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MAY
2016

GLOBAL COMPLEXITY: INTERSECTION OF CHESSBOARD AND WEB TRENDS

Anne-Marie Slaughter, President and CEO of New America

This article is the original English version of a piece to be published in Spanish in the forthcoming edition of the *CIDOB International Yearbook 2016*.

Statesmen and foreign-policy experts have long been taught to view the world as a chessboard, analyzing the decisions of powerful states and anticipating the reactions of rival states in an endless game of strategic advantage. Indeed, the theoretical basis for interstate bargaining, spelled out by Thomas Schelling in *The Strategy of Conflict*, is game theory. Half a century later, *Game of Thrones* offers us a particularly gory and irresistible version.

As Henry Kissinger reminded us in *World Order*, the modern chessboard world is structured by the Peace of Westphalia, which established “the concept of state sovereignty” and the equality of all states, regardless of the nature of their domestic arrangements.¹ When foreign policymakers operating in the Kissingerian-Metternichian tradition think of the international system, they see states in eternal competition with other states to

advance their national interests. That view of the world is inherently neither bad nor good; depending on the nature of a ruler or government, a country’s national interest can be defined as world domination or the welfare of its people or anything in between.

The chessboard remains a highly relevant metaphor for large swathes of international relations. But equally relevant, if far less recognized, is the web.

To see the international system as a web is to see a world of networks, intersecting and overlapping closely in some places and more strung out in others.

We are returning to a genuinely multipolar world in which powers engage with one another on the basis of simultaneous shared and conflicting interests.

Historians will look back and see the decade from roughly 2008 to 2018 as the EU’s equivalent of the American Civil War, a great internal struggle fifty to sixty years after its founding to determine the future and future shape of a European union.

The future, contrary to the federalist hopes of many of its founders, will not be a United States of Europe. Moreover, just as important for this evolution as its coming together is the coming apart of many EU component states.

Another web trend is the populism that is roiling European and American politics. As we have seen repeatedly over the centuries, massive economic disruption breeds political disruption.

The resulting tangle of people and problems make prediction folly; we are more likely to be able to respond and adapt than to predict and plan.

The chessboard remains a highly relevant metaphor for large swathes of international relations. But equally relevant, if far less recognized, is the web. Imagine a visualization of the Internet, a mass of interconnected networks with a number of large nodes and countless smaller ones. Or think of the pictures of the globe at night from a satellite, with electric light so dense in some places that the entire Eastern seaboard of the United States is lit up, while in other continents only a few cities brighten the darkness with thin corridors of light between them. That is what the web view of the international system looks like, with intersecting networks of people, groups, businesses, institutions, and governments.

1. Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. New York: Penguin Press, 2014, p. 26.

In the international relations literature and the halls of the State Department the participants in the web world are referred to as “non-state actors,” which as Clay Shirky has observed, is like calling a car a “horseless carriage.”² The term speaks much more to what the actors are *not* than what they are. It is much more helpful and productive to see global actors as participants as both nodes in and creators of networks. States are independent entities that choose whether to ally with other states – to connect or not to connect. Members of a network, by contrast, matter only to the extent that they are durably connected to other members, bringing the network into being.

Think about ISIS. It is now standard counter-terrorist lore that it takes a network to defeat a network. That is because efforts to destroy individual nodes in a network produce a game of whack-a-mole, in which other nodes replace the node that was taken out, sometimes in multiples. General Stan McChrystal was in charge of the special operations forces charged with destroying al-Qaeda in Iraq. He analogized the al-Qaeda network to Proteus, the Greek god who was forever changing shape to elude capture.

To see the international system as a web is to see a world of networks, intersecting and overlapping closely in some places and more strung out in others. It is the world not only of terrorists but of global trade, both licit and illicit. Of

The web view of the international system shows intersecting networks of people, groups, businesses, institutions, and governments.

drugs, arms, and human trafficking; of climate change and declining biodiversity; of water wars and food insecurity; of corruption, money-laundering, and tax invasion; of pandemic disease and air, sea, and land transport. In short, it is the world of many of the most pressing 21st century global threats.

The principal trends of 2015 must be viewed through both these lenses: the world of states and the world of networks, the chessboard and the web.

On the Chessboard: A Metternichean Moment?

On the chessboard, the biggest trend of 2015 was the triumph of diplomacy in resolving conflicts from Ukraine to Iran and addressing global public problems such as climate change. Foreign ministers appear to be back in the driver’s seat, taking over from generals. The great powers that did the most to shape international politics over the course of the year, and that are set to continue in that role, were the U.S., Russia, China, the EU, and Iran. The roles of both the

EU and Iran are worth separate discussion below, but it is worth pausing first on the nature of politics among those powers. We are returning to a genuinely multipolar world, not only because of rising and returning powers, a phenomenon that has been taking place for at least a decade, but also because of the ways in which powers engage with one another on the basis of simultaneous shared and conflicting interests.

All countries have some shared interests: even at the height of the Cold War the United States and the Soviet Union had a mutual interest in not blowing up the world. Thomas Schelling’s genius in *The Strategy of Conflict* was to show how what appeared to be a zero-sum conflict should in fact be thought of as a bargaining game in which those common interests could be advanced through limited but effective cooperation. And as Douglas Ollivant, a retired U.S. army officer and national security official, has recently argued, even U.S. relations with allies and partners such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia can display the characteristics of “frenemies,” a blended word that describes a person or entity that displays the characteristics of both a friend and an enemy, “who on some occasions helps and other occasions hinders.”³ Much more striking, however, is that the U.S. and China or the EU and Russia could also now be characterized as frenemies, at least some of the time.

The sheer volume and complexity of global affairs creates plenty of opportunities for shifting interests. Moreover, the existence of dense commercial relationships among the U.S., EU, Russia, China and other important

powers around the world at the same time as their geopolitical interests often diverge, combined with the exigencies of each nation’s domestic politics, means that powers are beginning to develop more fluid identities. Militarily, the US and the EU remain strong NATO allies; Russia and China are also growing closer, both bilaterally and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. But economically, the UK, France, and Germany broke ranks with the United States and joined China in establishing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. Under the leadership of Chancellor George Osborne, the UK has sought a much closer economic relationship with China, encouraging Chinese investment in British nuclear power plants and allowing the Chinese telecommunications company Huawei to build critical national infrastructure.

The U.S. and its European allies had plenty of differences over how to engage the Soviet Union over the Cold War. But China offers a 1.3 billion market alongside growing global political clout, meaning that the finance ministries and foreign ministries are often pulling in different directions. As a White House official commented after Britain signed up as

2. Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*. New York: Penguin Publishing Company, 2008.

3. Ollivant, Douglas. “Middle East Truth in Labelling – Identifying Our ‘Frenemies’.” *New America Weekly*, January 7, 2016, <https://www.newamerica.org/weekly/middle-east-truth-in-labelling-identifying-our-frenemies/>

founding member of the AIIB, “We are wary about a trend toward constant accommodation of China, which is not the best way to engage a rising power.”⁴ Differences on how and how much to engage rising and returning powers in a shifting geopolitical landscape can lead to much more flexible great power diplomacy.

Moreover, on issues such as regulating the Internet, European attitudes toward American technology companies can converge with Russian or Chinese attitudes, albeit for very different reasons. Issues of surveillance, privacy, and even censorship can produce unusual bedfellows. Although the U.S. and the EU deplore Chinese censorship, for instance, many European citizens are highly suspicious of U.S. government surveillance in apparent collaboration with U.S. information technology companies. The U.S., for its part, often questions European privacy protections.

Thus on economic, social and cultural issues, the four big players are trending toward a world in which countries can side with one another on different issues less predictably than in the 20th century. This is not to say that the U.S.-European alliance is weakening; the “West,” including Asian allies and partners such as Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand, still enjoys much closer interaction and cooperation than the relations of any Western countries with China, Russia, Iran or other countries. But international negotiations on a range of global problems, from crises such as Syria to climate change to Internet governance, will become more dynamic and unpredictable.

On the Chessboard: Iran Rising

Iran is rising. Iran and Turkey, and to a lesser extent Egypt, are the traditional historic great powers of the Middle East, Southwest Asia, and indeed Central Asia – historic in the sense of centuries-old. Against that backdrop, Iran’s isolation since its revolution in 1979 is a mere blip. History may well record Iran’s revolution the way we now see the French revolution, the first wave of an era of Islamist efforts to overthrow corrupt Western-sponsored regimes that took over half a century to play out.

Iran’s interests still diverge sharply from U.S. and EU interests; indeed, the U.S. and Iran are unlikely to restore diplomatic relations any time soon. Still, it is already apparent that the conclusion of the nuclear deal has unblocked diplomatic channels in important ways. The speedy resolution of the Iranian detention of ten American sailors through U.S.-Iranian diplomacy and a subsequent U.S.-Iranian prisoner exchange both resulted from a close relationship between the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Javad

Zarif. Many European businesses lined up to do business with Iran as soon as the sanctions are lifted; Iran will also be a recognized and powerful voice at the multilateral negotiations over Syria.

This development is certainly not welcome to Saudi Arabia or Israel, both of which fear a Middle East in which the United States has pulled back and Iran has pushed forward. Saudi Arabia’s new foreign policy assertiveness – bombing in Yemen, breaking relations with Iran – is a function partly of a new generation of royals coming to power and jockeying with each other and partly a response to the rise of Iran. In Israel, the conclusion of the deal with Iran that Prime Minister Netanyahu’s government worked so hard to avert may well roil Israeli domestic politics even while the U.S. moves to reassure Israel of the enduring strength of the U.S.-Israeli alliance.

On the Chessboard: the European Union Strengthening

The European Union is stretched and stressed, but its evolution continues to be one of the most important trends not only of 2015 but of this century. The two biggest events of 2015 in the EU were the resolution, even if temporary, of the Greek crisis with the election of an anti-austerity but pro-euro and EU party that nevertheless accepted the terms of an EU-IMF

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bail-out, and a refugee crisis that has thrown the commitment to common borders into public question. The headlines have emphasized crisis and the EU “coming apart”; the reality is that once again, at least with the Euro-crisis, EU members and institutions have transformed impending disaster into closer union. The Eurozone continues intact with all nineteen members and 2015 witnessed the deepening of the Stability and Growth Pact, which is the EU’s clumsy and inadequate but nevertheless pioneering version of a fiscal compact.

The refugee crisis, to be discussed further below, has put the most tangible symbol of European Union – the absence of internal borders – at risk. The resolution of this crisis will be long and complicated, composed in equal parts of national political developments, EU policymaking, and negotiations with Turkey. Already, however, the fear of the potential reestablishment of internal borders has led to a strengthening of the EU’s external border, with more money and enforcement authority allocated for Frontex, the EU’s border agency.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with her insistence on keeping German borders open to a million refugees, is emerging as the Konrad Adenauer or Helmut Kohl of her generation: a German leader who uses German power to commit to both pan-European values and the EU policies and institutions necessary to realize them. Her perceived domestic troubles will actually strengthen her hand in intra-EU negotiations over how to develop a collective EU response to stopping the current flow of refugees and creating a much stronger collective EU border policy.

4. Watt, Nicholas; Lewis, Paul and Branigan, Tania. “U.S. Anger at Britain Joining Chinese-led Investment Bank AIIB”. *The Guardian*, March 12, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/13/white-house-pointedly-asks-uk-to-use-its-voice-as-part-of-chinese-led-bank>

Historians will look back and see the decade from roughly 2008 to 2018 as the EU's equivalent of the American Civil War, a great internal struggle fifty to sixty years after its founding to determine the future and future shape of a European union. That future, contrary to the federalist hopes of many of its founders, will not be a United States of Europe. Moreover, just as important for this evolution as its coming together is the coming apart of many EU component states. The secession aspirations of near-majorities in Catalonia and Scotland are here to stay, joined over time, perhaps, by Lombardy, Flanders, and other restive parts of current nations.

A hundred years hence we will see larger regional agglomerations of states with clumsy but ultimately effective decision-making composed of many smaller states, or far more autonomous regions within states. The process of striking this balance will be long and hard; the political results will often be cumbersome and slow. Yet federalism, the 18th century solution to democratic government at scale – as James Madison explained in *The Federalist Papers*, is still an often stalemated form of decision-making as well. Just look at the dysfunctions of American politics, in which a state with half a million people, Wyoming, has the same voting weight in

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the U.S. Senate as California, a state with almost forty million people and states draw their own electoral districts to favor the party in power.

2015 was the year in which Greek voters chose to stay in the Eurozone and the EU as a whole even in the midst of extraordinary, and to some extent unnecessary, economic pain, and in which Scottish voters almost chose to leave the UK and become an independent state within the EU. Both those dynamics will shape the ever-evolving identity and institutions of the world's most integrated regional union and least integrated pluri-national state.

In the Web: A River of Refugees

From the web perspective, the biggest trend of 2015 was massive refugee flows. In June 2015 the UN High Commissioner for Refugees announced that the number of the world's refugees, internally displaced persons, and asylum seekers had hit a record high of almost 60 million people.⁵ Almost twenty million of that sixty were refugees, with the largest numbers coming from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. In December 2015

the International Organization for Migration announced that over a million refugees and migrants had crossed into Europe by land and sea; Frontex put the number at 1.5 million; German officials counted over a million entrants into Germany alone.⁶

As discussed above, the toll on the EU's open border policy and on the internal politics of individual EU members continues to play out. But in terms of longer-term trends, one of the most significant aspects of the refugee flows heading for Europe was that they received real-time guidance via social media. Michel Bauwens, founder of the Peer-to-Peer Foundation, describes 2015 as the year in which millions of refugees "were organized by social media (specifically through secret Facebook groups) and in which scores of citizens organized themselves through peer-to-peer networks to assist them."⁷ These "Facebook refugees," as the press quickly dubbed them, used Facebook not only to coordinate with smugglers, but also to help each other. According to UNHCR official Alessandra Morelli, the tens of thousands of Syrian refugees arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos "know exactly where they have to go, who they have to talk to. They know what to buy."⁸ Facebook posts showed them what kinds of tents to purchase, what routes to pursue, and what strategies to follow, such as slashing the rubber boats they arrived in to avoid being pushed back out to sea by Greek officials.

The drownings of refugee families and the death of over seventy refugees from suffocation in the back of a van abandoned by smugglers underline the continuing human tragedy of refugee flows. Still, the ability to communicate with each other in real time creates a sense of collective identity that can shift the power dynamics between refugees and host countries. Refugee flows can turn into powerful rivers of millions of people following family, friends, and countrymen across borders, acting as a body rather than as hundreds of thousands of individual families. The ability to mobilize protests in Hungary against the Hungarian government's policies and to walk along train tracks toward the Austrian border, all while communicating continually to global media reflected a change in the standard refugee as victim narrative. As climate changes drive more and more people off their land, the ability of people to engage in mass migrations in which they are moving as a body is going to shape global politics in a different way.

In the Web: Nativist Populism

A second web trend is the populism that is roiling European and American politics. As we have seen repeatedly over the centuries, massive economic disruption breeds political dis-

5. News Stories, "Worldwide Displacement Hits All-time High as War and Persecution Increase," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 18, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.

6. BBC News, "Migrant Crisis: Migration to Europe Explained in Seven Charts," *British Broadcasting Corporation*, March 4, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34131911>.

7. Bauwens, Michel. "Peer-to-Peer". *Shareable*, December 30, 2015, <http://www.shareable.net/blog/top-10-p2p-trends-of-2015>

8. Watson, Ivan; Nagel, Clayton and Bilginsoy, Zeynep. "'Facebook Refugees' Chart Escape from Syria on Cell Phones". *CNN Today*, September 15, 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/10/europe/migrant-facebook-refugees/>

ruption. In the United States, researchers and businesspeople are focused on “the future of work”: what will happen to jobs as robots powered by neural networks and deep machine learning take over not only blue collar but white collar tasks. Already, iPads replace waiters, sending orders directly to the kitchen; legal search software replaces paralegals; tax software replaces accountants; and soon self-driving cars will replace taxi drivers. Combine these disruptions with what is known in the United States as “the gig economy,” in which individuals provide services and possessions – from cars to houses – on an “as needed” basis for both the provider and the consumer, and the scale of digital disruption of industrial ways of life grows daily.

The disruption of the first and second industrial revolutions – the invention first of steam and then of electricity – produced both socialism and communism as counter-narratives to the relentless march of capitalism. The economic chaos of Weimar Germany and post-WWI Italy provided fertile ground for fascism. These ideologies focused on the enemy within – aristocracies, industrialists, Jews and other minorities. They succeeded in harnessing mass anger and frustration against simple and readily identifiable targets, just as parties across Europe, from Golden Dawn to the Front National, as well as the right wing of the Republican Party in the United States, are targeting immigrants today. Citizens and migrants of a different race, color, and creed are readily identifiable as the fount of all social ills.

When Donald Trump promises to “make America great again,” he is spinning visions of turning back the clock to an America dominated by white Anglo-Saxon protestant men. When Victor Orban insists on Hungary for the Hungarians, he is rejecting the cosmopolitan vision of the European Union for a 19th and early 20th century view of the nation. When Marine Le Pen describes Muslim religious sites as occupied territory, comparing them to the Nazi occupation in World War II, she is insisting that to be French is to be Christian.⁹

Both Europe and the United States have witnessed waves of anti-immigrant politics before. But the forces of reaction typically match the scale and scope of the forces of change. As the full dimensions of artificial intelligence, robotics, biotechnology, and other new technologies enabled by what World Economic Forum Chairman Klaus Schwab calls “the fourth industrial revolution” become clear, the political winds of 2015 will be remembered as a gathering storm.¹⁰ The question, as it was a century ago, is whether elites can reform the distribution of wealth and power sufficiently to avoid a revolution.

9. “Marine Le Pen: Muslims in France ‘Like Nazi Occupation’.” *The Telegraph*, December 12, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8197895/Marine-Le-Pen-Muslims-in-France-like-Nazi-occupation.html>
10. Schwab, Klaus. *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*. World Economic Forum, Geneva, 2016.

Franchise Terrorism

In the 1960s American fast food, led by McDonalds, captured the country by virtue of a new business model: the franchise. Franchisees owned their own restaurants and recouped the profits, but conducted their business according to a template developed by a central authority. They were required to operate within company guidelines, but they sprouted from the bottom up, with enterprising businessmen in small towns across the country seeking to bring a profitable national brand to their town.

2015 witnessed the rapid growth of franchise terrorism, primarily under the ISIL banner. Al Qaeda had established multiple nodes of its network: AQ in the Arab Peninsula and AQ in the Islamic Maghreb. But these were centrally planned and directed. ISIL, by contrast, invites any group or individual who wishes to pledge allegiance to the caliphate to join its forces, from Boko Haram in Nigeria to former Taliban groups in Pakistan and Afghanistan to Jemaah Islamiya in the Philippines. The counter-terrorism company IntelCenter has identified 43 groups worldwide that have pledged either support or allegiance to ISIL.¹¹ The men who carried out the coordinated Paris attacks on cafes, restaurants, and a concert

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hall and the couple who killed over a hundred people in coordinated Paris attacks and the couple who killed fourteen people and wounded over twenty more in San Bernardino reflect the further reach of ISIL to radicalized individuals and groups in Western countries.

From a web perspective, the danger of franchise terrorism is how fast it can replicate. Network theory identifies the conditions under which rapid replication is likely as a kind of Goldilocks situation in which potential nodes are connected but not too connected.¹² Radical Islamic terrorism spreads rapidly when targets have a relatively low threshold of adoption – alienated Muslim youth in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority countries who seek excitement and a cause they can commit to – and who are connected enough to receive the signal through mosques or social media but not so connected as to have it lost in the noise or countered by opposing narratives.

It is in this context that ISIL’s command of social media channels makes such a difference. It has succeeded in establishing itself as a dominant and cool brand, composed of equal parts black flags and brutality. The territory it controls provides a focal point and a trademark, elevating and distinguishing its

11. “Islamic State’s 43 Global Affiliates Interactive World Map”. *IntelCenter*, <http://intelcenter.com/maps/is-affiliates-map.html#gs.UkaFq4U>
12. J. Watts, Duncan. *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 2003, pp. 240-241.

message. Militants originally loyal to other groups can switch allegiances, just as franchisees could decide that another fast food company would be more profitable.

The Greatest Generation fought World War II. The generation of the post-World War II in Europe and the United States fought the Cold War. The threat facing the Millennial generation is the war within, a guerrilla war fought both by organized franchisees choosing which global brand of terrorism to support and by individuals and small groups convinced that random attacks on both government and civilian targets will advance a wider cause, whether to bring about the end of days or to cleanse the stables of both religious and secular corruption. These attacks spread terror because they are random and target civilians, but their purpose is less to terrorize than simply to kill – to wage a global religious war.

The picture I have painted is fairly bleak. Other trends in 2015 were more positive, above all the opening and deepening of U.S. engagement with Burma, Cuba, and Iran as part of the Obama Administration's foreign policy legacy. Global civic and corporate networks played a vital role in achieving the Paris Agreement on climate change; more liberal parties have also rallied against nativist populism, successfully in France and Great Britain – for now. Diplomats are gathering to hammer out a settlement in Syria and to create a lasting coalition to fight ISIL at its center in the Middle East.

The overall picture is one of extraordinary complexity: a growing number of nations on the chessboard; hundreds if not thousands of important networks in the web; the intersection of chessboard and web trends. A global polity and society is emerging, woven together by the strands of the web in ways that traditional chessboard regional and global institutions never achieved. The resulting tangle of people and problems make prediction folly; we are more likely to be able to respond and adapt than to predict and plan. But the identification of key trends at least provides guidelines and markers for what to watch.