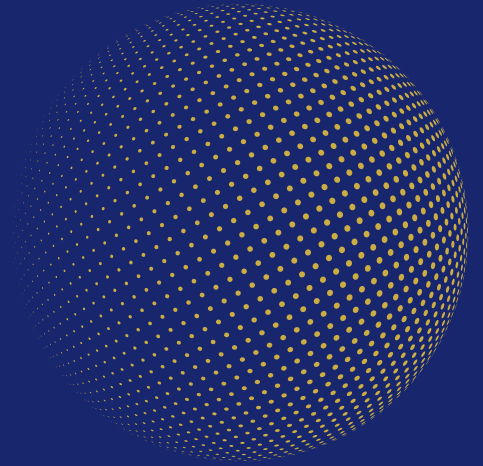




Global Dialogue on Power

Working memo Global reflection on power shifts 30 September 2026

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This note serves as both a roadmap and a working document, shaping the way forward based on the inputs shared by colleagues.

The Global Dialogue on Power aims to build trust and to re-impulse creativity in collective thinking. The initiative is grounded in Europe's concern with building a new generation of power, but it goes well beyond Europe. Europe cannot conduct this reflection alone.

Discussions around power have often produced deadlocks, while the current context is marked by systemic rivalry, pressures towards polarisation and a weakening of shared frames of truth. Any serious discussion of power must therefore consider the implications for multilateral governance, institutional reform, domestic politics and the relationship between state and non-state actors.

Preparatory calls to the Global Dialogue on Power held on 28 and 29 September brought together actors from different regions and backgrounds to compare how power has changed over the last twenty years and how it may evolve further. The purpose was not to reach premature agreement, but to identify the questions that matter most and to create a space in which regional perspectives can challenge and enrich one another.

Several existing initiatives already seek to capture power shifts through foresight and scenario-building, including work conducted by the Africa Institute for Security Studies. Our added value should be to connect such regional analyses, compare perceptions and move progressively from diagnosis to shared intellectual and practical capacity.

Without equating the present context with the interwar period, participants recalled that the systemic crises of the 1920s and 1930s ultimately required a collective intellectual and political effort to rethink international order. The same sense of responsibility should inform the present initiative: identifying what we can advance together, what each participant can do within their own field of action and which regional levers can be activated.

Six questions for a common framework

1. What is power today?

The first task is definitional. Power and influence are related, but they are not identical. Influence can give an actor agency and agility: the ability to advance ideas, shape choices, set standards, build coalitions or nudge partners towards outcomes that serve one's interests. Power can include influence, but also the capacity to decide, to act, to sustain action and to shape the environment in which others operate. Power and influence may therefore reinforce one another, but they can also diverge or become contradictory. The ability to bring a partner into an order – as in the case of European enlargement – was cited as one possible expression of influence.

The discussion should therefore look beyond conventional factors of power. Material capabilities remain central, but non-material power – culture, narratives, legitimacy, knowledge, information, standards and the capacity to define the terms of debate – matters increasingly. Perceptions also matter: power and influence may be understood differently across regions, particularly between what is conventionally described as the West and the East.

Key questions: How should we distinguish and connect power and influence? Are they mutually reinforcing or can they become antinomical? How should each be measured today? Which material and non-material criteria matter most? To what extent does the perception of power itself generate influence?

2. Are we entering an age of systemic power?

Power is increasingly difficult to understand as a sum of separate assets. Military capability, economic scale, technology, finance, energy, data, industrial capacity, institutions, narratives and social cohesion interact and can reinforce – or weaken – one another. This points towards the notion of systemic power: the capacity not only to possess assets, but to connect them into a durable system capable of shaping choices, dependencies, standards and long-term trajectories.

This raises a second issue: systemic rivalry. When a small number of actors combine capabilities across many domains, other states and societies may face growing risks of dependency, alignment or satellisation. The central question is therefore not only who has power, but how power is organised and how systems of dependence are created or resisted. Key questions: What makes a power systemic? How do different capabilities combine? Are today's major powers becoming more systemic, and with what effects on the rest of the international system? Can a political entity such as the European Union develop systemic power without reproducing an imperial model?

3. How are technology, science and artificial intelligence transforming power?

Technology and science are already major factors of power. Artificial intelligence may accelerate that transformation by changing the speed, scale, concentration and projection of capability.

To what extent could the development of artificial intelligence transform the nature, speed, concentration and projection of power? Does control over advanced models, data, computing capacity, semiconductors, digital platforms and scientific ecosystems create a disproportionate systemic advantage? Or can AI also empower smaller states, middle powers, cities, firms, civil society and other non-state actors by lowering barriers to knowledge, coordination and action?

A related question concerns governance. If AI becomes an infrastructure of power, then the ability to set standards, organise access, guarantee trust and preserve human agency becomes part of the power equation itself.

4. Can power be built collaboratively and shared?

A central hypothesis emerging from the discussion is that power should not be thought of only as something concentrated, accumulated or exercised over others. It can also be built collectively and shared: power as the capacity to act together.

This idea of shared power deserves to be explored rigorously. Coalitions of states, cities, institutions, companies, civil society organisations, universities and think tanks may be able to create capabilities that none of them could build alone. Flexible, issue-based cooperation can generate agency without requiring every participant to share the same interests on every subject.

Key questions: Under what conditions does cooperation create real power rather than simple coordination? How can shared power remain effective without becoming dominated by its strongest participants? Which forms of governance can combine trust, flexibility, legitimacy and capacity for action? Can shared power deliver positive public goods while preserving pluralism?

5. What agency remains for middle powers, small states and societies?

Middle powers and smaller states deserve particular attention. In a context of systemic rivalry, they face pressures to align, to depend on larger actors or to accept choices made elsewhere. Yet they may also possess significant agency when they cooperate, specialise, build regional capacity or form functional coalitions.

The exchanges cited the Greenland–United States–Denmark episode and the continuation of the Sevilla Financing for Development process despite the absence of the United States as examples worth examining. They raise the question of how smaller actors and multilateral frameworks can preserve agency when major powers exert pressure or withdraw, without treating either case as a definitive conclusion.

The same applies to societies and non-state actors. Civil society, universities, think tanks, diasporas, cities, business networks, media, science and culture can shape narratives, define problems, build trust and sometimes alter the room for manoeuvre of states. The question is not whether the nation-state disappears — it clearly remains central — but how it interacts with other sources of agency. Canada's recent approach is an example of the need to engage civil societies globally and to bridge the politics–diplomacy and domestic–international dimensions. Diasporas, migration and development should likewise be treated as integral parts of contemporary power dynamics.

Several regions also concentrate interconnected security, resource and institutional challenges — including maritime security, connectivity and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation — that require more sustained foresight and planning.

Key questions: How can small and medium-sized states and middle powers resist domination or forced polarisation? What forms of collective action preserve autonomy? What can be learned from Europe's attempts to move beyond a purely national framework, including its successes and failures? How can non-state actors contribute without weakening democratic legitimacy?

6. What international order — and what shared values — can sustain legitimate power?

The discussion on power cannot be separated from the international order. Participants expressed different views on the state of the rules-based order, but there was broad reason to examine how multilateral governance can function when major powers diverge, withdraw or seek to reshape the rules.

This leads directly to institutional reform, including the future of the United Nations and the Security Council, but also to a deeper question: who defines the values, terms and narratives that structure international action? A value system is not abstract. Those who define the terms of debate can shape institutions, policies and lives.

Key questions: How can a shared value system be revived or rebuilt without imposing a single cultural model? Who should participate in shaping it? How can multilateral institutions recover legitimacy and capacity for action? How should domestic politics, nationalism and the nation-state be integrated into global thinking rather than treated as external to it?

Cross-cutting implications

- The relationship between domestic and international politics must remain central.
- International change cannot be analysed separately from the political and social dynamics inside states. Europe's experience offers lessons from both its achievements and its failures, while the renewed force of nationalism and of a strictly nation-state model within Europe makes this question more urgent.
- The global economy, debt and growth form part of both the diagnosis of changing power relations and the preconditions for effective collective action.
- Think tanks and foundations face a shift from analysis alone towards action. Publications remain necessary, but they are no longer sufficient. The challenge is to connect ideas, foresight, convening, coalition-building and practical experimentation.
- Representation matters. Being in the room is not enough: geographical diversity, generational representation and the inclusion of actors outside traditional foreign-policy circles should be built into the method.
- Scenario-based foresight can provide a common language for comparing regional perspectives and testing different configurations of power without forcing premature consensus.

Proposed way forward

The network should be conceived as a neutral and trusted space in which different regions can compare perceptions, test concepts and formulate common questions before seeking common answers. The objective is not to create another forum for general discussion, but a working architecture that progressively turns collective intelligence into useful outputs and, where appropriate, joint action.

A first twelve-month programme could be organised around the six questions above. Each stream could be carried by a small cross-regional group, with one or two lead institutions and a limited number of concrete deliverables. Regional work should feed into the common framework rather than be subordinated to a single global narrative.

The method should combine: comparative research; scenario and foresight exercises; closed-door dialogues; engagement with younger generations and non-state actors; and a limited number of public outputs capable of shaping wider debate. The intention would be to connect existing work rather than duplicate it.

Responsibility should be distributed and ownership shared. Different members of the network can contribute according to their expertise, regional anchoring, convening capacity, research assets and ability to mobilise resources. The network itself should remain light, flexible and collaborative.

A particularly important line of inquiry is whether collective action by smaller states, middle powers and potentially systemic actors such as the European Union can redistribute agency in the international system — provided that cooperation creates real capability, remains sufficiently flexible and issue-based, includes more vulnerable states and produces positive public goods.

Our first task is therefore not to agree on the answers. It is to identify the right questions together. The ambition for the next phase should be simple: build trust, sharpen the questions, compare regional perspectives and test whether a more collaborative and shared conception of power can generate greater collective agency.