21st Century Power

Dislocation, Diffusion and Decay

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As part of the Churchill 2015 statesmanship programme, LSE IDEAS formed an interdisciplinary panel to seek to understand how power operates in international relations today.

Members of this panel included:

- Professor Danny Quah, Director, Saw Swee Hock Southeast Asia Centre at LSE
- Dr Nicholas Kitchen, Assistant Professorial Research Fellow, LSE United States Centre
- Susan Scholefield CMG
- Sir David Manning
- Julian Miller, Deputy National Security Adviser, Cabinet Office.

The panel discussions were informed by papers presented by:

- Professor Barry Buzan, LSE
- Professor Patrick Porter, University of Exeter
- Professor Giulio Gallarotti, Wesleyan University
- Dr Josef Teboho Ansorge, Yale University

The panel was supported by three LSE students who drafted this report:

- Shreya Das
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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scholars have identified three distinct phenomena with respect to power in the international system. A shift in the geography of economic output moving from west to east, and from established powers to emerging powers; diffusion away from states and towards non-state actors; and decay of the efficacy of traditional instruments of power.

This report argues that a cause and consequence of these phenomena is that the nature of power in the international system has undergone a significant shift since the mid-20th century. These changes in the modes of power have important implications for contemporary statecraft. Statesmen need to recognise this shift in power and recalibrate their strategies to develop a full spectrum of approaches to contemporary international order.

Key recommendations arising from the panel discussions are:

- The renewal of the UK's diplomatic assets and capabilities.
- Embedding independent support for the generation of soft power assets including overseas broadcasting services.
- The recognition and democratisation of digital power.

These recommendations draw on an understanding of contemporary power capabilities that recognises that instrumentalisation by the state can undermine capacity. In an information age independence confers authority, and states need to recognise where stepping back may be more effective than stepping up.

KEY FINDINGS

In the 75 years since Sir Winston Churchill's 'finest hour', the international system has undergone significant changes. It is hard to imagine modern statesmen having the authority to exercise the degree of control over their populations and economies as Churchill – or indeed, the leaders of the other major industrialised nations –- did during the 1940s and 1950s. This is less a reflection on modern leaders than it is the populations they lead, which are better educated, better informed, and less likely to defer to supposed authorities than previous generations. But whilst this must be seen as an overwhelmingly positive thing, it does present 21st century statesmen with a different challenge when responding to the distribution of power in the international system, a distribution that is currently evolving in three key ways:

1. Transition from a hegemonic system controlled by one or two Superpowers, towards a more decentralised world characterised by a number of regional great powers.
2. Diffusion of power to non-state actors generating an increasing capacity to resist, and reduced capability to compel.
3. Development of new tools of data collection and management that comprise digital power.

Power Transition: Decentred Globalism[1]

The first decades of the twenty-first century have set about reversing the trend, rooted in the 19th century, of centralisation of power among a few countries of 'the West'. The modern modes of power that enabled the West to dominate the world – industrialisation, rational state-building, and ideologies of progress – have been spread beyond the Western powers to the former colonial periphery. This process of development has enlarged the 'core' and reduced the uneven concentration of power throughout the world. The result is that as it becomes bigger, the core of the international system is also becoming less Western.

[1] The Panel owes the argument in this section to the compelling analysis in Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The Global Transformation: History, Modernity and the Making of International Relations* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

At the same time, it is becoming more difficult for a superpower to have the capacity and moral legitimacy to exert its power across the whole international system. In other words, while the international order continues to operate on a global scale, the nature of this order has shifted from one that is 'centred' – or Western-dominated and unequal – to one that is 'de-centred'. The rise of what used to be peripheral states is reducing followership, making it more difficult to be a superpower, and creating a number of new great powers.

This 'evening out' of the international distribution of power may well be a good thing. It certainly has the potential to address some of the democratic deficit of the prevailing international order. Yet a key concern arising from the decentralisation of the international system is the possibility of under-management. As the core-periphery inequalities reduce, the political and economic benefits arising from being a hegemonic power recede, while regional powers have little incentive to employ their power with regard to the international system as a global whole.

Despite this structural evolution, prospects for effective cooperation within the international community remain robust. Indeed, never before have states so agreed on the basic tenets of international order: sovereignty, human equality, international law and free markets are deeply embedded within international society.

Diffusion of Power and the Proliferation of Non-State Actors

Whilst states may exhibit general accord on basic principles, some argue that developments in economics, technology and communications are rendering states decreasingly important. In the 20th century, processes of separatism and self-determination meant states increased in number and decreased in size, while global companies became increasingly transnationally structured and incorporated so as to avoid taxation by national governments. Global NGOs now coordinate transnational political movements and campaigns; hackers are able to bring down the systems of government agencies; and terrorists can build an improvised explosive device for around $200.

These and other phemonena, collectively termed the diffusion of power, have led some observers to predict the decline of traditional nation-states as the primary economic and political units of world society.[2]

A closer look, however, reveals that in fact the demands for statehood, and what it can deliver, remain intact, with many non-state actors vying to be recognised as states. Yet this does not mean that state power remains unchanged. While the proliferation of non-state actors has not eroded the capacities of the state *per se*, it has impacted the ways in which states can deploy their power, with far-reaching implications for the leaders of tomorrow. For one, states have become increasingly restricted in their use of force. There is broad consensus that great power wars have largely become delegitimised as rational policy, forcing major powers to largely rely on tools of co-option and persuasion – and coercive means short of force – rather than being able to resort to compellent strategies. However, this paradigm shift does not necessarily apply to non-state actors, which may not feel obliged to follow the so-called 'rules of the game'. Force and gratuitous violence are not only employed, but in some cases glorified, by prominent non-state actors today, particularly in the Middle East. Thus there arises a global dichotomy where on the one hand, the great powers are increasingly constrained – distinguished by their ability to build societies rather than empires – while on the other hand the weak or failed states and non-state actors threaten the very fabric of international society with their unrestrained use of force.

This shrinking state monopoly on violence has been accompanied by an erosion of state control over markets. This can be seen in part by choice – through policies of deregulation and privatisation – and in part because of the capacity of private economic actors to transcend borders, both in terms of access to capital and labour, and the means of production. Taxation is also an important area where the state's capacity to extract resources from the economy is limited by the tendency of firms to develop transnational legal structures which fuel – and exploit – a 'race to the bottom' in corporate tax rates.

[2] Kenichi Ohmae, *The End of the Nation State: The Rise of Regional Economies*, (Simon and Schuster, 1995).

Some of these trends are likely to intensify, as innovation and new technologies continue to empower the individual and disrupt state control. Developments in 3D printing, artificial intelligence, and nano-technology not only present complex economic issues, such as increased redundancy of lower-skilled labour, but also pose regulatory challenges which could alter the relationship between citizen and state. Moreover, the diffusion of these technologies may further reduce the costs to private actors of increasingly sophisticated means of causing violence.

Rise of Digital Power

As the pace of innovation accelerates, 21st century statesmen will be faced with the task of employing new technology while minimising its disruptive potential. A key element of this will be harnessing digital power.

Digital power is essentially the ability of a public or private actor to combine information on any particular individual, and use this information for comparative and analytical purposes. The digital power of a nation state is derived from political authority, and potentially provides a modern solution to the age-old problem of public order. It is used effectively by states like the United States, the United Kingdom, and China, as well as non-state actors such as presidential campaigns. Digital power is offered up as a solution to myriad issues, including policing, healthcare, and immigration, but there are legal and moral questions associated with privacy and anonymity that remain inadequately addressed. Ultimately digital power has the capacity to fundamentally alter the relationship between the individual and the state, and in so doing recast the balance of power between sovereign states.

We understand digital power as a new dimension of power, one that is not distributed evenly throughout the world and that is possessed by an array of different actors. Information-collection and data-storage infrastructure are needed to capitalise on digitisation, and such infrastructure is unequally distributed: many states simply do not have the bureaucratic capacity needed to hold useful data on their citizens, others have developed systems to allow instant access to thousands of data-sets about individuals' movements and habits. And for some states, the advent of digital power has been simultaneously accompanied by robust privacy laws that serve to protect the individual against this new tool of the state.

The digital power of the individual has also been enhanced by the growing role of private digital actors such as Apple, Google, Facebook, Twitter and other social networking sites. The precise role social media services such as Twitter played in the Arab Spring and other mass protests has been hotly debated, but there is no doubt that they are significant tools of mass organisation. At the same time, these networks provide a wealth of possibilities for data-collection and information-gathering by the state.

By rendering human beings as their data, digital power at once provides both challenges and opportunities to the traditional conception and instruments of statecraft and statesmanship. Increased digitisation creates intense vulnerabilities, as digital information and data are easier to steal than physical, analogue documents, and once databases are compromised much more information can be retrieved. Yet at the same time, digitisation allows for the rapid promulgation of knowledge and information that can in turn translate into a powerful asset for projecting soft power.

IMPLICATIONS

Decentralisation and the proliferation of regional power bases has highlighted the need for effective international cooperation in strengthening international institutions, in order to build governance of the international system that can operate independent of hegemony.

Concurrently, the emergence of powerful non-state actors which choose to operate in a manner seemingly unrestrained by global norms, indicates the continued importance of force as both a symbolic and coercive tool, though significantly, not on the part of the state. As such, those in the political establishment will require a highly nuanced understanding of the complexities and consequences of the use of force, in order to successfully harness the broad spectrum of hard and soft power to narratives of legitimate action.

Meanwhile, the emergence of digital power has highlighted issues of privacy and liberty, as well as national security. Leaders need to consider the interaction between the state machinery and its citizens, as well as balancing power and security with national values.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Democratising the Status Quo

The key to enduring stability in the global order will be ensuring that rising powers have a stake in maintaining that order. Absent the possibility of major war to provide a moment of 'world making' by the victorious powers, historic inequalities in power persist through inertia as structural power, generating resentment among actors that have emerged in the course of the 20th century. Giving those actors their due is the great challenge of global governance today. One way it might be achieved is by offering a development pathway to political responsibility, and by extension, status and influence. For example, states could be allowed to attain permanent member status in the United Nations Security Council by satisfying certain criteria, such as GDP, military capability, and commitments to UN peacekeeping or other global governance structures. This would not only give new powers a way into the system, it would also ensure that they (and established powers) had responsibilities to fulfil in order to maintain their position.

Renewing diplomatic assets and capabilities

A crucial part of adapting to the challenges of the modern world in an effective and sustainable manner will be capacity-building at an early stage. In recent years there has been a tendency to side-line the diplomatic corps in favour of small-group decision-making. Consequently, we have witnessed a hollowing out of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in the UK, amidst a series of budget cuts and downsizing, whereby the current diplomats are relatively less well-equipped than the class of seasoned foreign service officers in the 1940s.

Recognising the increasing salience of digital power, the expansion of the modern modes of power will have to be better managed as well as better coordinated. In other words, it is not about choosing which kind of power is the best; rather, it is about synthesising the various kinds of power and selecting, based on the context, the most relevant type or even a combination of several different modes of power, and that takes diplomatic knowledge and skill. The quality of a nation's foreign service is thus of utmost importance. The knowledge

and expertise of the diplomatic service enable its officers to combine different factors into an integrated strategy, hence providing a country's resources both direction and weight – a strategy to exploit and direct these assets and in the process, translate them from potentialities into actual power or influence for the state. As such, the deep specialisations and skills of the diplomatic service should not only be reclaimed, but also consolidated, through specialised training and education.

Investing for Influence: Cultivating Soft Power

In a world of instant connections and communication, information is power. In order to build a long-term consensus that crosses national and cultural boundaries, leaders need to ensure they are employing all the tools at their disposal to diffuse their narrative. Overseas broadcasting services not only fulfil this role, they also offer a valuable pool of regional knowledge and expertise that leaders can use to make well-informed policy decisions. The campaign by private media outlets to remove the license-payer subsidy for the BBC, the world's most trusted media organisation, should be resisted as a principle of national strategy and public diplomacy. Additionally, Britain could continue to position itself as an educational superpower by ring fencing a greater amount of the budget towards educational establishments such as its universities. The increasing appeal of British universities to foreign students can be translated to actual soft power via the influencing and shaping of the thoughts and experiences of these international students who may then import these ideas back home.

Digital diplomacy is also key. In order to successfully cultivate and project soft power, leaders need to be aware of how their state is perceived internationally, and an important tool in this process is monitoring, and engaging with, social media. A sophisticated, modern communications strategy can make a state appear more relatable to the masses, while the use of digital platforms provides access to a much broader audience, and allows governments to interact directly with the general public. Effective digital diplomacy will ultimately make it easier for states to capitalise on their soft power, and enable them to construct convincing narratives.

Recognition and Democratisation of Digital Power

While societies grapple with the implications of the digital age, digital power largely remains concentrated in the hands of powerful states and non-state actors. Although the UK has adopted a leading role as a norm entrepreneur, both regionally and globally, in pushing for recognition of digital power and cybersecurity, much remains to be done in order to make it safer, and more accessible.

At the individual level steps can be taken to improve digital literacy in the population as a whole, ensuring that we all have the skills to navigate digital platforms securely.

Private businesses can play a crucial role in empowering their employees, and also by recognising the vulnerabilities of their own IT systems. Companies are also key in mitigating some of the issues associated with free access to the Internet. In particular, social media corporations like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are increasingly tackling the use of their platforms as a vehicle for disseminating radical propaganda and hate speech. This is to be welcomed, although there are legitimate concerns about how far this agenda might stretch, and the danger of driving those kinds of activities into the so-called 'dark net' where they are less easily monitored by law enforcement services.

Governments of course have a role to play in defining an agenda for digital security and openness. Some have proposed data return arrangements, to enable citizens to access the personal information on them that is held by the government or private corporations. Ultimately, increasing digital literacy will impel this process as citizens begin to realise the importance of their digital identity and seek to reclaim ownership of their data. Leaders will also have to address issues of the security of the data government holds. Digitisation creates increased vulnerabilities, and leaders will need to be increasingly aware of the capacity and infrastructure needed to keep sensitive data secure.

At the global level, states and international organisations can facilitate the efforts of smaller actors by taking advantage of their broad reach. The DigEuLit project set up by the European Commission is a good example; it aims to work with educational institutions across the European Union to promote digital literacy. But even more importantly, there is a

need for states to define the rules of the road in this domain: to decide what type of digital action constitutes legitimate espionage and what constitutes a cyber attack.[3]

[3] See Benjamin Mueller, “The Laws of War and Cyberspace: On the Need for a Treaty Concerning Cyber Conflict”, *LSE IDEAS Strategic Update* 14.2, June 2014

CORE ARGUMENT

A world in which states vie for mastery over the entire system is historically unusual. Consequently, we may be looking at another phase of global transformation whereby the period of centred globalism is transitioning towards one of decentred globalism. A greater number of states can thus claim to be great powers but the era of superpowers, when the US and USSR dominated may be over.

This can be traced back to the process of globalisation which facilitated the adoption of the modern modes of power by a greater number of states. This in turn reduced the inequalities of the 19th century system. The great powers of the 19th and early 20th century enforced deep inequalities that spread across the political, legal, military, economic and demographic spheres through imperialism, thus precipitating our current conception of the core-periphery order. Ironically, this historical process also exported the various aspects of modernity to the periphery – specifically industrialisation, western forms of state organisation, and ideologies. This culminated in a more connected, integrated, and (to a certain extent) ideologically homogenous world order, which in turn narrowed the gap between the core and the periphery.

As a result, these great powers are increasingly less able to impose their will than in the past. Taking into account the rise of digital power and the information age, progressive shifts in technology and ideas are hence not only diffusing power away from states, but in so doing, causing power itself to erode.

ROAD BLOCKS

Rapid Pace of the Information Age

In the digital age, the increasing rapidity with which information is created, reproduced, disseminated, and discarded, leads to unprecedented pressure on statesmen. The challenge is essentially twofold: the sheer volume of data available, and the speed with which it becomes obsolete. This effectively means there is a much shorter timeframe for reaction, and leaders must work much harder than their historical counterparts to stay one step ahead of issues. The relevance and timeliness of well-crafted policies can be altered in a matter of seconds as new information becomes available.

This becomes particularly problematic when compared with the relative inertia of unwieldy modern bureaucracies. Bureaucratic rigidity prevents swift adaptation to changes in the policy milieu. Human psychology dictates that people tend to stick with strategies even when they may no longer be relevant in a given context. In other words, policy-makers may be driven by cognitive confirmation bias, seeing the world as they expect to see it. Simplistic historical analogies also often influence foreign policy strategies; the adage that nations are generally prepared to fight their last war bears testament to the difficulty in adapting to new policy-making environments, let alone the information age.

Facing Old and New Threats

This relative lack of flexibility, combined with the persistence of certain 20th century-style threats, makes it difficult to dedicate the requisite resources to addressing the needs of the information age. While the threat of major interstate war has been mitigated to some extent, other traditional threats to international stability remain, such as territorial disputes, civil wars, and competition for resources. Modern-day statesmen need to be equipped to deal with both these old threats, as well as the new challenges presented by the new modes of power. Cybersecurity in particular is a significant challenge at the global, state, non-state, and individual level. Challenges will include the increasing vulnerability to interstate cyber-attacks, divergent data protection provisions in different states, active surveillance, as well as increasing anonymity and its impact on democracy and power. While this compound

of novel and established threats is by no means unique to the 21st century, the pace at which technology progresses intensifies both the scale and nature of this challenge.

ENABLERS

Harnessing Innovation

Although the advent of the information age has created new challenges, it can likewise provide opportunities for progress. For example, the pace of change can actually mitigate bureaucratic inertia, by prompting abrupt changes in perspective. The rapid dissemination of information allows the gathering of a critical mass of opinion in support of a particular cause, for example the refugee crisis, which can pressure the government and bureaucracy to alter their policies. Moreover, the increasing complexity of issues in the modern age as well as tightened budgets can put pressure on legacy systems, and steer governments away from exclusive small group decision making towards a greater recognition of the value and expertise that dedicated foreign service officers can provide.

SELLING IT

The key to understanding 21st century power is moving beyond the zero-sum paradigm of a 'declining West' or 'ascendant East'. There is no longer a global centre of power; deep systemic processes of ideological, technological, and organisational change have meant that development, influence, and power are becoming more evenly distributed. Consequently, the tools of power, and the best actors to wield them, are constantly in flux. While states remain the primary building block of the international system, certain policy areas increasingly benefit from the involvement of non-state actors with greater expertise and influence. This must be handled with sensitivity – a state can look weak by outsourcing policy to non-state actors, while association with that particular state could undermine the independence and credibility of those entities. These and other challenges of today's age are fundamentally changing the nature of power in the modern world, and statesmen will need to be more skilful than ever to successfully navigate the 21st century.