies state action
 - Establishing the intensity of commitment to that vision / the measure of tolerance

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Problems of empire (2/2)

- Problems of leadership
 - Competence and mentality
 - Support to avoid overload
 - Succession
- Problems of adaptation
 - Shifting priorities and architecture of government in response to changing circumstances
 - Political, administrative, military, economic adaptation
 - Overcoming problems of distraction, myopia, sclerosis, coordination

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Are superstates more robust? Not necessarily

- More advanced information technologies
 - √ Improved ability to control
 - X Improved ability of people to mobilize
- More restless populations
 - X Urbanization, education, marketization
- Higher expectations of states
 - X Control over internal affairs
 - X Respect for human rights
- Changed norms of interstate relations
 - √ X Prohibitions on aggressive war
 - X Contested sovereignty: R2P, preemptive interventions
 - X Increased surveillance

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What challenges in the US? A first cut

- Problems of purpose
 - Collapse of neoliberal consensus
 - Rising ethno-nationalism
 - Revived "sectionalism"
- Problems of control
 - Conflict, skepticism over role of center
- Problems of leadership
 - Competence, gridlock, mentality of rule
- Problems of adaptation
 - More than a decade of drift

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What challenges in India? A first cut

- Problems of purpose
 - Challenges to secularism, tolerance
- Problems of control
 - Shortfalls in administrative capacity
 - Overreach in center-state relations
- Problems of leadership
 - Churn, recruitment problems at the apex?
- Problems of adaptation
 - Economic transformation and inclusion

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