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School of Public Policy

# Governing at scale: The challenge for India and other superstates

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## Three forms of governance

- The age of empires
  - Until mid-twentieth century
  - Expansive, populous, diverse
  - Lightly governed, usually autocratic
  - Often an imperial or "civilizing mission"
  - But also neglect of most subjects
- The age of states
  - 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries
  - Smaller, more intensively governed
  - Often homogeneous "nation states"
  - Often democratic and sensitive to human rights
- **The age of superstates**
  - Politics with the scale of empires and burden of states

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## 20<sup>th</sup> C: The age of (small) states

- States: intensively governed, hard borders, aiming for homogeneity ("nation-states")
- Increase in states: 60 in 1906 → 194 in 2019
- Most states have fewer people than Switzerland and 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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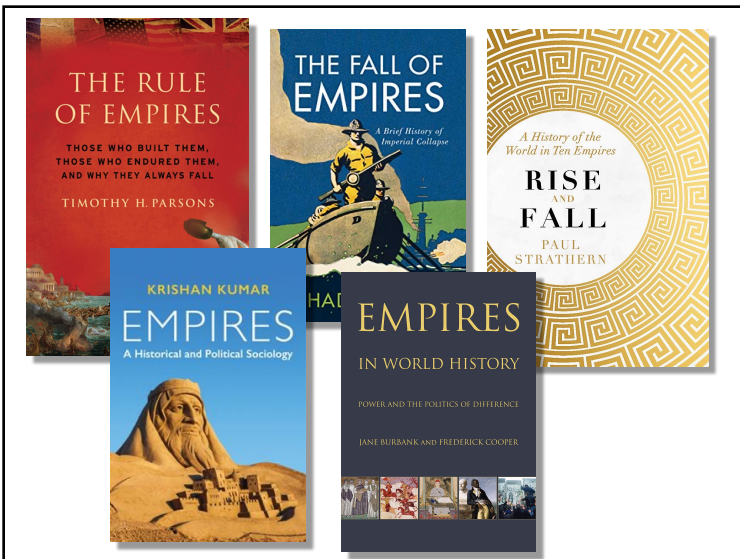
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## The advent of supersized polities

- India, 1.7 billion people by 2050
- China, 1.4 billion
- European Union, 440 million
- United States, 440 million
- **Forty percent of the world's people will live in these four polities**
- Each will have more people than British Empire at peak
- India, China will each exceed world population in 1880
- Median population of other 162 states: 12 million

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## Can polities this large be governed?

- Expanse, population, diversity, complexity
  - Unlike empires: people are educated, urbanized, mobile, wired
- Will superstates share the "fate of empires"?
  - Can superstates be **kept intact**?
  - Can they **thrive**?
    - Providing security and services
    - Responding to strains and shocks
- Can they do this while:
  - Respecting **human rights** and
  - Maintaining **democratic institutions**?

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## Signs of strain in all superstates

- United States
  - Jill Lepore: “a domestic cold war”
  - Red-blue polarization, gridlock, incompetence
- China
  - Leadership “obsessed with stability”
  - Xinjiang, Hong Kong, “mass incidents”
- European Union
  - Brexit, Italeave, Grexit
  - North/South tensions during financial crisis
  - East/West divisions: proceedings against Hungary, Poland
- India
  - Communal, regional, urban-rural tensions
  - Downgraded to “electoral autocracy”
  - What is the “idea of India”?

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## Central questions about governing superstates

- The design of **administrative systems**
  - How tightly to regulate economy and society?
  - How much regulation from the center and how much “indirect rule”?
- What sort of **leadership structure**?
  - How far should authority be divided?
  - What are the principles of selection – democracy, technocracy, diplomacy?
  - What is the “mentality of rule”?
- What sort of **justificatory creed**?
  - What is the mission or purpose of the superstate?
  - How strictly should this creed be enforced – how much tolerance?
- Gambling on all aspects of regime design

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## Four answers on how to govern

- **China**
  - Unitary state
  - Control by Communist Party
  - “soft authoritarianism”
  - State capitalism
- **India**
  - “Quasi-unitary state”
  - Parliamentaryism
  - Strong central bureaucracy
  - Constitutional liberalism
  - Highly regulated economy
- **United States**
  - Federalism
  - Separation of powers
  - Two party system
  - Weak bureaucracy
  - Constitutional liberalism
  - Lightly regulated capitalism
- **European Union**
  - Confederation of states
  - Mixed democratic models at country level
  - Technocratic/diplomatic at center
  - Constitutional liberalism
  - Regulated capitalism

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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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## Variation over time: United States

- The pre-1933 formula for governing
  - Sectional differences
  - Limited role for center
  - Emphasis on compromise and union
  - Limited democracy at center
  - Neglect of human rights
- The 1933-1980s formula for governing
  - Sectional differences gone?
  - Role of center expands
  - More democracy at the center
- The current problem
  - Sectional differences are back
  - There is more at the center to argue about
  - The structure at the center is not good at managing this conflict

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## Variation over time: India

- Nehruvian formula, 1947-1960s
  - **Centralization**
  - **Limited democratic competition**
  - Tight regulation of some parts of economy
- Breakdown of the Nehruvian formula, 1960s—1970s
  - Pressure from states, subaltern demands, economic stagnation and protests
  - **State of emergency, 1975-1977**
- Millennial formula, 1980s-early 2000s
  - Growing role for states, deregulation, communal conflicts
  - Coalition government at center, more accountability mechanisms
- Breakdown of the millennial formula and rise of “Modi-ism”
  - Slowing growth, inequalities, corruption
  - Weaknesses in central schemes
  - **Re-centralization of power at the center**
- Questions for this century:
  - What can the center do well?
  - Can democratic institutions resolve problems effectively?
  - What “glue” holds the country together?

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## Three big themes

- Distribution of capacities between levels
  - What tasks are central authorities in superstates capable of performing?
  - How much variation in "citizenship" is acceptable?
- Structure of the leadership group
  - How much and what form of democratic influence at the center?
  - What "mentality of rule" is needed at the center?
    - Vigilance, improvisation, bargaining
- Resilience in the face of shocks like COVID, climate change
  - Capacity to mobilize in response to threats
  - Capacity to adapt institutions to meet new challenges