The Challenge of Global Commons and Flows for US Power

Mika Aaltola, Juha Kapyla and Valtteri Vuorisalo, The Challenge of Global Commons and Flows for US Power

Reviewed by Géraldine Pflieger
University of Geneva

The Challenge of Global Commons and Flows for US Power aims at studying the redefinition of US world power through the lenses of the symbolic and concrete strategies of the US to control but also to frame the global spaces and global flows of people, money, goods and services.

The book is organised around six chapters including an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction clearly presents how the US global power adapted its strategies to strengthen its power on extra-sovereign spaces and its potential control of global flows. The main thesis defended along the book is that the US developed new types of articulations between its power and the global flows, targeting all kind of intents to threaten the openness of global spaces, such as seas, air, spaces and cyber mobilities. According to the authors, one can observe a shift from a geopolitical paradigm based on sovereign spaces to a new paradigm based on a new framing of extra-sovereign spaces. The authors mainly define global commons as spaces of flows. They notice that maritime spaces, cyberspaces or airspaces are all facing major issues of security that threaten their constitutive principles of open access.

After a first chapter dedicated to a broad study of how the US works at framing the flow of events and a discursive analysis of the temporality of foreign policy, the second chapter identifies the main trends towards a development of geopolitical strategies more and more articulated to the global flows of power and their related infrastructures, airports, pipelines and maritime routes. In this chapter, the authors argue that new territorial forms of power emerge, which are not based on territorial extension anymore, but on ‘network empire’, following hub-and-spoke dynamics. This vision of a network empire emphasises the role of political and economic arteries and the crucial issue of the security of flows of people, information, and money on a global scale. To illustrate this new type of power organisation the authors develop an extended study of aero-mobilities as the main symbol of this new hub-and-spoke territorialisation of global flows and power. Thus, the authors consider that global power is more and more related to the management, the control and the securitisation of flows.

The third chapter comes back to the US and focuses on the national production of power through the social construction of various, evolving and sometimes competing scenarios of national power, by networks of institutions, actors, knowledge producers...
and thinkers. After defining the different type of power scenarios, the authors study the most recent geostrategic scenario of the US, entitled *Sustaining US Global Leadership* (SUSGL), issued in January 2012. They show that this document gives a prominent role to the concept, and practice, of the global commons. The concept of global commons adopts a broad sense in this strategy. It includes the logistic flows of goods, raw materials and military hardware and gives a strategic military role to the outer space (for GPS and satellite control) as well as to the maritime space and the cyberspace. The US should guarantee the freedom of access to these domains in order to avoid any disruption in the global flows. This strategy also emphasises global interdependencies and the capacity to enhance the global market of good and service. It also considers global commons as global resources and underlines the strategic function of sometimes vital global resources such as air, water, forest, or global fisheries.

The fourth chapter sheds light on the human aspect of the global commons and contemporary US power. It shows that the global commons are not only appropriated but also reframed by the strategic discourses, they are redefined as existentially important, exposed to harm, danger and disruption, and exposed to the growing danger of disruption of global flows within the global commons. In the conclusion the authors use the cases of the Horn of Africa and the practice of counter-piracy to illustrate how the US works at securing global flows by creating a community of like-minded and willing actors and not only by acting itself. For instance, throughout the operation ATALANTA, the US worked at creating counter-piracy communities of practice that are characterised by networks of relations through which information is transmitted.

This book sustains an innovative analysis of the paradigm shifts of US power, more and more focused on global flows and dynamics and less on sovereignty issues. This analysis is well documented with several case studies including the maritime and air spaces, and the flow of people and goods, the cyberspaces of services, information and knowledge. It proposes a deep analysis of contemporary US national and global power.

I would raise three main points that this innovative study of US power transformation fails to address and that could complement this research in the future. Firstly, the lack of a stronger historical perspective is regrettable. It might be worth developing a historical comparative analysis of the defence and geopolitical strategies of the US for the last 30 years including the end of the Cold War. It would be interesting to trace the position and the evolving definition of the global commons in these strategies. It would help to assess under which conditions the key position of the global commons progressively – or suddenly – emerged in the US production of national power.

Secondly, the book is by nature founded on a US-centred approach of the global commons and does not consider competing definitions and framing of the global commons. The last chapter dedicated to the study of the Horn of Africa and counter-piracy strategies begins to show how the US builds communities of practice to develop its action, but this should be done for other commons that were studied in 1

---

the book (airspaces, cyberspaces, polar regions, …) and where the authors remain focused on the US geostrategies.

The last point is related to the vision of global commons promoted by the authors as of extra-sovereign spaces. They tend to consider global spaces as free spaces without any global or multilateral governance procedures. However, we do know that all the global spaces, seas, air, cyberspace and the outer space faced several debates related to their governance for three decades (the position of nation-States, the role of developing states, their sustainable governance). The work focuses on the US defence strategy and its vision of global commons but does not consider to what extent this strategy aims at transforming global institutions, the rules of the game, the perimeters of actors involved and the governance procedures of global commons.