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Between Concentration and Dispersion: A Promising Future for Power Relations

Par **Thomas Gomart**

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The notion of power has long been a topic of study in international relations. In the coming decade, the evolution of power will be characterized by the dynamics of concentration and dispersion. On the one hand, the global system will be marked by the clash of two superpowers, the United States and China. On the other hand, capacity for individual action will proliferate through information and communication technologies.

politique étrangère

Far from being an absolute, power “is a human relationship¹”, one conceivable in both theoretical and political terms. Both an analytical concept and a policy principle, power is now understood in all its different forms, and is either celebrated or criticized in the academic on the topic.²

We must start from a distinction between power, which presupposes an accumulation of means, and the exercise of power, which demands a will of its own. The former develops, and gains or loses value, over the long term; by contrast, the latter inevitably runs up against the existing order, and consequently has a more short-term character. They must be understood on different time scales: no power is born great. To become great, it must possess a portfolio of (human, moral, and material) resources, bringing these to fruition through projects that vary, not only under the influence of internal and external forces, but in terms of the direction

1. R. Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1984, p. 58.

2. For the recent French historiography, see P. Buhler, *La Puissance au XXI^e siècle*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019; B. Badie, *Quand le Sud réinvente le monde: Essai sur la puissance de la faiblesse*, Paris: La Découverte, 2018. See also F. Argounès, *Théories de la puissance*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018.

(i.e., the aim) given to them. Their potential is the set of virtually possible reconfigurations. Using this approach, we can define power as “the combination of potential and acting out”.³

As an analysis of the topic reminds us, “the factors of power are not the same from century to century”.⁴ For instance, the *Defence and National Security Strategic Review* presented to Emmanuel Macron in October 2017 underscored the fact that military competition has once again raised its head: “The international balance of power is changing rapidly. The uncertainty, the anxiety, or, on the contrary, the new ambitions generated by this unstable situation are all risk factors. Competition, initially economic and technological, is increasingly extending to the military realm”.⁵ This way of approaching the topic emphasizes an often forgotten fact: the opposition between economic and diplomatic-strategic conduct. The goal of the former is relatively limited, whereas the second develops “in the shadow of war”.⁶ The whole art of politics consists in knowing how to distinguish these in order to better combine them.

Any discussion of power that considers the next ten years must raise the question of hierarchy. In the early 1980s, Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) claimed that “capitalism needs a hierarchy”, and that “capitalism does not invent hierarchies [...] it merely uses them”⁷ – a very useful claim, if we believe that capitalism will continue to govern economic exchanges. Any discussion about power, then, will be based on a wager over the future course of globalization. Rivalry between nations is one factor among others that will guide globalization. Is it the main one? Perhaps not, given the environmental damage caused by our current modes of consumption. Still, such rivalry is the aspect closest to us, and it is this that I aim to shed light on here.

From a political point of view, the consequences of the United States and China potentially swapping places at the top of the global hierarchy must be examined. China’s rise, and American reactions to it, are the primary issues in international politics in the short, medium, and long terms. From a theoretical point of view, power is becoming increasingly dispersed – or perhaps increasingly concentrated. The question arises because of the rapid global diffusion of information and communication technology

3. T. de Montbrial, *L'action et le système du monde*, Paris: PUF, 2011, p. 55.

4. R. Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, op.cit., p. 64.

5. *Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017*, Paris: DICOd, 2017, available at: <www.defense.gouv.fr>.

6. R. Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, op.cit.

7. F. Braudel, *La Dynamique du capitalisme*, Paris: Arthaud, 1985, p. 78.

(ICT). The last decade has been characterized by empowerment – that is, individual capacity for action that has been increased thanks to technology. This diffusion has taken place at the very heart of human activity, and, even if hierarchies will remain with us, we must now rethink them. It also brings with it heavy concentration, particularly given the role played by a small number of digital platforms. On this dual political and theoretical approach, current dynamics will necessarily lead to major tensions and upsets for the existing order. Such an approach invites us to closely examine the intense technological and scientific competition that both economic domination and military superiority depend on.

China at the top of the global hierarchy

We can see the state of mind predominating among strategic elites at any particular point in time by looking at the relationship between historiography and history. Two books, published thirty years apart, can serve as reference points for debates over power. They reflect the concerns of their time – particularly in Washington, where “policy makers at the highest level often think any event more than ten years old is a matter of ancient history”.⁸

Paul Kennedy’s *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, which was published in 1987, examines the gap in time between a state achieving economic power and the inevitable translation of this into the diplomatic-strategic domain. Kennedy uses examples to show that, once a power reaches the top of the hierarchy, the economic resources required for its military projects cause it to come apart under its own weight. This leads it to “strategic overstretch” and, consequently, to decline. Power is fundamentally relative, and varies depending on growth rates and technological advances of other actors. When the book was published, America’s potential rivals were Germany and Japan, the two main losers of the Second World War. China was not part of the equation.

A new “Sputnik moment” in Washington

Graham Allison’s *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?*, published in 2017, highlights the speed of China’s rise over the last forty years, and the high likelihood of a conflict with the United States, which is determined to defend its place at the top of the global hierarchy. The book’s success is no doubt the result of a new “Sputnik moment” in Washington. In 1957, the American authorities were caught off balance by the technological advances of the Soviets, who had successfully sent a rocket into space.

8. T. Corn, “Donald Trump et le retour de l’Histoire”, *Le Débat*, Vol. 1, 2018, pp. 52–3.

They responded by putting substantial resources into their own mission to conquer space. With this success in mind, there is a very widespread view in Washington that the time for the United States to confront China's rise is now or never. We will know in ten years whether, in spite of all the controversies he caused, Donald Trump's first term was the moment for a bipartisan mobilization of resources to counter China's rise, whether successful or not.

It is difficult to tell precisely what are China and America's positions toward each other. But it is clear that, in the near future, they will be the dominant global players by far, even if powers like India also intend to make their way up the global hierarchy. As difficult as it may be to understand China's position, we should recognize that it could reach the top of the hierarchy within the next two decades – a deeply contradictory rise, since the global capitalist system will be dominated by the People's Republic of China, a party-state.

We must therefore explore two hypotheses. The first is that the Chinese regime will transform as it gradually adapts to the demands of a capitalism governed by shared rules. This interpretation subscribes to the myth of convergence, encouraged by China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, which led to the belief that the country was becoming more politically open. With ten years' hindsight, this interpretation has run up against the financial crisis of 2008 – when China made its international ambitions clear –, and the ideological hard line taken by Xi Jinping. Very few in Washington would wager on any convergence between China and the United States, in spite of the level of economic exchange between the two. A variant interpretation puts its money on internal political divisions. China is an “*amnesiac* superpower”, in which it is impossible to challenge Mao's watchful presence or mention the Tiananmen Square Massacre of June 1989: can it build a future on forced ignorance of the recent past?⁹ No one is safe from the violent return of the repressed.

The second hypothesis is that the current regime will remain stable, raising the prospect of a Leninist government becoming the leader of global capitalism. We may not be able to dismiss this as an irony of history: since 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has established a “new authoritarian equilibrium” which experts say could allow it to maintain power for the next three decades.¹⁰ The CCP's foundations are Soviet, and amnesia about Tiananmen is masked by hypernesia about the fall of the USSR, the causes of which have been carefully analyzed by Chinese

9. S. Leys, *Les Habits neufs du président Mao*, Paris: éditions Ivrea, 2009, pp. 13-14.

10. J.-P. Cabestan, *Demain la Chine: démocratie ou dictature?*, Paris: Gallimard, 2018, p. 11.

leaders so that the same does not happen in their own country. Mikhail Gorbachev has been consistently criticized since 1991 as a “traitor to socialism”. In December 2012, in a speech distributed to every Party member, Xi Jinping explained that the disintegration of the USSR was caused by criticism of socialist “ideals and beliefs”, the denial of Lenin and Stalin, and the depoliticization of the army: “Finally, Gorbachev announced in a simple declaration that it was being dismantled. A great party disappeared. Proportionally, the CPSU [Communist Party of the Soviet Union] had more members than our own. But there was no one man enough to stand up and resist”.¹¹ We must understand that the CCP believes it has the right to establish a permanent state because it claims to immanently represent the Chinese people.

From this point of view, does capitalism or socialism, or some fusion of the two, have more of a future? Whatever our answer, China’s domination of the global hierarchy will be the CCP’s – “the largest secret society in the world”,¹² with eighty million members, which operates with its own rules and standards and only allows information that legitimizes its own power to filter out to the outside world. It is immediately clear that such an organization, concentrating so much power around itself, is incompatible with the openness demanded by the dynamics of capitalism. The “problem of problems” remains that of hierarchies.¹³ The issue is whether we should think in terms of a single hierarchy, of the world economy as a “universal market” unified by gradual convergence, or instead conceive of multiple world-economies with coexisting hierarchies. The choice of viewpoint clearly has consequences for how we understand the long-term play of power. Historically, world-economies delimited concentric geographic spaces and were organized around a dominant pole. Such reasoning recalls the dialectic of decentering and recentering – comparable to the dialectic currently on display between Europe and China – and acts as a reminder of a historical law that is always valid: “Those who are in the center, or near the center, can lord it over the others”.¹⁴

To think about power is, therefore, to think about the geography that it emerges from and that it projects itself toward. China no longer conceals its international ambitions, positioning itself as the leader in restructuring global governance by investing in multilateralism in all its forms, promoting an alternative model of development, diffusing a post-Western vision of the world, and proposing new international norms and standards.¹⁵ These

11. *Id.*, pp. 49–50.

12. *Id.*, p. 41.

13. F. Braudel, *La Dynamique du capitalisme*, *op.cit.*, p.79.

14. *Id.*, p. 89.

15. A. Ekman (ed.), *La Chine dans le monde*, Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2018, pp. 13–18.

ambitions reflect a powerful desire for international recognition, fueled by a historical resentment toward Westerners. Chinese diplomacy seeks a “new type of Great Power relationship” – that is, an equal relationship with the United States. China’s change of status will certainly be judged by its position relative to the United States. But not exclusively: equilibrium in Eurasia is the result of its relationship with Russia, which has been marked by profound historical antagonisms and, over the last twenty years, by strategic convergence.¹⁶

Over the last decade, China has strengthened its ability to throw weight behind its strategy. Unless something major and unforeseen happens, it is likely that this ability will increase significantly in the next decade. The most difficult, and most sensitive, thing to establish today is the effect of the Trump administration’s strategy of opposition. Having been through historic periods of major internal division, China is developing a “Grand Strategy” across several decades, setting its sights on 2049. Among all the great powers, China’s ideology is that which has changed the least since the Cold War.¹⁷ It seems very likely that its potential will continue to grow, but we should identify possible opportunities for action that will allow it to exercise its power in terms of initiative and/or coercion. Ten years from now, Taiwan could be the issue that puts Chinese and American willpower to the test.

The chessboard and the Web: the fusion of power

Raymond Aron defined international relations as “relations among political units”. He then asked: “Are we to include in the relations among political units the relations among individuals belonging to those units?”¹⁸ In this age of digital networks, the answer is clearly yes – an answer that shows how profoundly the international system has been changed by technological developments. These have deeply altered the concept of power. The discipline of international relations is very heavily dominated by the American academic hegemony, which has chosen to center its output around the analysis of power relations. In a context of technological globalization, even the most powerful states are destabilized in some of their practices by exponential flows of information that escape their initiative and their control.

The concentration of power is visible in interactions between states, while its dispersal is visible within societies, on the individual and collective

16. N. Rolland, “A China-Russia Condominium over Eurasia”, *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2019.

17. S. W. Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China’s Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 4-5.

18. R. Aron, *Paix et guerre entre les nations*, *op.cit.*

level. Interactions between states are often represented by the image of the chessboard. Each piece fits into a hierarchy, with precise rules for how it is to be used. Interactions within societies are often represented by the image of a network with an infinite number of nodes. Each actor's power depends on the nature of their connection to the network. From this point of view, the concept of network power is now central to power and demands our attention. Network power is based on the following dialectic: standards gain value as growing numbers of people use them, but in doing so, they gradually eliminate alternatives that offer free choice.¹⁹ This creates a tension between relations of sovereignty, which allow for the construction of a public will and collective decision making, and relations of sociability, which group together individual, decentralized decisions that ultimately affect the whole group. For some, the process of globalization is characterized by the increasing predominance of relations of sociability over those of sovereignty, contained within the borders of nation-states.²⁰

The concept of network power

To see the dispersal of power as a phenomenon that produces more transformations than the concentration of power is to claim that the points of departure for any discussion should not be competition between nations, but the well-being of citizens on a global scale.²¹ Instead of the verticality brought on by the idea of hierarchy, we have the laterality produced by the establishment of a network, where power shifts toward influence – that is, the ability to modify others' judgments and so direct their action. In the age of digital networks, the ability to influence is measured by the type and number of connections or, more precisely, by their multiplier effect. It is a matter of conceiving how objects, people, and organizations are modified – transformed – by their system of connections, and how this can be used. Power, and therefore influence, belongs to a large degree to those able to connect different kinds of network. This leads us to a distinction between power *over* someone and power exercised *with* someone in order to “act in concert”, as per Hannah Arendt's famous phrase.²²

Unlike China, the United States has continually encouraged the diffusion of power by promoting a particularly ambitious form of digital diplomacy. The Obama administration's emphasis on digital diplomacy is rooted in the concept of smart power, which was initially meant to recover

19. D. S. Grewal, *Network Power: The Social Dynamics of Globalization*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 4.

20. *Id.*, p. 11.

21. A.-M. Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in a Networked World*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 2.

22. *Id.*, p. 163.

the moral authority lost in the Bush years with the military intervention in Iraq. Smart power was based on the principle of connectivity: an actor's centrality is a direct result of its ability to generate connections and thereby exercise influence, imposing its own agenda by encouraging commitment on the part of others. For Washington, it was a matter of positioning itself as an information hub that could shape global opinion and, above all, segment it based on its own goals. American digital diplomacy claimed to support democratization efforts around the world, with internet freedom a crucial part of this.

In May 2009, secretary of state Hillary Clinton presented a program, "21st Century Statecraft", which emphasized the need to go beyond state-to-state diplomacy, using connectivity to establish direct relations between the state and individuals, and vice-versa. In January 2010, she gave a speech arguing for the abolition of digital borders, given the dangers of a digital iron curtain – a goal that still seems distant ten years later, after the Snowden affair and Trump's election. Snowden revealed part of the mass-

The battle for global leadership is being played out in the digital sphere

surveillance programs established by the National Security Agency (NSA) in close partnership with the giants of American technology. In the public's eye²³, Snowden's main revelation was this collusion between the NSA and businesses supposedly founded on democratization and individual emancipation. The intertwining of public and private still directly serves American interests: it has created an unparalleled concentration of global power, which allows them to orchestrate an "imperialism of interpenetration".²⁴ Today, only China seems to possess the desire and ability to escape it, and there is no doubt that the battle for global leadership is now being played out in the digital sphere.

The lesson is that technology is changing the very essence of exchange, profoundly and diffusely. Such changes make any understanding of power a delicate matter, both in terms of concentration and dispersion, because of the speed with which economic actors can dismantle and reconstruct global value chains. As soon as a complex manufacturing process is overseen remotely, it is split up into simple tasks that can be carried out anywhere. Big businesses put whole territories in competition with each other. Thanks to the possibilities that technology offers, globalization is no longer about nations or products, but about tasks. Production has historically been linked directly to consumption: a product was consumed close to where it was produced.

23. T. Gomart, "De quoi Snowden est-il le nom?", *Revue des deux mondes*, December 2013.

24. P. Bellanger, "De la souveraineté numérique", *Le Débat*, No. 170, 2012, p. 152.

Globalization can be interpreted as a process that has led to a disconnect between production and consumption. This has taken place across large-scale historic shifts: around 1820, the costs associated with the circulation of goods began to fall; and around 1990, information technology meant that the costs associated with the circulation of ideas began to fall as well.

The period 1991-2008 has been presented as the rise of new economic powers which reduced poverty through the growth of the middle class. In fact, higher industrial production (at the expense of G7 countries) and lower poverty have been concentrated in six countries: China, Korea, India, Poland, Thailand, and Indonesia. These trends have mostly bypassed South America and Sub-Saharan Africa, where growth remains linked to raw material cycles. The third phase has already begun: falling costs in the circulation of people and, in particular, falling costs of personal interaction through the use of telepresence. In other words, information technology means that the next phase of globalization could enable “virtual migrations”, with workers from one country offering their services to another without being physically present.²⁵ This would go hand in hand with the increasing automation and robotization of manufacturing equipment.

In principle, this new period should open up opportunities for development – or, rather, for jobs – in developing countries that are able to manufacture parts of products, or provide some or all of the services consumed by the main world-economies: the United States, Europe, Japan, and of course China. This third phase of globalization is likely to transform the tertiary sector as deeply as the second phase transformed the secondary sector, leading to new distributions of wealth. It remains to be seen whether such redistribution will be limited to a small number of countries, as in the case of industrial production.

If we place our bets on continued globalization, understood not as the convergence of political-economic systems but as an exponential intensification of data flows, we have to conceive of power simultaneously in terms of concentration and dispersion, in a system drawn toward heterogeneity rather than homogeneity. In terms of concentration of power, the rivalry between China and the United States for the top of the international hierarchy in which capitalism resides will intensify. Two fundamental questions immediately

25. R. Baldwin, *The Great Convergence: Information Technology and the New Globalization*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016.

arise. Neither China nor the United States want a head-on confrontation: will they have the means and desire to create a form of global co-leadership?

This discussion of power has relied on the principle that capitalism and socialism will continue in their present forms. But global warming and the intensive exploitation of natural resources worldwide may put ecosystems at risk of collapse. Are we to wager that politicians will become increasingly ecologically aware? Or should we bet on their continued inertia? In either case, the consequences for power relations are difficult to anticipate. Note, however, that the United States will have more energy flexibility than China. As for the dispersal of power, relations between individuals, digital platforms, and states all give rise to redistribution and, potentially, to major asymmetries. Such dispersal enables the creation of new cycles of innovation, consumption, and participation in public life.

Rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) will alter power relations over the next decade: as Vladimir Putin declared in September 2017, “Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world”. AI has benefited from the convergence and industrial maturity of big data, machine learning, and increased computing capacity. Given the strategic, political, and economic stakes, it should be the subject of sustained attention by state actors who can build effective partnerships with private actors – something that could lead to “an overall trend toward the centralization of power in the hands of a few actors”.²⁶ Concentration and dispersion lead to the concept of “digital power”, which demands both a definition and methodological work to be quantified and compared with other phenomena.²⁷ With the merging of the economic and military spheres, we will observe digital power both on the chessboard and the web. It remains to be seen what sort of acting out this will give rise to over the next ten years.



Keywords

Power
Theory of international relations
China
Information and communication technologies

26. N. Mialhe, “The Geopolitics of Artificial Intelligence: The Return of Empires?”, *Politique étrangère*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2018, p. 107, available at: <www.cairn-int.info>.

27. M. Willett, “Assessing Cyber Power”, *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 1, 2019.