

# Is access to resources the key issue in conflicts?

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The rise in populism illustrates a growing distrust of globalisation. The future of multilateralism has once again been brought to the fore. The world threatens to be a place of violence in the future, with conflict playing a central role in the international economy. Those who are most directly involved, the large companies, governments and international institutions, are facing new challenges. Access to resources, control of resources, and the sharing of global resources had already been the focus of the “Rencontres économiques d’Aix-en-Provence” economic forum ten years ago. Now the subject is back, with a vengeance!

The gravest danger threatening the international economy is the return of mercantilism. An idea is discreetly gaining traction: the world is closed, resources are limited, and when one country appropriates something for itself, it inevitably does so to the detriment of the others. Global warming shows us that the planet is already suffering the repercussions of the Anthropocene era; the Earth will not have the capacity to guarantee developed country standards of living for 9 billion humans. The spread of growth to an increasing number of emerging countries has lifted hundreds of millions of people out of extreme poverty, but could one repercussion of this be the repetition of the European experience in its most tragic format?

The conception of an open world in which we have lived for three-quarters of a century is an exception in history. The rule is rivalry between powers, between Holland, Great Britain and France in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and between the colonial powers at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. One does not have to be a Leninist to place ‘sharing the world’ at the heart of political economy: Child and Colbert were the first to establish a close, direct and indisputable link between wealth and power. Are the strategies followed by Messrs Putin, Trump and Xi their resurrection?

These evocations obviously go too far, and the panel will certainly not seek to confront them directly. However, they do constitute a backdrop which may prove useful in positioning the debate, from the outset, within the field of geo-economic realism rather than on hopes for universal peace and prosperity. The participants in this round table will speak about many sectoral or geographical subjects. The problems caused by the increase in the price of oil are enough to remind us of the extent to which the economy depends upon satisfactory access to raw materials.

Beyond the current economic context, there lies a more fundamental issue: the long-term opportunities for growth on which to base hopes for greater and better-shared prosperity. And oil is not the only example; food, energy and water (as well as the scarcity of land) are

other potential sources of tension that could take on a critical dimension in certain parts of the world. They are primary resources. But there is also rivalry upstream pertaining to productive forces, access to technology, the sharing of innovations, and the capacity to attract talent. The questions raised by access to “data”, by its economy and its regulation, have in this regard undoubtedly become the most emblematic component of the new rivalries born of rapid technological progress.

To their sectoral or geographical considerations, the panellists may perhaps wish to add their comments on two horizontal questions:

- Before beating a ‘hasty’ retreat, how can we use/develop the resources represented by existing international institutions and rules so as to frame future competition and channel mercantilist temptations?
- In a world of growing rivalries, how can we make the European Union into a major player, one that is simultaneously capable of strategic initiatives to defend its own interests and of forging continental alliances with Asia or Africa?