

### **Defining Power**

While analysts are almost universally agreed on the preponderance of U.S. power, they are considerably less certain of the sources of that power. This difficulty reflects a longstanding debate in IR theory about the nature of power, a debate that figures prominently in this week's readings. To suggest what a comprehensive definition of power might include, I will describe various sources of American power and their efficacy in achieving different goals. I will contrast John Mearsheimer's approach to defining power with David Baldwin's, and then suggest some additional sources of power that neither approach mentions.

The first thing to note is that power must be viewed as a means not an end. It must be distinguished from outcomes because, as Mearsheimer correctly points out, we would otherwise only be able to define power after a conflict, tautologically define the victor as the more powerful when this plainly may not be the case (cf. the United States vs. North Vietnam), and we would ignore the very question of how power affects political outcomes (60). In this respect, I differ from Dahl, who defines power as the ability to secure a desired outcome, and Blainey, who argues explicitly that power can only be determined after a war (113). (Baldwin, in my view, elides the issue by speaking instead of "potential and actual effects"--he argues these distinctions are different from a means-ends approach but uses them in much the same way (170-171)). Having defined power as a means, what does it consist of?

For Mearsheimer, the answer is easy: military power, particularly the strength of a conventional army. This emphasis on land-based hardware does too much and too little. Too much, because Mearsheimer's definition of land conquest as the sine qua non of great power goals slights other sources of military power, such as naval, air, and nuclear capabilities. While the army is obviously important, control of shipping lanes, the ability to engage in long-range bombing, and nuclear deterrence are all critical to vital U.S. security goals short of outright conquest--whether keeping trade routes open, destroying suspected WMD sites, or restraining incipient nuclear states like North Korea.

Mearsheimer's approach does too little because it doesn't seriously consider goals other than conquest. This is Baldwin's basic critique of the fungibility of power resources (192)--what may be useful in achieving one goal (say, conquering territory) may be quite useless in achieving another goal (securing agreement on a round of tariff reductions). This also points to a deeper flaw in Mearsheimer's reasoning: conquering territory may no longer be useful for much of anything. Given a highly interdependent knowledge economy, characterized by almost instantaneous flows of capital, taking over another country may not add much to U.S. economic capacity and indeed pacification efforts may be a net drain on the economy (cf. Iraq).

The limited fungibility of military power causes me to endorse Baldwin's notion of "contextual power analysis," in which the efficacy of particular power resources depends on the goals being sought (192). He uses the example of international economic relations, where military might is of little use. However, we should note also that this logic could apply even to certain types of military and political goals. For instance, when the goal is

humanitarian intervention, as in Kosovo, the use of American firepower is dramatically constrained--it is difficult to justify killing Serb civilians to save Kosovar civilians. Baldwin, moreover, does not go into any significant detail on non-military sources of power, so let us now consider them.

Krasner's analysis of trading regimes uses a set of economic factors as the measure of power in this arena (332). This approach can be elaborated in defining American economic power today: the attractiveness of U.S. markets, the sale of sought-after, often high-tech goods abroad, the vast pool of investment capital--granting or denying access to these can all be used as carrots or sticks in seeking economic goals. One should also note that the international economic structure on the whole bolsters American power by adding to the growth and efficiency of the U.S. economy and by encouraging nations to engage in liberal reforms (i.e. become more like America). In effect, nations that seek to increase their own wealth need to buy into a system that also increases American wealth and security--China's recent accession to the WTO can be seen in these terms.

One may also consider the role of legitimacy in bolstering American power. This relates to a set of ideas theorized by Joseph Nye as "soft power." We may ask why the balancing coalition against America promised by realists after the Cold War never materialized. One answer is that the perception of the United States as a benign hegemon militated against this. On the other hand, why must the U.S. bend its election plans in Iraq to the will of Ayatollah Khomeini? Again, part of the answer is that he is viewed as a legitimate authority by the Shi'ite population while U.S. occupation forces are not. Legitimacy is a source of power insofar as it can make achieving goals less costly by reducing opposition. Indeed, international institutions where the U.S. has a major say, such as the UN, have been significant tools in legitimizing U.S. power in the last 50 years. Legitimacy is difficult to measure, but studying it, perhaps by correlating actor behavior to elite or public attitudes about the U.S., may yield fruitful insights.

A look at the nature of American power today confirms the utility of Baldwin's claim that power can only be understood with reference to the goals it seeks to achieve. Mearsheimer's emphasis on conventional land forces slights other important military sources of power and totally ignores non-military sources. Baldwin's approach needs to be specified further, however: I have suggested different ways in which economic strength and even the nature of the world economy can contribute to power, and also suggested studying legitimacy as an independent source of power.

## References

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