

Power: the central concept



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Power is a central concept in International Relations. As so often in IR, the theoretical discussion takes its reference point from realism, since the role of power is central to this dominant worldview in the field. According to realists, the ‘struggle for power’ is the defining feature of international affairs and understanding power is the realist precondition for successful policy. More precisely, understanding power is essential to answer two key questions. Who can be expected to win in a conflict? Who governs international politics? Translated into the realm of theory, power becomes a central variable in a twofold causal link. For realists, power understood as resources or ‘capabilities’ is an indicator for the strength of actors, and consequently of their capacity to affect or control events. Likewise, a general capacity to control outcomes has been used as an indicator for determining how the international system is governed.

At the broadest level, realism relies on the concept of the balance of power to generate hypotheses concerning international stability, and the likelihood of war among states. However, the balance of power only makes sense as a concept if there exists a common denominator for power in which all its dimensions can be coherently aggregated. At the level of the state, realist theory assumes that states are positional actors that are primarily motivated to maximise their relative power in comparison with other states. Again, this assumption requires that power be measurable, akin to the concept of money in economic theory. In this analogy, the striving for utility maximization expressed and measured in terms of money, parallels the national interest (i. e. security) expressed in terms of (relative) power.

This central assumption has been challenged, and many scholars argue that the analogy between power and money is false. To aggregate power resources, one needs a common scale to measure their value, just as money provides a way of imputing value to disparate goods and services. Critics of realism claim that unlike money, power is not a fungible phenomenon. The term fungibility refers to the idea of a moveable good that can be freely substituted by another of the same class. Fungible goods are those universally applicable or convertible, in contrast to those goods that retain value only in a specific context. According to the critics, it is difficult to see how even apparently ultimate power resources like weapons of mass destruction might be of help in getting another state to change its monetary policies. Thus in international relations, power cannot play a corresponding role as a standard of value. It cannot be the ‘currency’ of great power politics. Actors are never sure about its real value in the variety of different (power) denominations. At best, power is segmented, usable within specific issue areas. The aggregation of power in a general ‘balance’ is inherently uncertain.

In response, realists have argued that diplomats have repeatedly been able to find an aggregate measure of power and hence the difference between money and power is one of degree, not of kind. Yet even if actors can agree on some approximations for establishing a rough ranking of power, these agreements are social conventions which by definition can be challenged and exist only to the extent that the agreements last.

Political pluralism: redefining the link between resources and outcomes

The rebirth of power analysis in IR over the last two decades has been inspired by the ‘paradox of unrealised power’. For example, during the Vietnam War, the leading superpower had to accept a humiliating military and political defeat against the Vietcong. Some scholars tried to explain this paradox away by identifying the lack of ‘will’ on the side of the United States to use all its available resources, and to convert capability into power over outcomes. An explanation based on alleged conversion failures implies that the war did not show the relative weakness of the United States, but simply its unrealized strength. But such an explanation can re-arrange any outcome to suit any power distribution. In other words, such an explanation has the scholarly implication that the significance of power cannot be empirically assessed, let alone employed as a predictor of outcomes. A more ‘pluralist’ approach to power acknowledges that power is segmented into issue-areas. Consequently, control over resources, even issue specific ones, does not necessarily translate into control over outcomes. There can be no useful assessment of power independent of situational factors unique to specific issue areas, and all generalizations about power are inherently contingent. Power is fundamentally a property of a relationship between two or more actors, and can only be understood in the context of that relationship. For example, if someone who is about to commit suicide is threatened at gunpoint to choose between his money and his life, he might not feel threatened at all. The gun as a power resource may therefore be powerless to achieve its intended outcome.

In other words, power comes not (only) from the utility attached to resources, but also from the value systems of human beings in their relations with each other. Value systems, in turn, cannot be simply assumed in any empirical analysis of power. Instead, the researcher has first to analyze the value systems of the interacting parties in order to establish what power resources exist in the first place. For this reason, one can only study power as a causal variable in circumscribed ‘ policy-contingency frameworks’. The framework specifies the scope and domain of power, as well as the norms and values within which interaction takes place. Once circumscribed, power can then be defined as a causal antecedent to an outcome. The price to paid in this approach is that power analysis is a very poor predictive tool. The question should always be: power over whom, and with respect to what?

Structural power in the global political economy

In addition to thinking about power as a relationship between actors, one should also bear in mind an important distinction between relative power and structural power. The latter confers the power to decide how things shall be done, the power to shape frameworks within which states relate to each other, relate to people, or relate to corporate enterprises. The relative power of each party in a relationship is more, or less, if one party is also determining the surrounding structure of the relationship. Structural power defines the context within which interaction takes place, the resources considered important for assessing capabilities in the first place, and the outcomes that should be included in power analysis.

Balance of power

Balance of power may refer to the distribution of power between countries, a particular configuration of such a distribution, or a foreign policy. Central to each of these is power. Traditionally, power is assessed in terms of material capabilities. Different countries have different endowments of the elements of power, and this distribution is one definition of the balance of power. The distribution of power may have a multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar configuration. Multipolarity occurs when there are a number of great powers, exemplified by Europe before 1945, and the balance of power has at times referred to the existence of this particular distribution. Some commentators have identified a 'holder of the balance' and the concept of 'offshore balancing', both exemplified by Britain before 1914. Britain was not committed to any European alliance but it was able to join the weaker side and so remedy any imbalance. Bipolarity occurred during the cold war as the United States and the Soviet Union were the only two countries plausibly able to counter an attack by the other. The United States has enjoyed a unipolar distribution since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, a situation some have called a unipolar 'moment' which will pass as other countries (such as China) or alliances of states engage in a policy of balancing against it. More loosely, balance of power may refer to the superiority of the power of one country over another.

A country pursuing a balance of power policy assesses the distribution of power and engages in balancing behavior, seeking at a minimum to maintain a distribution that preserves its independence. Countries may do this either externally by forming alliances or internally by generating power. A policy of

balancing does not prevent war, which might be prevented by strategies of accommodation, appeasement, and bandwagoning. The primacy of power over morality in policy has at times made the balance of power a term of opprobrium.

Balance of power theory, a major branch of realism, predicts the continuous formation of balances of power over time. In particular, weaker countries are expected to form alliances to balance against stronger ones to prevent the emergence of a hegemon, or dominant power. A significant outcome is the preservation of the system of states in anarchy, that is, without an overarching authority. Classical and neorealist variants of realism differ in their attribution of state motivations and whether countries always engage in balancing. Classical realists focus their analyses at the unit-level of countries, and emphasize deliberate balancing behavior by statesmen. In contrast to the manual balancing of classical realism, neorealist theories focus on the determining role of structure and its production of balances of power over time. The mere existence of actors seeking survival in anarchy causes the recurrent formation of balances of power. Balances tend to form without the intentionality of states.

A critique of balance of power measured in terms of the distribution of power begins with the argument that power is inherently difficult to measure. First, while some individual components can be measured (e. g., economic size), others, such as political competence and morale, are hard to measure, especially in prospect rather than hindsight. Second, having a list of components of power does not tell us much about how to aggregate them. Is a country with a large military and a smaller economy more powerful than

one with a smaller military and a large economy? The first might be more powerful inasmuch as it might be able to seize additional increments of economic capability, which was seriously attempted by Germany and Japan in World War Two. The second might be more powerful to the extent that it can convert its economic capability into military capability. The answer to the 'conversion problem' lies in the time available and the efficiency with which a country can translate its stock of economic elements of power into military elements or vice versa. Perhaps the optimal situation is to have a large stock of economic elements, which take time to grow, and the time to convert them, which has been the fortunate situation of the United States in two world wars.

A critique of balance of power as a policy and as a family of theories is that it is not clear what actions are sufficient to count as balancing and when those actions must take place. An historical critique of classical realist balance of power theory is that it is debatable how often countries actually engage in balancing behavior. For example many countries have not balanced against the United States after the end of the cold war, contrary to expectations based on realist analysis. Similarly, European diplomatic history in the 1930s is not a story of alliance formation to balance against Germany: Britain did not formally commit to a military alliance with France until early 1939, Belgium, Denmark, Holland, and Norway maintained their neutrality, and the Soviet Union did not form a coalition with Britain until after it was invaded by Germany in 1941. Equally, the diplomatic history of the Napoleonic period features extensive attempts by powers, great and small, to reach an accommodation with France.

Balance of threat

Balance of threat theory argues that countries balance not against power but against those countries that appear especially dangerous to them. It attempts to extend balance of power theory by considering additional factors. However, threat theory can be hard to test because these factors can be difficult to assess and measure.

Threat is comprised of aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions. Aggregate power is a country's total resources; a country with more resources can pose a greater threat than one with fewer resources. Geographic proximity matters because (other things being equal) countries that are nearby are often more threatening than those that are further away. Offensive power is the ability of one state to threaten the sovereignty or territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost. Finally, countries that are perceived as aggressive are more likely to elicit balancing behavior from other states. Aggressive intentions specify the propensity of one particular country to compel another to respond, a situation exemplified by Nazi Germany.

Balance of threat is a far better predictor of alliance formation than the balance of power. For example, in explaining the origins of the cold war, the geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions of the Soviet Union elicited balancing by regional powers in Europe and Asia in the form of alliances with the United States, and that the Soviet Union subsequently balanced against the United States by generating power internally. The theory explains why, notwithstanding contemporary concerns

about American foreign policy after the events of 11 September 2001, it is unlikely that US preponderance will elicit balancing by other countries.

Threat theory is closely related to but distinct from balance of power theory, which argues that countries balance against power. However, proponents of threat theory argue that its additional variables allow it to explain cases of balancing that are not readily explained by balance of power theory so that threat theory is a useful extension and refinement of power theory. For example, many countries joined the stronger United States in the cold war rather than the weaker Soviet Union, as a crude version of balance of power theory would predict.

Threat theory is hard to test rigorously because of difficulties in assessing key variables such as 'offensive power' and 'aggressive intentions'.

Offensive power is hard to measure because many types of military forces may be used for both defense and offense, and forces with defensive missions may require offensive capability to conduct counteroffensive operations. Equally, aggressive intentions can be difficult to assess.

Intentions are rarely bimodal, either 'aggressive' or 'not aggressive'; rather, there is a propensity that may range from high to absent, and that propensity may change over time. Furthermore, aggressive intentions may be informed by implicit cost-benefit analyses: leaderships may be more aggressive if the prospects for success are good and costs appear low so that aggression, and hence threat, may mean mere opportunism in the presence of an imbalance of power.

Aggressive intentions may also be hard to assess because they are the subjective judgments of a group of individuals (perceivers) about the intentions of another group of individuals (the perceived). Individual members of each group may come and go, have variable influence, differ with each other, and change their minds. It may not be clear whose mind, among either group, should be considered and whose should not. In the absence of an official articulation of aggressive intentions or extraordinarily good intelligence, the perceiver may have increasing evidence as the perceived prepares to act but cannot know with certainty the intentions of another until the perceived acts. Hence, the intentions of a leadership can be hard for external (and even internal) observers to know, and it can be impossible to know the intentions of a leadership before it is irrevocably committed to action. The usual situation is that some individuals in one country perceive the leadership of another as aggressive, others disagree, the leadership of the perceived country is divided and is itself making similar judgments about the other country.