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RETURN OF THE NATION STATE

— Walter Russell Mead

Nationalism is back; if there is one clear lesson from the politics of 2016, it is that. Whether one looks at Brexit, at the revolt against international trade agreements sweeping across both Europe and the United States, the rise of nationalist strongmen in countries as diverse as Russia, Poland, Hungary, the Philippines and Turkey, or the growing role that nationalist discourse plays in countries like China, India and Japan, a tsunami of nationalist emotion is transforming the global landscape.

Nationalism, of course, is not the only rising force in today's world. The politics of religious identity have also made themselves felt on a growing scale. The sectarian wars across the Middle East, approaching genocidal levels of violence in some cases, are shredding weak states and remaking the map of the region.

In Africa, communal conflicts between Christians and Muslims contribute to spreading violence as insurgents use religion to mobilize both internal and foreign support for their cause.

In both cases, what we see is the victory of illiberal identity politics over the liberal cosmopolitan ideals that shaped both European and North American policy in the years following the end of the Cold War.

Whether it was the European ambition to create an ever closer union among the many peoples of the EU, or the American desire (widely shared in Canada) to build a global order on the basis of liberal ideas and the rule of law, the western world based its post-Cold War policy on the belief that the new, post-Soviet world would be one of transnational institutions and multilateral cooperation.

This vision inspired a series of initiatives that transformed the world, often for the better. The World Trade Organization and the ideals of free trade it espouses have promoted the emergence of billions of people from abject poverty.

The European Union remains the most effective and ambitious project in international cooperation that the world has ever seen. On issues ranging from climate change to human trafficking, international institutions have, however imperfectly, begun to develop and implement policies that aim to address problems that have no real solution on a national scale. The extension of the legal and economic norms of the European Union into the formerly socialist countries of the Soviet sphere brought new affluence, new security and new freedom to nations who had suffered through generations of totalitarianism and war.

Yet, after 25 years of construction, the New World Order seems less secure and less hopeful than ever, and the European Union seems more disunited than it was in 1989.

Russia and China are unabashedly pursuing policies of nationalist ambition, attacking the structures and challenging the power of the liberal world order and its defenders. Nationalism and identity politics seem on the advance everywhere; liberal and cosmopolitan ideals are in retreat.

Given the dark history of nationalist passion in much of the world, and given the need for universal and rules-based institutions in a globally integrated economy, the nationalist resurgence threatens to return the world to an age of conflict and poverty. The question facing political leaders is how to respond.

There are two mistakes leaders can make: it is equally disastrous to repudiate nationalism categorically or to embrace it uncritically. While nationalism is sometimes considered (and in some forms becomes) a threat to liberal society, history shows that the right kind of nationalism can be a force for both progress and peace.

Liberal nationalism, a sentiment grounded in solidarity with one's own people and their history but open in its sympathies and attitudes toward the world, must become the basis of political culture and thought if liberal values are to flourish in the 21st century.

Nation states came into existence and have remained in existence because, in an age in which public opinion plays a large role in the policy even of non-democratic countries, the nation state occupies a 'sweet spot' in political space.

A people whose identity is shaped by a common language and common values, however artificially those bonds may have been created in the past, constitutes both a moral and political community that channels political debate and legitimizes government. The French will freely grant much more power to a French government sitting in Paris than to a European government in Brussels, and the French are not alone. Many of the most powerful actors in world politics today, countries like Russia, China and the United States are powerful because they are nation states.

States that do not represent real nations – like many postcolonial African states – tend to be weaker and less capable than states formed around a dominant national identity and culture. The European Union, similarly, is a weak international actor even as many of its member states remain strong; the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

Nationalism is and will remain a powerful force in human affairs, and efforts to build a stable world system that do not harness this power will never succeed. For political leaders today, recovering the liberal nationalism that in their different ways predecessors like Franklin Roosevelt and Margaret Thatcher once embodied offers the best hope for the construction of the stable and open order that our world so desperately needs.

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