

Opinion **Geopolitics**

Welcome to the era of the non-state actor

It isn't China or Russia who will dominate the post-American world

JANAN GANESH



Houthi fighters brandish weapons in Yemen. A world that gives way to non-state and anti-state forces has dire implications for much of humankind © Mohammed Huwais/AFP/Getty Images

Janan Ganesh YESTERDAY

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We can no longer hold out hope that it was an AI-generated deep fake. Last autumn, Rishi Sunak really did interview Elon Musk on stage. To repeat, a serving head of government took the junior role to a businessman at a public event. As piercing and Socratic as his questions were (“What is it that you are particularly excited about?”), Sunak demeaned his office.

But he was also going with the grain of world events. Musk is a mostly benign example of a wider trend: the bleeding of power from the state. He has a larger space programme than all but a few national governments. He has had a thumb on the scales of the war in Ukraine through his Starlink satellites.

The darker side of this phenomenon is on show in the Middle East. Neither Hamas nor the Houthis are a state. Yet one has turned the politics of the region upside down and the other has its hand from time to time around a chokepoint of world trade.

Whichever entity killed three US soldiers in Jordan over the weekend wasn't a

WHICHEVER EARLY KILLED THREE US SOLDIERS IN JORDAN OVER THE WEEKEND WASH T A sovereign power either, even if it has the backing of one, Iran, which itself has exchanged fire with irregular Sunni forces in Pakistan. Four months ago, the US had hopes of deprioritising the Middle East. It is now anxious to ensure that no terrorist there turns out to be the [Gavrilo Princip](#) of this century: the author of a wider war.

On current evidence, the winner of the post-American world isn't China. It is the non-state actor. Whether good, bad or hard-to-place, these thrive when no nation is strong enough to command the global or even regional picture.

The US now accounts for about a quarter of nominal world economic output. China has a bit less and, to the extent that it can be referred to in the singular, so does the EU. Nor, before we reach for our Gramsci, is this state of affairs an "interregnum", in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born". The "new" world order should be even more fragmented, not less, assuming that India joins the top economic weight-class at some point. Calling this distribution of power "multipolar" seems ever more quaint. It is "non-polar".

The Middle East isn't unique in its chaos. (In fact, as its non-state actors are often the proxies of this or that sovereign government, there is a perverse shape to events.) Ecuador, once a model of order in its own region, is succumbing to drug gangs. The Sahel is so rife with jihadis and secular bandits that France, not known for shyness in its former colonies, gave up a long counterinsurgent mission there. There is large-scale irregular migration across the southern frontiers of Europe and America.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, the number of "armed groups of humanitarian concern" in the world has consistently exceeded 450 over the past five years. Some 195mn people live under the control — whether settled or "fluid" — of such informal forces.

We are meant to be living through the comeback of the state, remember. The big political arrivals of the last decade — Brexit, Donald Trump, Xi Jinping — suggested a worldwide longing for sovereign grip after several decades of fashionable looseness. Some of that has been borne out. There is a new dirigisme in once liberal economies. But if some states are strengthening within their borders (which, from Yemen to crime-tormented Sweden, several aren't) they are less and less able to prop others up elsewhere. None has quite enough clout, even in combination with allies. The result is ungoverned space.

For millennia, there was little or no economic growth. Then, from the late 1700s, it blossomed. What happened? Industrialisation, yes, but also the modern state, which

turned miscellaneous lands into integrated markets and provided the order within which commercial exchange could happen. The state, if we define it as that which has a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence within a given area, is there with agriculture and electricity among the greatest inventions of the species. If it is giving way to sub-state, non-state and anti-state forces, the implications for a large share of humankind are dire.

The question is whether those who cheer the end of that American order will now see it for what it always was: a kind of global public good. Iran? Unlikely. Russia too, a western spy once put it to me, regards a “lose-lose as a win for them”. But there are countries in the grudging but not quite hostile camp that must be finding a decentralised world nicer as an idea than as an experience.

janan.ganesh@ft.com

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