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Headline: Values Inspire Foreign-Policy Revolution Across Borders

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SINGAPORE: The world is moving into the era of value-driven societies replacing an era of economics, the industrial age and materialism – a seminal shift in culture, attitude and behavior not seen since the second half of the 18th century with the French Revolution and the arrival of manufacturing and industrialization.

Social networks cut across time, geography and national borders. Non-economic social and cultural values confront economic values of business and commerce. Political ideology focusing on distribution of wealth is yielding ground to humanistic attitudes and a rollback of spreading denaturalization. Recalibrating is found in business ethics in support of human rights, including drives to battle child labor, pollution and global warming.

Opponents appeal to nationalism and fears about change. The legacy from the Age of Enlightenment – objectivity – for now has given way to subjectivity, and reality is what one can convince sizable numbers of people to accept as reality. All countries have been hit, but the main victims are the United States and Britain. China, despite political leaders raising barriers for cross-border communication, may prove decisive for how fast the revolution goes or, alternatively, be stopped in its tracks with unprecedented political repercussions.

Regardless of the age we live in, power games determine winners and losers and the distribution of benefits and burdens. Until now, power broadly speaking had three parameters: military, economic tools and persuasion. Values and the principles by which we live can override each of these parameters – the ability to shape perceptions by capturing the curiosity and trust of citizens, defining what is right or wrong, permissible or not, and ultimately drawing lines for what can or cannot be achieved. Leaders occupy what once was called the moral high ground, but now define the terrain instead of adapting to established norms.

The 2016 US presidential election demonstrates the strength of this power parameter and how it was wielded. Saboteurs – for the purposes of this argument, it's irrelevant whether it was Russian interference or Trump campaigners – relied on an onslaught of insinuations, disparate and scornful language, and spurious comments to shape an image of leading candidate Hillary Clinton as unelectable. She was forced to chase down unrelenting ghosts to repair a tainted image while Donald Trump had free hand to suffuse and hijack debate with superficial and freewheeling assertions, brushing away demands for evidence to support his claims.

Inevitably the rules for exercise of power, the institutional structure and players are redrawn. In global politics the demise of the nation-state establishes this changing paradigm, linked and geared to project hard power through the military power parameter. But shaping perceptions signifies that power is projected more via soft power, often across borders, where the nation-state is increasingly challenged to justify its prerogative or monopoly.

Before his election, Trump promised to take the United States out of the Paris agreement to combat global warming, and he kept his promise. But that does not mean that the United States has effectively reneged on its commitments. During Trump's announcement, he argued that he was elected to serve Pittsburgh, not Paris. Even so, 30 mayors from US cities including Pittsburgh, New York and Washington confirmed that they would continue work to curb climate change. They were supported by 80 university presidents and more than 100 businesses. Soon afterward, Jerry Brown, governor of California, visited China to discuss merging carbon trading markets. China is working to introduce a national market for trading carbon-emissions certificates, embedding economic incentives. The goal is to curb emissions to gain market share by lowering costs. A bigger market allows more efficiency, though experience suggests that implementation and fulfilling expectations are less easy than described by textbooks.

Still, US states and cities enter the arena to manage their own foreign policy, possible with soft power and trade, irrespective of the president, executive orders or legislative inertia. Over a longer time horizon such alliances circumventing the nation-state will have repercussions for hard security. The people of California may eventually feel more in common with the people of China and struggle to

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envisage military action against the Chinese. For now, the defiance centers on carbon-dioxide emissions, but it may not stop there. In short, this shows that soft-power relationships can challenge playing the national card on hard-security decisions. Like the residents of Washington State or New York who share perceptions with neighbors in Canada or Texans with Mexicans, many in California and beyond may discover more ties with people of urban China than fellow US citizens.

The winds of value-driven communities and societies bind people together and blow away strict nationalist considerations.

In Europe, Brexit illustrates a similar trend. Most people view the negotiations as the exclusive competence of the British government and Parliament, but this is incorrect to say the least. In July, the EU's chief negotiator, Michel Barnier, received Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and Wales' First Minister Carwyn Jones who explained their nations' positions on negotiations to remove the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland out of the European Union. All parties stressed that the meetings were not negotiations, not yet.

Constitutional experts have posited that Westminster cannot conclude terms for the UK's withdrawal without the consent of the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland parliaments as EU law is incorporated directly into the devolution statutes. The Scots and Welsh are assessing options, and those parliaments will make their stances clear to Westminster. Indeed, Scotland has already said it prefers staying in the Single Market, which the British conservative government has ruled out.

Without doubt, the purpose of the visits was to reiterate and strengthen what Barnier already knew, namely that these two members of the United Kingdom do not share Westminster's negotiating stance. Let's not mince words. Scotland and Wales are acting on their own behalf, bypassing the UK as nation-state and taking control of foreign policy on an issue of vital interest. Having done so once reduces impediments for doing it again.

Almost simultaneously, Britain's opposition leader, Labor's Jeremy Corbyn, also visited Barnier. Again, the parties stressed the meeting was not a negotiation and yet "They wanted to hear what our overall approach is and to let us know what their overall approach is, not only for article 50 but also for transitional and final arrangements," said shadow Brexit secretary Keir Starmer to the Guardian newspaper. He described a "frank exchange of positions" and suggested it could be "first of a number of meetings."

Cross-border social networks and values can aggressively be used as foreign policy instruments by anyone. The Islamic State offers the caliphate as a non-nation-state concept, and the Christian right in the United States and operatives like Steve Bannon, former advisor in the Trump administration, attack critical journalism and praise crackdowns on homosexuality in Russia, openly admiring President Vladimir Putin and urging the United States to follow his lead. Many groups in the United States and elsewhere are tempted by illiberal democracy as seen in Russia and Turkey and reliance on strongmen who support their populist causes.

Irrespective of nationality, people reach across borders, united by common values, to defy policy positions adopted by their own governments.

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