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# Dominance, stakeholders' moves and leadership shifts: New directions for transforming futures



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## ABSTRACT

Futures literature invites researchers to investigate stakeholders' interests, actions and reactions, as well as to introduce an analysis of power and influence in scenario thinking. The purpose of this paper is to assess how the concept of dominance can help to improve scenario building and futures thinking as dominance transforms leadership within action processes. First, we examine power at work at different levels using concepts that relate to dominance and leadership shifts. Secondly, we discuss methodological proposals to implement the concepts of weak and strong dominance in action-based scenarios design and the implications of these concepts for refining the approach of leadership in futures thinking. We conclude that paying attention to dominance transformations in scenarios is a promising direction to develop stakeholder and leadership analysis in scenario thinking. We suggest further research on the connection between history and futures thinking.

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## 1. Introduction

Futures literature invites researchers to pay attention to stakeholders' interests, actions and reactions, as well as to introduce an analysis of power and influences in scenario thinking (Marchais-Roubelat & Roubelat, 2008; Wright & Cairns, 2011; Cairns, Ahmed, Mullet, & Wright, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to assess how the concept of dominance can help to improve scenario building and futures thinking as dominance transforms leadership within action processes. First, we examine power at work at different levels – global, regional, local, organizational, and individual – and the different concepts that relate to dominance and leadership shifts. In this part, we emphasize the renewed importance of soft relationships between stakeholders and review the issues of the related concepts of weak ties (Granovetter, 1973; Rodriguez Diaz, 2009), soft power (Feldman, 2012; Nye, 1990) and weak dominance (Harsanyi, 1977; Marchais-Roubelat, 2012). Secondly, we discuss methodological proposals to implement the concepts of weak and strong dominance in action-based scenarios applied to the field of geostrategy. We examine transformations within scenario sets to look for influence at work at different but interacting stages and discuss implications to refine the concept of leadership in futures thinking. We conclude that paying attention to dominance transformations in scenarios is a promising direction to develop dominance analysis in scenario thinking. We suggest further research on the connection between history and futures thinking.

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## 2. Stakeholders and leadership shifts: power and dominance in scenario design

### 2.1. Introducing power in futures thinking

Since seminal futures works, to supplement scenarios has been a key research direction for futures studies to “extend the boundaries of plausibility” (Kahn, 1966) and include extreme scenarios (Wright & Cairns, 2011). Within that framework, the development of scenarios based on stakeholder analyses appears to be one of the prospective directions to manage moving scenarios and the underlying paradigm shifts (Roubelat, 2006), considering change as a “transformative process involving breakdowns and renewals of meaning” (Slaughter, 1993). As Wright and Cairns recommended, “a more intense focus on stakeholder analysis within the scenario development process” (Wright & Cairns, 2011) is a key proposal to enhance scenario thinking, while the search for rules and actors’ transformations pointed out in Berger’s prospective approach has to be developed (Berger, 1957; Marchais-Roubelat & Roubelat, 2011).

Such a direction invites to refine not only the role of stakeholders in futures thinking but also the one of power and dominance. In their “augmented scenario approach”, Wright and Cairns propose a stakeholder scenario matrix to identify context setters, players, bystanders and subjects, as their connections. In their matrix, power (high power/low power) and interest (high interest/low interest) frame a stakeholder analysis. For Wright and Cairns, “it is important to consider how power and interest may shift over time” and “to consider how different stakeholder groups might interact with one another under different sets of conditions”. Literature encounters there the issues of power relationships and of the impact of scenarios for and on stakeholders. When Wright and Cairns invite us to pay attention to disempowered and disadvantaged subjects, as well as to “disaffected context setters”, they suggest exploring indirect power relationships, not to mention soft actions, which can be played by some stakeholders.

From a future-oriented perspective, the concept of power can be defined from Jouvenel’s seminal works, as a “capacity to act” (Jouvenel, 1967). For Jouvenel, the future is indeed a field of power, together with a field of uncertainty and of liberty. As a result, soft actions and indirect power relationships refer to uncovering various capacities to act to be introduced in scenario thinking. Scenarios would thus offer a moving background to design the capacities to act of stakeholders engaged in action processes, while stakeholders’ acts would be the core issue of the scenario stuff.

This encourages futures studies to consider new directions for examining stakeholders at work, which might include Granovetter’s weak ties (Granovetter, 1973), stakeholder networks or communities, as well as stakeholders’ metamorphoses. It also invites us to pay attention to emerging ideologies and to paradigm shifts (Roubelat, 2006), which could serve as underpinnings to study how new stakeholders may challenge dominant visions and scenarios, and would develop capacities to act as a consequence within scenarios.

Behind these different directions lies the question of soft dominance in leadership shifts and the multi-level dimension of leadership, viewed as both “a resource for a group and an attribute of individuals”, which “cannot be studied apart from followership” (Van Vugt, Hogan & Kaiser, 2008). Indeed, the concept of leadership refers to various disciplines such as political science, sociology or organization science to mention a few, as well as it refers to many levels: international leadership (Ikenberry, 1996), which questions the leadership of superpowers and the regional leadership of emerging countries, industrial leadership, which relates to the control either by firms or nations of key technologies (Mowery & Nelson, 1999), leadership of outstanding individuals such as Weber’s charismatic leaders (Weber, 1921), leadership as a function in organizations together with the one of individuals (Bavelas, 1960) in organizing processes. Through leadership, individuals, groups, organizations and institutions interact not only to achieve goals, as mentioned in leadership literature (Van Vugt et al., 2008) but also to gain the capacities to act and to shape the future included in the leadership-followership relationship.

For the futures field, the different levels of leadership may be connected and the shift in leadership appears to be one of the driving forces of scenarios to be explored. At first glance, a classic methodological proposal to point out paradigm shifts would be to find out new shaping actors, i.e. new leaders. In these business-as-usual scenarios, BRICS countries would replace NATO ones to rule overseas multinational operations, new leaders such as Samsung or Amazon would overtake (and sometimes take over) their downgraded competitors. Some of them would even be based on dismantled value chains or on key parts of these chains, being “go-betweens” rather than providers. However, changes in behaviours are also one of the key issues of scenario planning, even when the stakeholders seem to remain the same.

The search for new actors and the study of stakeholders’ strategies in scenario thinking is to be connected to their influence in action processes, which can be hard, soft or smart. Depending of the scenario, international affairs suggest that the power of some leaders may shift from hard power to soft power (Nye, 1990) and even to smart power (Armitage and Nye, 2007). While hard power primarily depicts the influence of military capacities to act, soft power refers to the attraction effect of culture and way of life providing indirect capacities to act. Becoming “smart” power would be adapted to the strategies to be played, as to the budgets available to frame the capabilities to be developed and implemented by the stakeholders. Within Sen’s framework of entitlement and capability (Sen, 1983), this questions the leeway of the various stakeholders, at different levels. Smart power also suggests that power would be played differently according to the context, as Erickson proposed it with his lens of distance to frame “ripples of capabilities” (Erickson, 2012). Thus stakeholders would not play the same game according to the level, the distance or time, and, as we can suggest, according to the scenario to be played, as the capacities to act would not have the same meaning for stakeholders and would be connected to the capabilities developed by stakeholders.

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