Nations are chasing the illusion of sovereignty

By Philip Stephens

The concept of freedom to act is as compelling as it is unrealistic

The state is back. The post-1945 multilateral order is falling into disrepair. Everywhere you look, nationalism is on the march. States, established and rising, are disintering traditional notions of national sovereignty. They want to reclaim the international system created by the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. They are chasing a chimera.

For a moment, after the collapse of communism, the future belonged to a postmodern state. This state would remain the essential building block of political organisation, but would recognise shared interests. Governments would discard narrow concepts of national interest in favour of co-operative security and prosperity. Strange though it seems to say after the tumult of recent years, but the EU was seen as a model for the new international order.

There was more to this than utopian daydreaming. Globalisation has tightened the ties of economic interdependence. Threats to nations are recognisably international in character – from climate change to pandemics, from terrorism and the proliferation of unconventional weapons to mass migration. Mobile capital, cross-border supply chains and the connections of the digital age leach power from individual states. The way to recapture lost authority is to act in concert.

The mood has changed. As the rising have become risen powers they are reluctant to embrace a rules-based system – the more so since the rules were largely written by the established powers. For its part, the US is stepping back from the role of global policeman. Even postmodern Europe, where rescuing the euro demands another leap towards integration, is wrestling with tensions between the national and supranational.

The new powers – China, India, Brazil, South Africa and the rest – prefer the absolute sovereignty of Thomas Hobbes to the co-operative world of John Rawls. They imagine a landscape more like that of the 19th century, where power belonged to the states with the biggest economies and militaries, and balance was provided by competing alliances. Russia, where Vladimir Putin is reinventing the tsarist state, takes much the same view. Sovereignty is inviolable. The Westphalian principle of non-interference demands the world leave in place Bashar al-Assad’s murderous regime in Syria.
For all that it is the architect of the present system, the US has always been ambivalent about compromising its national freedom of action. Until quite recently, however, the US could have it both ways by setting global rules to its own taste. Now, Congress refuses to sign even the most innocuous of international treaties on the grounds they might impinge on sovereignty.

Barack Obama’s administration pays lip service to the new international order briefly imagined by George HW Bush after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But a US challenged by a rising China and obstructed by a morose Russia has tired of internationalism.

The unipolar moment has made way for the age of the self-sufficient superpower. More than anyone else, the US has the geography, natural resources and economy to stand back. It now prefers coalitions of the willing to grand multilateral designs.

In Europe, things are more complex. The 17 nations of the eurozone are committed to the pooling of more sovereignty, yet the euro crisis has awoken nationalist ghosts. In one breath François Hollande, the French president, speaks eloquently of the need for a European political union; in the next he is heard to rail against any interference in France’s economic affairs by the European Commission.

Britain’s Conservatives are not alone in their antipathy towards the EU. At a time of economic stress and insecurity, nationalists across the continent are humming a seductive tune. There is nothing easier than to blame “outsiders” – whether they be immigrants or Brussels bureaucrats – for a nation’s domestic woes.

There are countervailing views. I heard them in Dublin the other day at a conference on sovereignty and globalisation hosted by the Institute of International and Economic Affairs, the Irish foreign policy think-tank. Ireland has endured immense hardships in the aftermath of the global financial crash. But its commitment to the EU, and to the eurozone, is undimmed. Most Irish citizens still agree with John O’Hagan, a scholar at Trinity College Dublin, who told the conference that by sharing notional sovereignty, Ireland had enhanced its capacity to advance its own interests.

This interdependence is an inescapable reality for large as well as small states. National moods may have changed but the facts of globalisation have not. If anything, the diffusion of state power to non-state actors has accelerated.

As an ageing continent with a fast-declining share of global output, Europe has to act as one to uphold its values and interests. China is acutely vulnerable to the depredatations of climate change, and to any threats to open markets and global supply routes. For all its relative self-sufficiency, the US cannot avoid distant threats to its prosperity and security.

The paradox we are left with is a world in which state sovereignty is at once greatly prized and, when properly defined as the ability to act, increasingly ineffective. States share an unavoidable interest in replacing the old order with new arrangements to recognise mutual as well as national goals.

This is not to say they will do so. History is littered with unhappy examples in which politicians have preferred the pursuit of illusions. Next year Europe will commemorate the centenary of the bloody close of an earlier age of globalisation.

philip.stephens@ft.com

RELATED TOPICS United States of America, China, European Union