

## LEADERSHIP AND THE RISE OF GREAT POWERS

YAN XUETONG

Princeton University Press, 2019, 280 pp., ISBN 978-06-9119-008-2

**Reviewed by ANTONIETTA IVONA,**  
University of Bari, Italy

Global geopolitical balances will change much more rapidly in the next decade than in previous decades. The current bipolarity between the two world economic powers, China and USA is, perhaps, destined to become a concentration of decision-making power in the Asian area. This and other hypotheses on future international relations are central to the reasoning articulated in Yan Xuetong's book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers*. Unlike Western theories, which link the power of a nation to institutions, to the political form of the State, to governance, according to Beijing theories the independent variable that gives shape and speed to changes in the global order is leadership. The author is a leading academic authority in China and dean of Tsinghua University's Institute of Modern International Relations, considered the country's leading university, where many of the other Communist Party leaders including secretary Xi Jinping graduated. The theories that Xuetong presents in the book are the result of the intense debate underway in China, aimed at understanding the characteristics of the current challenge among the great powers. The book is published in Great Britain and the United States as confirmation of the fact that the Chinese political summit intends to inaugurate a new strategy in international relations with the West. The author claims that the strategic interests of a state are defined by its "all-encompassing capabilities", which consist of four elements: politics, military apparatus, economy, culture. It is on the basis of the strength of these capacities that a state can have an interest in maintaining a *status quo* of world domination; to try to get this dominion if it is an emerging power, it can point to a regional hegemony if it is an average power, it can protect its survival if it is a weak state. Of the four state capacities, the last three are "resource elements", while the political one is the "operating element" which applies a multiplicative effect on the other three elements. As a consequence, the improvement or decline of a state's capacity is determined by the political capacity of that country. The question, therefore, that Xuetong asks itself is: what is it that determines the political capacity of a State? The national leadership that can be inactive, conservative, proactive, or aggressive and which, in all cases, is strengthened when it makes reforms and when it changes the international reality. Yan defines

political leadership through the lens of morality, specifically the ability of a government to fulfill its domestic responsibility and maintain international strategic credibility. Examining leadership at the personal, national, and international levels, Yan shows how rising states like China transform the international order by reshaping power distribution and norms. Yan also considers the reasons for America's diminishing international stature even as its economy, education system, military, political institutions, and technology hold steady. The polarization of China and the United States will not result in another Cold War scenario, but their mutual distrust will ultimately drive the world center from Europe to East Asia. The book consists of eight chapters. The first chapter "Morality, Power, and Authority" investigates the shift of the center of world power over the centuries. Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States were successively the world's dominant states after the formation of a global system of states in the sixteenth century. Along with the changes of dominant state came occasional shifts of the world power center from one region to another. Scholars of IR have long sought to trace and explain how various great powers have risen and fallen relative to one another over the past five centuries. The second chapter is dedicated to the leadership and strategic preferences as mentioned above. Based on the definitions in chapter 1 of morality, capability, power, and authority, and the roles of leadership types as discussed in previous chapter 2, chapter 3 "Corollaries of International Change" will expound a new theory about changes in international configurations, norms, orders, and systems. As a branch of international relations realism, this theory follows fundamental realist assumptions, paramount among which is that the nature of interstate relations has not changed fundamentally throughout human history. The chapter 3 attributes the international redistribution of power to the different capacities between the national leaderships of the nascent states and the dominant state. The bipolarity that occurred in the second decade of the 21st century is a case that illustrates this argument. Nevertheless, the current bipolarization has coincided with the displacement of the global geopolitical center. Although both cases result from

the redistribution of power, they occurred in different conditions. The chapter 4 "Power Redistribution and World Center" reflects on three aspects of the problem. They are the key factor driving the current bipolarization between China and the United States; the conditions that could trigger a global cold war; and the reasons for the displacement of global decision-making power. The theme of the fifth chapter is the fact that international norms change according to the conduct of the foreign affairs of the Member States in an international system. In distinguishing the international order from the international system in chapter 3, we have noticed that both the main international values and the international norms are components of the international order. Since international standards are formed under the guidance of traditional international values, the character of the first will change along with changes in the second. Therefore, the normative character of the international order changes according to changes in traditional values and norms. When emerging states espouse values different from those of previous dominant states, value conflicts become part of strategic competition between nascent and dominant states. This is discussed in the sixth chapter "International

mainstream values". Chapter 7 reflects on the use of the expression "transformation of the international system", often used casually to refer to changes in international orders, or configurations, or norms, or actors, rather than to the system as a whole. We therefore need to rethink this expression, especially when it refers to emerging countries. An international system transformation is a complete and complex change that includes changes in the type of actors, configurations, rules, orders and leadership. Based on the analyzes in the previous chapters of the relationship between leadership and changes in configuration, norms, political values and systems, this chapter will illustrate through historical cases how leadership types influence the transformations of the international system. The final chapter selects both ancient Chinese and global modern cases to illustrate the theoretical arguments made in this book. These cases vary according to their geographical location and size, their historical and cultural background and their political systems. In conclusion, using the point of view of classical Chinese political theory, the book *Leadership and the Rise of Great Powers* offers a provocative and alternative perspective on the change of the domination of nations on the global stage.