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Mapping The Divide Over Stream Of Commerce Doctrine

Law360, New York (November 19, 2013, 5:16 PM ET) -- Recent jurisprudence pertaining to the stream of commerce theory of personal jurisdiction demonstrates that courts are coalescing around two discernible schools of thought as to how to interpret *J. McIntyre Machinery Ltd. v. Nicastro*, 131 S. Ct. 2780 (2011).

Nicastro attempted to delineate the contours of the stream of commerce theory — the theory as per which a defendant foreign to a forum is subject to personal jurisdiction in a forum where the defendant's products have entered the forum and given rise to a lawsuit there.

According to one school of thought, *Nicastro* requires that a defendant must direct its activities with respect to its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits relating to its products on a stream of commerce theory.

According to another school of thought, after *Nicastro*, it must merely be foreseeable that a defendant's products would enter the forum in order for the defendant to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits related to its products on a stream of commerce theory. As discussed below, courts are coming to opposite conclusions as to the meaning of *Nicastro* apparently as a result of a disagreement as to how *Nicastro* interpreted prior to Supreme Court precedent, particularly *Asahi Metal Industry Co. v. Superior Court of Cal., Solano Cty.*, 480 U.S. 102 (1987).

In *Nicastro*, a four-justice plurality held that a defendant must target a forum with its products in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits relating to its products under a stream of commerce theory, and the mere fact that a defendant may have predicted that its products would wind up in the forum is not enough to subject the defendant to personal jurisdiction for such lawsuits. *Nicastro*, 131 S. Ct. at 2789-90.

The plurality held, thus, that the defendant in *Nicastro* was not subject to personal jurisdiction under a stream of commerce theory, as it had not targeted the forum with its products. *Id.* A two-justice concurrence agreed that the defendant in *Nicastro* was not subject to personal jurisdiction, but ruled that personal jurisdiction was lacking because the case at bar involved only one isolated sale of a product, which could not give rise to personal jurisdiction under any circumstances. *Id.* at 2791-92. The concurrence held that *Nicastro* could be resolved by the then existing precedents. *Id.*

Prior to *Nicastro*, the most recent Supreme Court case to consider the stream of commerce theory at length was *Asahi Metal Industry Co. v. Superior Court of California, Solano Cty.*, 480 U.S. 102 (1987). In *Asahi*, a four-justice plurality led by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

held that in order for a defendant to be subject to jurisdiction in a forum for lawsuits relating to its products under the stream of commerce theory, it was not enough that a defendant might have predicted that its products would enter the forum, rather the defendant must have taken some act with respect to its products purposefully directed toward the forum. *Id.* at 112.

Also in *Asahi*, a four-justice plurality led by Justice William Brennan disagreed with the O'Connor plurality, holding that a defendant could be subject to personal jurisdiction in a forum under a stream of commerce theory merely where it was foreseeable that the defendant's products would enter the forum, and the defendant need not have necessarily taken any acts directed to the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there. *Id.* at 117.

As *Asahi* produced two plurality opinions, some courts interpreting *Asahi* have applied the O'Connor plurality and others have applied the Brennan plurality. See *Boit v. Gar-Tec Products Inc.*, 967 F.2d 671, 683 (1st Cir. 1992) (applying the O'Connor plurality from *Asahi*); see also *Dehmlow v. Austin Fireworks*, 963 F.2d 941, 947 (7th Cir. 1992) (applying the Brennan plurality in *Asahi*); *Rustin Gas Turbines Inc. v. Donaldson Company*, 9 F.3d 415, 420 (5th Cir. 1993) (same).

In other words, some courts have held that under *Asahi*, as per the O'Connor plurality, a defendant must direct its activities with respect to its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there under a stream of commerce theory. Other courts have held that under *Asahi*, as per the Brennan plurality, it merely must have been foreseeable that a defendant's products would enter the forum in order for the defendant to be subject to personal jurisdiction there under a stream of commerce theory.

Thus, *Asahi* and *Nicastro* are the two leading legal authorities on the stream of commerce theory of personal jurisdiction, and neither produced a majority opinion that clearly articulated one controlling standard on this issue. Both cases have been read to mean either that a defendant must direct its activities with its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there on a stream of commerce theory, or that a defendant can be subject to personal jurisdiction in these circumstances merely where it was foreseeable that a defendant's products would enter the forum.

Predictably, courts disagree over the meaning of *Nicastro*, and over the viability of *Asahi* after *Nicastro*. Recent case law suggests that courts are lining up into two separate schools of thought as to how to interpret *Nicastro*. On the one hand, some courts hold that *Nicastro* requires that a defendant must specifically direct its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits relating to its products on a stream of commerce theory.

See *Intercarrier Communications LLC v. Whatsapp Inc.*, 3:12-cv-776 *5 fn. 3 (E.D.Va. Sept. 13, 2013); see also *Canntelo LLC v. Axis Communications AB*, Civil No. 13-1084 *5-6 (D.P.R. July 11, 2013) (same); *C&K Auto Imports Inc. v. Daimler AG*, N.J. Super. A.D. 2013 *4 (Super Ct. N.J. App. Div. June 21, 2013) (same); *Dejana v. Marine Technology Inc.*, No. 10 — cv — 4029 * 5-6 (E.D.N.Y. Sept. 26, 2011) (same).

The proposition that *Nicastro* requires that a defendant must direct its activities with respect to its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there under a stream of commerce theory appears to be based on the idea that both the plurality and the concurrence in *Nicastro* adopted Justice O'Connor's plurality opinion in *Asahi* — the contention that the defendant must purposefully direct its activities toward the forum in

order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there.

See *Smith v. Teledyne Continental Motors Inc.*, 840 F. Supp. 2d 927, 931 (D.S.C. 2012) (holding that the Nicasastro plurality and concurrence “agree that at a minimum, the limitations of Justice O’Connor’s test [from *Asahi*] should be applied, although the plurality would apply an even stricter test, the parameters of which were not precisely defined ... therefore the ‘stream of commerce plus’ test [the O’Connor plurality test from *Asahi*] now commands the majority of this court.”); see also *Northern Ins. Co. of New York v. Construction Navale Bordeaux*, No. 11-60462-CV *5 (S.D.Fla. July 11, 2011) (same).

Thus, one group of courts interprets Nicasastro to mean that the Supreme Court now requires that a defendant must direct its activities toward the forum with its products in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits relating to its products under a stream of commerce theory. This conclusion apparently stems from the proposition that both the plurality and the concurrence in Nicasastro endorsed Justice O’Connor’s test from *Asahi*.

On the other hand, some courts hold that even after Nicasastro, the Brennan test from *Asahi* still can control, as Nicasastro left the law unchanged. Recently, *Service Solutions U.S. LLC v. Autel U.S. Inc.*, No. 13-10534 *3 (E.D. Mich. Oct. 18, 2013), held that Nicasastro left the law on the steam of commerce theory unchanged, and that *Asahi* still applies the same way before and after Nicasastro. Similarly, in *Ainsworth v. Moffett Engineering Ltd.*, 716 F.3d 174 (5th Cir. 2013) the Fifth Circuit held that because Nicasastro did not produce a majority opinion, the holding of Nicasastro may be viewed as the position taken by the justices who concurred on the narrowest grounds, and that because the concurring opinion in Nicasastro endorsed the Supreme Court’s precedents, *Asahi* still controls this issue. *Id.* at 178.

Ainsworth held further that even after Nicasastro, Justice Brennan’s test from *Asahi* applies, and that a defendant need not target the forum with its products or direct its products to the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there under a stream of commerce theory. *Id.* at 177-179. Rather, according to *Ainsworth*, it must merely be foreseeable that the defendant’s products would come into the forum for a finding of personal jurisdiction on this theory. *Id.* *Ainsworth* noted that its decision was “in tension” with the plurality opinion in Nicasastro. *Id.* at 178. See also *AFTG-TG LLC v. Nuvoton Technology Corp.*, 689 F.3d 1358, 1363 (Fed. Cir. 2012) (holding that because Nicasastro produced no majority opinion, Nicasastro left stream of commerce theory unchanged, and that *Asahi* still applies).

Ainsworth appears to disagree with cases like *Teledyne Continental* in that the latter held that the Nicasastro concurrence and plurality endorsed the O’Connor plurality from *Asahi*, while the former holds that the concurrence in Nicasastro did not reject the Brennan test from *Asahi*. Therefore, a second school of thought holds that Nicasastro did not change stream of commerce jurisprudence, that *Asahi* still controls, and that as per Brennan’s plurality in *Asahi*, a defendant can be subject to personal jurisdiction in a forum under a stream of commerce theory for lawsuits related to its products where it is merely foreseeable that a defendant’s products would enter the forum.

Thus, interpretation of the stream of commerce theory of personal jurisdiction after Nicasastro seems to be coalescing into two discernible schools of thought. One school of thought holds that after Nicasastro, the Supreme Court requires that a defendant must direct its activities with respect to its products toward the forum in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits related to its products on a stream of commerce theory. Apparently, this school of thought’s conclusion is based on the belief that both the plurality and the concurrence in Nicasastro embraced the O’Connor plurality, and rejected the Brennan plurality, from *Asahi*.

Another school of thought holds that a defendant need not target the forum with its products in order to be subject to personal jurisdiction there for lawsuits relating to its products because the Brennan plurality from *Asahi* remains good law. This school of thought's conclusion appears to be based on the belief that the concurrence in *Nicastro* did not reject the Brennan test from *Asahi*. Courts will almost certainly continue to disagree on this issue for the foreseeable future.

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