Nation-state and the media

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The current state of the nation-state that arose historically along with the advent of capitalism has generated a debate about whether this is a political form that is either already extinct or on the verge of becoming a museum curiosity. On the one hand, the tendency towards the formation of 'super-states' comprising many different nations and ethnic groups is perhaps best embodied by the European Union (EU). This 'fortress Europe,' as it has been dubbed, is poised to adopt a common currency, thus undermining one of the abiding symbols of nationalistic pride. On the other hand, some multinational states, especially those constituting the former socialist camp of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, have tended, in the aftermath of the collapse of that system, to break up into smaller, ethnically more homogeneous entities. Of course this development has not been without its convulsions as well as mercifully peaceful examples (Yugoslavia fits the former, Czechoslovakia the latter).

Another form of the convergence of nation-states into non-antagonistic groupings is the emergence in recent years of economic blocs. The path was once again paved by the EU, but it has been followed by the successful examples of ASEAN, NAFTA, and APEC, and the regretfully not so successful case of SAARC. Trade and economic considerations have helped heal old wounds and bind traditional friends and even perceived rivals in mutually advantageous material relationships. Apart from economic compulsions, political compromise and the turn from war and conflict towards peace has been in the air at the dawn of the new millennium (the most prominent examples being the Middle East and, lately, the Korean peninsula). The Subcontinent, and particularly Pakistan and India, are the glaring exceptions to this general trend. National sovereignty is being re-negotiated in large parts of the globe, not, it may be added, without resistance from historically evolved nation-states.

Do these developments mean that the pursuit by nation-states of political ends by other means, including war, is a thing of the past? This assertion may perhaps hold true for competition amongst countries of the developed world, their mutual contention for global resources and markets having provided the source of two world wars in the twentieth century. But there are holdout areas, such as the Pakistan-India relationship, where the exception serves to illustrate and prove the general rule.

As far as the drive by the developed world to dominate the South is concerned, the methodology has changed with the advent of globalisation (meaning the homogenisation along modern capitalist lines of hitherto underdeveloped states and societies). But the underlying purposes of seeking resources and markets, which have defined the global capitalist paradigm historically, remain intact, albeit in altered form (economic and financial rather than military conquest). As the cases of Iraq, Bosnia and Kosovo tend to suggest, this does not exclude the exercise of military power where diplomacy and other means have failed to achieve the objectives of the most powerful countries of the world. Nor does it exclude armed conflict between traditional foes in the South, as the Kargil crisis of 1999 between Pakistan and India dramatically highlighted.

Clausewitz, therefore, cannot be said to have become entirely redundant, despite the peace and compromise wave. But the pursuit of politics through war now has to take account of the changed nature of modern warfare. Traditional notions of valour and gallantry, which informed the battlefield ethos in past millennia, no longer appear valid in an age of highly sophisticated, technologically extremely advanced warfare. The defining characteristic of this new kind of warfare is that bravery and courage on the battlefield, long considered the foundation of the profession of arms, appear irrelevant when the enemy is engaged at vast distance through technical means (artillery, missiles, air power, to name but a few). The enemy may no longer be visible to the combatant with his or her finger on the trigger, but the awesome destructiveness of modern weapon systems is soon in evidence after the fighting has stopped, thanks to the electronic and communications revolutions.

It is this chilling trail of blood and destruction that modern means of killing leave in their wake which threaten to sicken even the most hardened warrior. Even in the past, soldiers were not always left unmoved by the sight of the havoc their own sword arms had wrought. The modern clinical distancing of the killer from his or her victim nevertheless fails to immunise him from the after-effects of the sight of mangled and burnt human bodies and vapourised material objects which appear as the inevitable concomitant of so-called 'smart' weapons. And all this is before the results of 'collateral damage' (meaning non-combatant, civilian deaths and destruction) are taken into account.

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It is true that nation-states remain wedded to their inherent nature of pursuit of national interests by any and all available means, including (admittedly more and more by way of exception) military means. However, the changed nature of modern methods of killing on the battlefield, and their unprecedented capacity for spreading mayhem and havoc, dictate the necessity to remove the 'enemy' from the category of human flesh and blood, in order to shield the nation-state's own combatants from the deadly effects of their professional endeavours. This can only be done by dehumanising, nay demonising, the 'other', portraying him as the personification of evil, in order to justify the brutality of the means employed to bring about his defeat and subjection. Without such demonisation (a la Saddam Hussein or Milosevic, their own contribution to making this effort easy and successful notwithstanding), it may not be possible to keep up the morale of professional soldiers when they are confronted with the results of their 'clinical' strikes.

This is where the media of the nation-state acquires a new importance and role. In this age of instant information gratification, it is the national media which often lends itself to the role of a cat's-paw or tool in the hands of the nation-state. It thereby contributes to the demonising of the 'other', the 'enemy', depriving him of all semblance of humanity, and in the process justifying the most callous horrors that modern warfare can inflict on humankind. For examples one does not have to travel further than the cases quoted above of Iraq, Bosnia (both during the civil war and after NATO intervened), and Kosovo. Closer to home, the role played by the media of Pakistan and India during the Kargil crisis, honourable exceptions apart, falls by and large into the category of the media lending itself to the purposes of the nation-state in pursuing its political goals through war. Whether the respective position of either side on the Kashmir issue, the right of self-determination versus the notion of territorial integrity, justify the resort to arms, is an open question when weighed against the backdrop of the new wave of global post-cold war conflict resolution by less costly means, in terms of lives and resources. Placed at the centre of such methods is diplomacy, talks, negotiations.

What the media, especially in Pakistan and India, can contribute to this effort is to create the informed public opinion about the 'other' in both countries, which would make the task of the diplomats that much easier rather than help whip up the kind of chauvinism and jingoism that was on display on either side during the Kargil episode. Only when the national media remains true to the pursuit of the unvarnished truth, no matter how painful or bitter, can it be said to have fulfilled its duty to itself, its people, and to history.

The above is the gist of a presentation made at The News South Asian Media Conference in Islamabad on July 1-2, 2000