

**Is complexity revealed by a mutual capacity to blackmail?
The search for geopolitical equilibrium and the war on terror**

In today's world, economic interdependency redistributes bargaining power among actors. It empowers emerging ones while urging dominant ones to look for a new equilibrium to keep them at bay. If the USA depends on China (for financing its government spending), as much as China depends on the USA (for sustaining its economic demand), then China will have to be co-opted by the dominant group (the G8, for example). In other words, as soon as China attains the power to blackmail the USA, then the USA will have to befriend it.

But what if an emerging actor is not willing to come to an agreement? This is the case with Al-Qaeda, which the USA is currently trying to annihilate, not by chance.

In a world where money and information flow freely, actors that were once peripheral are newly empowered. From this stance, it makes sense for the USA to dominate by acting as the world's policeman and by fighting against globalization of the ultimate source of power: nuclear weapons.

In recent years, political scientists have looked with increasing interest at the issue of complexity. Lloyd (2005) acknowledges more than 30 scientific definitions of complexity, one which I find particularly appropriate for my research context: complexity is “the science of emergence order, with higher-level behaviours arising from lower-level interactions among micro-units” (Waldrop, 1992).

In this short essay, I try to show complexity in some recent evolutions in the world geopolitical arena. Leveraging on the concept of interdependence as a main element for “complexification” of international relations, I will present a speculative hypothesis on some governing dynamics that may reveal underlying complexity.

Manuel Castells (1996) regards interdependency or “mutual dependency” as the defining features of today’s globalization, as compared to previous economic and social orders. An example of such interdependency is offered by the current relationship between the two most prominent economic players in the world: USA and China (Jisi, 2005). Indeed, USA depends on China for financing its government debt as well as China depends on the USA for sustaining its economic growth.

In the new era of global interdependence, China could blackmail to withdraw its financing, in case something went wrong in the relationship. A counter-action capability comes into place, which I will argue is a cause for complexity in this specific instance.

[Figure 1, about here]

But how was it possible that the previously economically dominated actor got so empowered to reach a position to blackmail the dominant? To answer this question, we should consider the nature of globalization as an open system characterized by spillovers of information (Nien-Huei Jiang, 2000) as well as spillovers of capital (Blomström, 1989).

For the principle of communicating vessels (Bernoulli’s theorem, 1968), such spillovers happen from fuller to less full containers, hence from dominant to dominated actors, empowering the latter.

The new era of global interdependence started when the global financial market and the global information market (i.e. the Internet) came into being (Castells, 1996). Previously, information and money were only circulating within boundaries of national states. Driven by the promise of major gains (i.e. avidity), dominant actors promoted open markets worldwide, while building the two “meta”-markets of information and money.

Thanks to economic growth, the Internet and global finance acted as democratizing forces, empowering dominated actors while still enriching dominant ones. As the number of economic actors in the position of blackmailing others increased exponentiallyⁱ, global competition for dominance accelerated, making alliances among dominants and dominated actors more attractive. An old Chinese proverb says “what you cannot avoid, welcome”, then “if you can’t beat your enemy, befriend it”.

I would argue that this is the same reason why we observe more and more mergers and acquisitions in the business world. As an example, as soon as a minor company threatens to blackmail Google by attempting at its dominant position, Google buys it out.

By following this path, equilibrium is reached through the creation of a global group of dominants, what could be called global establishment in politics (such as the G8 or G20) and global oligopoly in economics.

[Figure 2, about here]

If information and financial markets keep being open, this group is doomed to grow, by co-opting more and more dominated actors that have reached the blackmail threshold.

Nevertheless, the larger the number of actors in the group, the more expensive it is to keep at bay ambitions of domination inside it: a guarantor of order is needed.

In today's world, the USA is playing the role of guarantor of order, the same nation that took the lead in the creation of global finance and the Internet, as we know them today (Wilhelm, 2001). In this respect, the rest of dominants in the groups of dominants are dominated by the USA.

[Figure 3, about here]

At this point, issues of complexity make their way inside the group of dominants as well.

USA's main preoccupation is keeping other dominants beyond the threshold of counter-action. This could be one systemic reason why the USA is preventing the full opening of markets for the ultimate source of power: physical force. Could globalization of nuclear weapons to countries such as Iran and North Korea lead to ultimate chaos?

In this respect, the USA is still in a good position: "It's not convenient for you guys to try to blackmail me, since I could annihilate you".

But an ultimate problem exists: what if an emerging actor refused to join the global group of dominants?

It may be the case of the global dissidents of Al-Qaeda, who do not consider money and information (the two global currencies) as incentives. From this perspective, in front of terrorists, the group of dominants has two options: either it converts them to the value of money and knowledge, per se; or it physically annihilates them, if they refuse to negotiate.

In conclusion, I wonder if the power of blackmailing as a manifestation of underpinning complexity is a defining feature of the era of global interdependency. I would argue that it is not, for a degree of interdependence among actors is also inherent to national markets and closed systems. But this happens at an infinitely lower scale. Indeed, according to the law of Metcalf (1995), an increase in the number of nodes in a network results in the quadratic increase of the number of relationships among those nodes.

When the number of actors increases, opportunities for blackmail skyrocket.

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Figures

Figure 1. Relationship complexifies when a counter-action capability comes into place

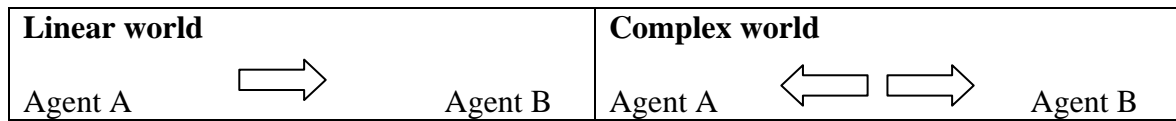


Figure 2. In a complex situation equilibrium is more easily reached by co-option

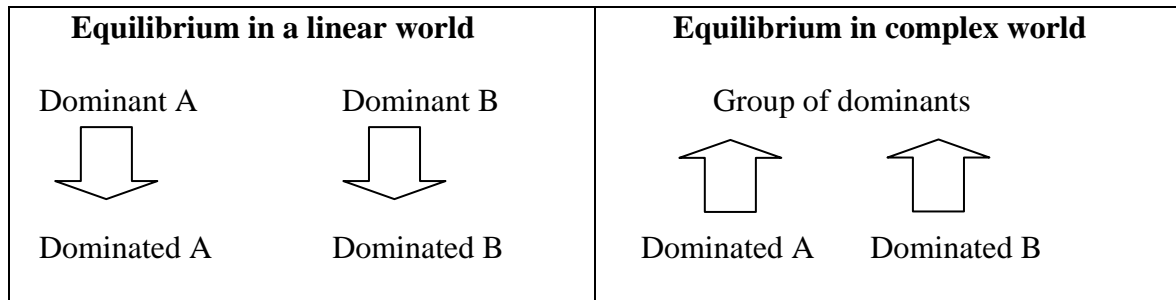
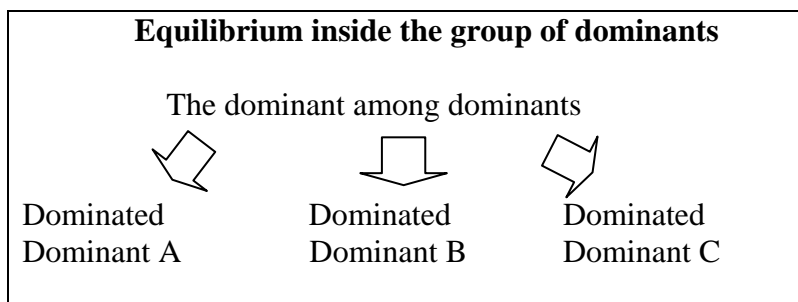


Figure 3. A guarantor of order is needed inside the group of dominants



Endnotes

ⁱ According to the law of Metcalf (1995), an increase in the number of nodes in a network (i.e. number of economic actors) results in the quadratic increase of the number of relationships among those nodes (i.e. number of opportunities to blackmail).