Book Review


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According to the traditional view, the idea of the global commons derives from a notion related to the environmental protection of the spaces beyond national jurisdiction, such as the high seas, the deep seabed, and outer space, including the celestial bodies therein. Its root may be found in the events and movements of the 1960s and 1970s, when the disastrous collision and grounding of oil tankers caused pollution of the global maritime environment and highlighted their adverse impact upon the environment in which human beings live. The 1972 Stockholm Conference and the subsequent movement that widely emerged following the publication of Our Common Future (Oxford University Press, 1987) and the series of conferences led by the United Nations, such as the 1992 Rio Conference, are among the responses worthy of note. However, what is nowadays at stake in international society is the assured free access to the common and maritime domains that have been maintained under the strong initiative of the United States (US). This type of public domain has expanded to include air and cyber spaces.

Irrespective of the origin and content of the phraseology, the so-called public domains connected with the notion of the global commons have a connotation for international society that is more security oriented, such as the suppression and control of piracy on the high seas and of hacking in cyberspace, and thus need to be handled by states in a more organised and cooperative manner to ensure the secured free flows therein. From an economic and military point of view, the practical necessity of securing the Gulf of Aden against Somali pirates in light of the failed state of Somalia has become as important to the world as protecting safe and stable transactions in cyberspace from hackers of unrevealed nationality. In other words, what the world is facing is a new reality in which pirates, who have long been regarded as hostis humani generis, are more or
less similar to hackers on the internet in the sense that they act for their own profit in the domain of common interest. Non-state agents act in the space beyond national jurisdiction.

In this sense, *The Challenge of Global Commons and Flows for US Power: The Perils of Missing the Human Domain*, co-authored by Mika Aaltola, Juha Käpylä and Valtteri Vuorisalo, gives the reader good guidance on the current significance of and challenges to the global commons with theoretical articulation and a concrete case study. As the title of the book shows, its focus is on the increase and transition of US power, both hard and soft, through its (geo)strategic change concerning the management of the global commons and flows in the era of a global political economy in which the increasing ‘de-territorialization of global flows’ (p. 2) is facing disruptions caused by non-state actors such as terrorists. As is explained in its introduction, the book focuses on the strategic approach towards US power projection in relation to the free and assured access of the global commons (or the four domains of sea, air, space, and cyberspace) in the international community led by the US. The reviewer of this book shall be, below, focusing on the framework and structure of its analysis adopted by the authors to examine theoretically and historically the notion of the global commons, with special reference to US power projection over those domains.

Chapter 1 argues that, according to the flow approach, the temporal management of various sequences of events and their confluences, such as those related to 9/11 and the Iraq War, is the foundation of US national power. The time element of the analysis in this argument is based on the culturally powerful Christian conceptualisations and is fundamental in Western-led global governance. The book under review draws attention to ‘various US scenarios of national power that envision the world of global flows running across global commons’ (p. 21), and identifies the US frame approach as one based on the pragmatist philosophical tradition.

Chapter 2 reviews the background conditions for new governance practices concerning the relations between US global power projections and secured major international flow through the ‘hub and spoke’ dynamics infrastructure, such as ports and airports. This chapter also provides a world political framework of the ‘West’, Christianity, Christendom, and Western power in terms of global security and geo-power.

The main argument of Chapter 3 is that, as US power – hard, soft and smart – originates in the overall knowledge (or cultural awareness) production of the US’s close domestic relations between policymakers and the research community, the emerging geostrategic scenarios of the US are becoming ‘more plural, mutating and diffused’ (p. 77), in accordance with its enemies, as suggested by Joseph Nye. In an age of global markets and rapid technological changes, spaces are expanding and penetrating to the heart of sovereign territories, including even that of the US, through cyber-enabled social media or international air transportation, so that global interdependencies reflected in global commons depend on the US-led and -developed orders for secure and
free access to the flows of resources therein. Thus, the historical concept of global commons (the high seas, air, and outer space) focused on the use of natural and environmental resources has so far as to include global security’s ‘reframing’ (p. 90) of these commons under the US’s command, in accordance with its geostrategy.

The book under review is particularly strong in Chapter 4, in which the major reason for the US turning its attention to the global commons is its attempt to ‘renew its influence and sustain its international leadership’ (p. 93). Since the global commons constitute the ‘arteries of the US-led liberal world order’, which is ‘increasingly interconnected and interdependent’, ‘the command and security of these flow arteries is of crucial interest for the US’ (p. 95) to govern and control through its own military and its affiliated international organisations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It is maintained that the global commons are nowadays exposed to harm, danger, and disruption by terrorism and hacking by non-state actors, such as terrorists and pirates, on the one hand, and by the challenge of newly rising powers, such as China, to regional stability due to their increase in military and technological power. Therefore, the chapter observes, the US military has grown to recognise that thinking about the global commons or the activities therein – including their command – should ‘clearly depart from the domain-centric and spatial mind-set and adopt a broader, holistic and action-based approach’ (p. 117) so that the global commons will be grasped as a complexity of interconnected domains or, ‘cross-domain connectivities’ (p. 118). To illustrate the above-mentioned theoretical analysis, the book considers some concrete cases, such as the use of drones in these domains and the collaboration between the US National Security Agency (NSA) and its UK counterpart, the Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ).

The conclusion introduces the case of Somali piracy in the Horn of Africa as an example of the practical need to deal with the challenges posing a threat or danger to the global commons, where international practice through NATO and the EU, for example, functions well in securing the free flow in and through global commons such as the high seas.

The book certainly offers us the theoretical and strategic background to the global commons, whose military significance for the US leadership has recently attracted particular attention from experts, scholars, and practitioners in the fields of military and strategic studies. Its main argument seems in a sense successful in justifying and defending the newly forged notion of the global commons with a military flavour because the threat and danger increasingly raised in the global commons by international terrorism after 9/11 and the challenge of newly rising powers such as China may be to a certain degree obvious to those who adhere to the US-led status quo. The argument and analytical framework of the book may provide persuasive support to those who take it for granted that the areas beyond national jurisdiction need to be governed and controlled by the US-led global order, but they may seem narrow-sighted and obsolete for those who see the world
as being in need of a totally new paradigm that is inclusive enough to cover as many challenges as possible. The rise, or even return, of China may not be appropriately covered, and the fundamental risk of cyber security will be too heavy for these arguments.

The framework shown in the structure of the book may only interest those who benefit from and thus support the US-led Western global order. The perspective of and analysis given by the book may have overemphasised the role and practice of NATO and the EU with respect to the counter-piracy measures in the Horn of Africa, without mentioning the cooperative effort made by some US allies, such as Japan and South Korea, not only in patrolling the relevant maritime areas but also in giving justice to the arrested pirates in their domestic judicial procedures, in accordance with a series of relevant UN Security Council resolutions. Technological innovation based on recent economic development has also enabled newly rising states, such as the BRICS states, to utilise cyberspace as a virtual common domain that allows almost every user to enjoy freedom therein. This freedom is double-edged since those who intend to maintain a US-led governing order will not share the rules created and supported by those who aim to challenge the status quo.

As the US did particularly in the field of the law of the sea after the turn of the last century, challengers such as China to the current global order may inevitably conflict with the US-led values and orders in light of the development of the world economy and the consequences of globalisation after the Second World War. It is undeniably necessary to secure the free and stable flow of resources in the global commons in the face of any threat and danger that may arise, regardless of the actors and their nationalities. The point is, however, that the international community must face these challenges to the global commons through cooperation and collaboration with all the stakeholders so that they will be able to coexist and develop in harmony.

The temporal background to which the book was written may have forced the co-authors to place too much focus on the Obama administration’s US (security) policy change regarding the treatment of China’s rise and Asia-Pacific peace and stability, though the reader will definitely gain profound insights into the topics dealt with. Even if the Trump administration may essentially have a similar stance with respect to its strategic policy on the global commons, the reader may, for the time being, be vigilant against any possible challenge to the global commons, not only by the common enemies of the world but also by the current self-centred and capricious US administration.