Preserving national sovereignty in a global village

Nair, Basskaran

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SPEECH ON "PRESERVING NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY IN A GLOBAL VILLAGE", AT THE AMIC 25TH ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE, JUNE 2 1996, 2.00PM, PAN PACIFIC HOTEL

Let me first put this broad topic "Preserving National Sovereignty in a Global Village" ^{or Global Village} into proper perspective. We are exploring Asian Communications, with a futuristic time frame of 25 years (I hope I won't be around to be accountable for my comments). And we have the issue of national sovereignty operating within the global village. The questions before us include preservation of the nation state. Which begs the question, is national sovereignty under threat ? Is the threat due to the globalisation processes ? Why are we discussing this topic in a communication conference ?

Standing at the threshold of the 21st century, we live in an age where national issues are increasingly global in nature. Many of the problems need multinational, regional or global cooperation and not purely national solutions. No country can protect the value of its currency or the health of its people without the extensive cooperation of other countries. Multinational companies play a dominant role in the global manufacturing operations and global marketplace and they have a significant effect in the redistribution of economic resources at the global level. New technologies have shrunk the world into linkages and cross border activities.

At this point let me answer the question "why are we discussing this topic in a communication conference" ? The reason is that the single most important factor that has contributed to globalization

is the global communication system. Communications satellite, electronic revolution in storage and retrieval of information, jet travel, the Internet and other telecommunication linkages have woven an interdependent world. The consequences include a vision of a global village with world citizenship to boot. ~~The consequences include the~~ However the changes are too fast even for existing international institutions which are structured to cope with problems that are largely national, bilateral or at best multilateral. ~~but~~ They are not sufficiently global. ~~The~~ In the interim, there has been a proliferation of linkages to create something larger, more powerful and more capable of coping with these perplexing problems. At the same time, not all nations feel comfortable with the global communication technologies. They want national control, particularly when ~~with~~ globalization comes ^{with} the pervasive influence of the dominant global players - - be it cultural, political, military or economic influences.

Defining Nation States

Before going any further, let me define a nation-state. The basic attributes to nationhood cover definable boundaries (even if disputed) and a government entity (however unpopular) that is responsible for domestic affairs and foreign relations on behalf of the people within the definable boundaries. The nation-state system enables citizenship to be universally recognized as a legal sanction of human existence ; a stateless person does not exist in legal terms.

Historically, nation states existed about the 15th and through to the 17th centuries and largely in Europe. ~~Historically, nation states~~ ^{They} were preceded by civilisations, empires and dominant city states. ^{These} City states became focal points when money, merchant capitalism and the beginnings of the world economy took place. City states reached other pockets of civilisation through long-distance trade, political representation, religious conversion and military conquest. City states gradually gave way to nation states. Nation states maintained national borders with much greater areas of territory, and maintained administrative power within their territories. For individuals, families and societies, the nation state system provided better security. Today, in the mid-20th century and after two world wars and post-colonial struggles, we have a fragmented 184 nation-state global system. Some have yet to hold a silver jubilee celebration. As we stand at the threshold ending one century and looking forward to another, will the nation state be overtaken by some other socio-cultural-political-military framework? To revisit the opening questions--Is the nation under threat and is the threat due to globalization? We would examine the issues in the context of its relevance to communicators.

Understanding the Global Village

What are the issues before us? First, while most of us will operate within respective cultures and value systems of our nation states, our views and perceptions will be influenced, even determined, by the socio-political changes at the supranational and global levels. The changing political dynamics will influence cultures and value systems. In

Asia, China will be the economic and political powerhouse. There is even a “Chinese commonwealth” as an economic and cultural entity. There is also an increasingly important Muslim political force not only in the Middle East but also in Central Asia and pockets of Asia, though that force is roughly divided between the Shiites and the Sunnis. Russia, with an Asian presence, will balance its power between the West and China and its Central Asian countries. There will be a more cohesive European entity. We are all familiar with the global role of America.

Reflecting on these dynamics and their impact on cultures and value system much literature has been written on the subject of clash of civilisations. What it means is that the content of communication is in a state of flux. European countries and the United States, products of Renaissance and Reformation, have developed social and political institutions with a strong focus on liberty and individual rights. Most Asian countries’ value systems support disciplined behaviour and social harmony based on obedience to authority. Religion-based nation states have other values that they hold dearly and resent humanistic and philosophy-based nations imposing their values on them. Against this backdrop, the nation-states’ politicians and professional communicators have to articulate their positions to both internal and external audiences. By so doing, the politicians and commentators strengthen the nation-state system, not weaken it.

Besides, geo-politics and geo-value systems, we see globalisation affecting the economic stability and social fabric of nations. Surprisingly, it has already become a political issue in the developed

economies. Jobs are being affected. Politicians in the USA, for example, are saying that what is good for “General Motors is no longer good for America if General Motors is shutting down plants in Michigan and Ohio and opening them outside Mexico City.” (Pat Buchanan) European countries agonise over how their industrial democracies are mired in unemployment, crime and anxiety over technological change. Politicians point to the global economy and the redistribution of economic power at the world level as the cause of their problems. Will this phenomena gain momentum? I doubt, and even if it does, it bolsters the nation-state system and undermines the globalisation process.

Another global phenomena is the global capital market. Global capital markets operate independent of the sovereignty of nation-state. Will they have significant impact on the nation-state especially in the countries that have embraced the disciplines of the marketplace? The answer is yes. Vast streams of market data, massive computing power and complex statistical analysis move capital at lightning speed across borders. The trading horizons are measured by minutes and hours. Global financial markets have grown so powerful in the past decade that governments look over their shoulders at the global stock and bond markets and worry whether these markets are giving thumbs up or thumbs down to their national economic policies.

Paradoxically, ^{while} globalization ^{is} seen to erase boundaries, ^{it} has encouraged a greater focus on smaller social units, even the individual. Even the delivery channels in the global media are more niche, for example, narrowcasting, video on demand, surfing the net and so on are

more “micro” and individualistic. Historically, nations find that family, society, community, tribes, clansmen and so on ~~were~~^{are} the core units of society. ~~The more homogeneous, with the discipline, have been in the community, the better.~~ In the future however, the individual, for better or for worse, will be a more important “unit” abetted by the global media system.

Two perspectives could be noted. One, an empowered individual, a knowledge worker, working on computer technology out of Bangalore for a multinational company with headquarters in Bangkok or Baltimore has a level of conscious that goes beyond his nation to include in his mental scheme of things, the global events. Electronic technology cuts through time and space to bring him the news with immediacy and urgency. Knowledge includes his cross-border religion and culture, his e-mail, his overseas contacts, his touristic inputs, international sports, and mass entertainment. He becomes the mass middle class market in his country, lubricated by international advertising and promotions, and primed for mass consumption.

Two, global instantaneous communication however enables the smaller social units and individuals to shout for help louder and faster. Its easier to get global attention if an issue is turned into a crisis. The best lessons on communication and global PR are to be learned from interest groups and non-government agencies operating international agendas and who highlight individual interests above social harmony and the nation’s authority. These interest groups have mobilised public support taking advantage of the global media reach. They understand the

political pressure points, the communication channels and the associated political-social language to get the global village to champion and transform issues-centric causes such as environmental interests, or human rights into global interests or international issues.

Preserving the Nation State

Back to our question how to preserve national sovereignty within the global village framework bearing in mind the confluence of the geopolitical (and military) power, the conflicting value systems, the maverick financial markets and the focus on individuals and interest groups. Basically, despite the interconnecting complexities, nation states will survive and thrive for at least the next foreseeable 25 years. With some measure of oversimplification, each nation wanting to maintain its identity and unique national institutions will have to manage 3 aspects : money(or capital), message(or communication content) and social mores (or culture and traditions). On money, the capital market disciplines government to financial prudence and sharpens focus on managing the micro and macro aspects. Having capital strengthens your role in the global village which is increasingly divided between the information-rich and the information - poor . We mentioned earlier that nations are battling with globalisation efforts to preserve jobs and manage the economy.

On message, the focus on the “micro”, on the “niche”, on the individual does not actually undermine the nation states. Nation states system itself is geared to look after the interests of its citizens.

This leads to the next point on social mores. There is congruence of minds that not all global message is in the interests of the state and the people. The nation state will find ways of policing the social mores and culture. Take a non-Asian example of a global message that was considered undesirable and interestingly of great concern to most Asian governments and societies. At end Dec'95, Germany imposed strict censorship on the Internet, forcing the on-line service, CompuServe Inc, to ban worldwide access to about 200 bulletin boards that contain material with sexual content. The content was illegal under German criminal law. As CompuServe was unable to block access to the 200 Internet newsgroups, CompuServe "temporarily" locked all its 4 million members around the world. This tension between the nation and global communication will continue. These global messages have an enormous capacity to shape public opinion to mobilize people and resources and to transform societies, a capacity far greater than in the past. Paradoxically, it is these tensions that strengthens the nation state system as it asserts itself and it defines the identity of its people.

Nations are basically structured to define what is good for its people. Nation states represent its people on issues such as ecological matters, harmful gases, forest fires, hazardous solid wastes and pollution. Such issues that do not recognise borders and cannot be handled by smaller social units; certainly not by individuals. Nation-states have also systems to keep its cultural differences, educate its younger generation on core values, and guide its people to discriminate what is good and bad in the global information and knowledge flow. Moreover, global

institutions lack administrative resources, while nation states use national resources as a direct means to influence domestic and international events.

In conclusion, like the light bulb which candlemakers sought to burn some decades ago, the computer chip and other communication technology breakthrough are here to stay. It will also erase borders at the financial, informational, cultural, political and other levels to create a global village. And we will communicate and communicate not as global citizens but as citizens of a nation. Thank you.

BASSKARAN NAIR
PRESIDENT, INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS SINGAPORE
VICE PRESIDENT, PUBLIC AFFAIRS, DBS BANK