

What evolution of the notion of power and of its operating modes towards 2030, applied to the cases of the United States, Europe and China?

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Synthesis

Traditionally at the core of international relations studies, the notion of power is generally used in an attempt to evaluate the capacities of action of states, and sometimes to establish a hierarchy among them. Nonetheless, its definitions are diverse, and tend to vary over the time and according to different points of views. According to the evolution of the international agenda, the fluctuation of the international balance and will of power among states, the criteria defining the notion of power, and its modes of action, are, most notably, in constant redefinition.

As a “capacity” (of a state, group of states or non-state actors), the notion of power has, for instance been used alternatively to describe:

- *A capacity to impose and destroy*: this is the definition that is for instance predominant within the realist or classic approach of international relations.
- *A capacity of action or margin of manoeuvre*: this second definition tends to consider that an international actor is powerful as it benefits from a freedom of action and a margin of manoeuvre which enable it to conduct its actions according to its own will. Power is thus closely linked to the concepts of national sovereignty and independence, of which it is a means of accomplishment through a capacity to “avoid having one’s choices imposed by others”.

- *A capacity to shape its international environment*: this definition, which takes into account the questionings of some realist paradigms, integrates the growing multiplicity of international actors that need to be taken into account in IR studies, and defines, among other, the capacity of an actor to make a high number of international actors converge towards its own interests and priorities. This suggests a capacity of the actor not only to be able to “face the world as it is”, but, beyond this, its capacity to build, on the longer term, a “world as it would like it to be”.

This diversity of definitions is also the case as far as the operating modes of power are concerned: alliances, balance of power, network, influence strategy, power by proxy, etc.

Lastly, recent evolutions of the debates on the notion of power, highly structured by the strategic thinkings and policies originated in the United States, tend to replace challenges such as security at the core of the definition of power.

After an analysis of these evolution of the definition of the notion of power and of its operating modes, this study turns to their application in three test cases: the United States of America, China and Europe.

- In the case of the United States, main power in the international arena for several decades, point of reference and landmark of international power currently, the prospective uncertainties concern essentially the question of its future international posture. It seems, indeed, that the challenge is not so much to question the permanence of american power by 2030, but rather to know its shape and operating modes.
- In the case of China, emerging power, but whose potential of power – frequently mentioned in recent years – is long in expressing itself through a power and a power strategy clearly readable, it seems reasonable to assert that, by 2030, the characteristics and strategies of China’s power will still tend to concentrate on thwarting the emergence of potentially rival poles of power in its neighbourhood: India, Japan, Russia.
- In the case of the European Union (EU), the uncertainties concern the evolution of the nature of the EU as an international actor as much as the fluctuations of its potential of power and international positionings. We take as a starting point in our analysis that

the attitudes of member states towards the European integration itself are, along the evolutions of the international system, the major determining factor of these criteria, and then envisage for possible scenarios: the renouncement to power, a “niche strategy”, a Kantian power, and a global power.

If one refers to the different criteria that may be constitutive of international power, one has to admit that France, alone, can hardly be qualified as a great power anymore.

Nevertheless, because of its integration in alliance systems and international/regional organisations, France can have its voice heard in a multipolar world. It is therefore mainly in this direction that the preservation of France’s relative power needs to be sought after.

In this respect, the EU seems to be the natural framework for such a strategy, but one has to be realistic: the fluctuations of the power of the EU (and thus, its strategic value) is the result of compromises and sharings of sovereignty among 25 member states, soon to be 27, and probably over 30 by 2030. Without trying to impose its views on its partners – which would provoke counter-productive reactions –, Paris should therefore, in particular, attempt at “pulling up” the level of strategic ambitions of its partners.