Istituto Affari Internazionali

ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 61 - SEPTEMBER 2020

The Cacophony of Powers. International Politics in the 2020s

by Riccardo Alcaro

The key to power in international politics is the ability to translate economic, military and technological resources, as well as cultural ties and societal connections, into actual influence beyond national borders – and immaterial factors, such as the competence of policymakers, are central to this effort.

This explains why states exhibiting huge resource disparities can nonetheless be grouped together as great powers and countries economically, demographically or militarily small may at times be more influential than larger and wealthier ones.

In these terms, the resolve and ability of states to pursue a foreign policy course in full or partial autonomy from other countries captures interstate dynamics with more precision than would be the case if one just applied a criterion based on the size of material resources.

Distinguishing countries as independent, partly autonomous and dependent surely has its shortcomings, not least because all interstate relations involve a degree of interdependence. However, it helps us place states along an independence-dependence continuum and better grasp the interplay of powers in a world of emerging, but not yet emerged, multipolarity.

The most important factor shaping interstate relations today is the relative decline of US power.

The trend is commonly attributed to the rise of other states – first and foremost China. Yet it has an arguably more important domestic origin, as Washington's foreign policy establishment struggles to give meaning, purpose and direction to the US's global pre-eminence.

No consensus exists in Washington on whether the United States should

Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). *A slightly different version of this article was originally published on 31 August 2020 by the Valdai Club. It is available at https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/the-cacophony-of-powers.*

guarantee the multilateral order, lead coalitions of like-minded states against non-aligned countries, or seek to extract better terms from bilateral interactions driven by narrowly defined national interests.

Such tribulations, reflected in at times wild foreign policy oscillations, have dented the US's standing and ability to organise international consensus.

Nevertheless, its military and economic resources remain intact. In fact, the US's dominance of financial markets has increased its external influence, as the success of "secondary" sanctions – that is, sanctions with extra-territorial effect – in compelling other countries to follow US desiderata eloquently attests.

Declining leadership, in other words, is not the same thing as declining strength, which is why the United States has shown little willingness to re-negotiate its position in areas where its influence is widely felt. That said, the growing gap between leadership and strength increasingly leads other countries – eagerly or reluctantly – to re-position themselves vis-à-vis US power.

First come those states that see US power as menacing to their interests.

The most important of these are China and Russia. Powered by an ultra-dynamic economy and big strides in technology, China is the only country with a real shot at threatening US superiority.

Through direct investments in physical and digital infrastructures along land and maritime trade routes, China's international influence has undoubtedly grown. Thus far, however, Beijing has not truly presented itself as a replacement of US power, but as an alternative model of development that can co-exist with US power within global governance structures.

Russia, for its part, has learned to use its military (both nuclear and conventional) as well as intelligence and diplomatic assets to spoil, at times successfully, US plans, including by exploiting US domestic divides through information warfare.

Yet, Russia remains a relatively small and undiversified economy with no chance to challenge US primacy. The best it can hope for is to ensure it has a place at the table on issues where it has a direct stake.

Critical to the success of Russia and China's ambitions is to push back against US influence in their own neighbourhood. While they have scored some points, the overall result has been that of entrenching competition with the United States and making East Asia, Eastern Europe and the Middle East systemically more insecure and fragmented.

In the struggle, opposition to US and the legitimacy of the regimes in power in Beijing and Moscow have become increasingly intertwined. This creates huge barriers on the ability of China and Russia to find enduring agreements with the United States.

Weak or isolated countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Syria or North Korea profit from China and especially Russia's

ISSN 2532-6570

resolve to fight off against US influence. Over-reliance on the US's main rivals however reduces the chance for them of alleviating economic and political pressure through a direct interlocution with Washington – as North Korea has tried to do, so far to no avail.

This dynamic also affects mid-size powers pursuing recognition and autonomy in their region. Prominent in this category is Iran, ruled by an avowedly anti-US regime that in the recent past has nonetheless shown enough pragmatism to contemplate an accommodation with the United States, at least on selective issues such as its nuclear programme.

Another country that fits the profile is Turkey. Even if a formal NATO ally, Ankara is increasingly at odds with such tenets of US Mideast policy as ostracism towards political Islam, uncritical support for Israel and tactical reliance on the Kurds.

These countries see regional arrangements reflecting their interests as compatible with global US primacy, yet US rigidity – outright bellicosity in the case of Iran – compels them to seek alternative arrangements with Russia and China.

The second category of states are those that see US power as beneficial.

Most US allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific appreciate Washington's defence guarantees and support for the multilateral order, which they seek to strengthen as a way to decrease the relevance of power politics and therefore their own dependence on US power.

No surprise then that the combination of great power competition and the US's faltering commitment to multilateral regimes and alliances have put them in a difficult spot. They are invariably driven back to Washington as a counterweight against Russia and China at a time when the convergence of interests with the United States is decreasing.

This has nurtured a desire for "strategic autonomy" among EU members states. Intra-EU consensus on the matter has limits, however, as most EU countries see autonomy as a complement to their asymmetrical relationship with the US rather than a path to full independence.

EU countries may seek triangulations with other powers (including Russia and China) on issues like climate change or nuclear non-proliferation, but their default preference remains a foreign policy enabled and empowered by transatlantic convergence. They may deviate from this path, but are not ready to abandon it altogether.

Other countries have no qualms in fully embracing their dependence on US power.

This category includes both strong states with significant military, technological, financial and energy assets, such as Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, and weaker states such as Egypt, Jordan, Ukraine or Georgia.

To varying degrees – with Israel towering over all others – these states have learned to leverage their importance to the United States.

ISSN 2532-6570

Skilfully exploiting the openness to foreign lobbying of the US political system, these countries create domestic incentives for parts of Washington's foreign policy establishment to frame US interests in keeping with their own.

The main incentive is to present themselves as vectors of US influence. The flip side is that the United States finds itself deeply entrenched in regional rivalries, as these states are often engaged in zero-sum competition with their neighbours. The result is a further fragmentation of regional politics.

A last category includes states, big and small, that see no advantage in taking sides for or against US power.

Most of these are states with limited resources, located in Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, whose main strategic interest is to avoid becoming overly dependent on others. These countries engage in complex balancing acts between great powers to protect their room for manoeuvre and are generally keen on joining regional institutions to share risks and extend their foreign policy latitude.

A similar policy mix is pursued by countries with considerable economic and demographic assets such as Brazil and South Africa, both of which tend to keep their distance from great power competition and catalyse regional trade and diplomacy.

India is a special case. Its massive demography and rising economic and military resources allow it to deal with other great powers on an equal basis. However, the unsolved conflict with arch-rival Pakistan and proximity to China constrain its potential for projecting power and catalysing regional trade and economic activity.

In a way, India is a wild card in world geopolitics, especially as it may review its traditional commitment to non-alignment and seek closer ties to the United States or Europe in an attempt to increase its ability to shape great power interactions and gain leverage vis-à-vis China.

In conclusion, the interplay of great, mid-size and small powers plays out against a backdrop of growing geopolitical competition and regional polarisation.

Countries around the world increasingly engage one another along partly overlapping paths of cooperation, competition and conflict, and often outside established multilateral regimes and institutions.

While one should not discard the lingering tempering effect on interstate conflict of military deterrence (nuclear and conventional) and economic interdependence, a system resting on fragile regions and constantly shifting balances is no recipe for long-term security.

A more stable, or at least predictable, system may still emerge, either as the result of allegiance and opposition to US power eventually generating broad coalitions engaged in controlled rivalry, or the creation of regionally-owned governance mechanisms respected by external powers.

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 61 - SEPTEMBER 2020 ISSN 2532-6570

Neither outcome is likely, as great powers see concessions as net losses and too often regional powers are unable or unwilling to create endogenous dynamics of aggregation.

In the 1820s, European diplomats romantically spoke of a concert of powers. Two hundred years later, we should content ourselves with a more prosaic, but more honest, description of international politics as a deafening cacophony of powers.

7 September 2020

ISSN 2532-6570

ISSN 2532-6570

IAI COMMENTARIES 20 | 61 - SEPTEMBER 2020

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy
T +39 06 3224360
F + 39 06 3224363
iai@iai.it
www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)