

What Is “Power in Global Politics” and International Relations? Dr. V. Sotirovic

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Power in Politics

Power is the ability to make people, states, movements, organizations, or things do what they would not otherwise have done. It is a matter of fact that politics is seen to be about might rather than right.

It can be said that, in essence, politics is power or, in other words, the ability of some international actor to get the desired results of his/her political behavior by using whatever instruments (legal or not, moral or not, etc.). In the very broadest sense of its meaning, power can be understood as the ability to influence the results of certain political/historical events, from the point of view to have or control power to do something in the arena of world politics and international relations.

The notion of power in world politics is usually attached to the nation-state and, therefore, power as an ability is prescribed to the country to direct its affairs but without the interference of other states or other international actors. As a consequence of such an understanding of the term, power in politics is, basically, a very close term if not even a synonym to autonomy or independence.

Nevertheless, in academic literature, **power in international politics is mostly understood as a relationship as the real ability to influence the behavior of other actors** (states, organizations, movements, parties, persons, etc.) in a manner, not of their choosing.

That is the reason why the term *power over others* is becoming more and more used as a proper one. In other words, power in politics can be understood as a phenomenon that is exercised when one actor gets another actor to do something that, in fact, the latter would not otherwise have done. However, from a very practical point of view, distinctions exist between potential and actual power, relational and structural power, and finally between hard and soft power.[1]

Power is for sure a property of a structure which means that it is an ability to control the political moves and shape how things of the others are going to be arranged influenced by key factors through which one actor may influence another one or several of them at the same time (for instance, the relations between the USA and the rest of the member states of NATO).



Soft Power

For decades, power in international relations has been seen through the prism of capabilities, and consequently, power as a phenomenon was understood either as an attribute or a possession. From this point of view, power was often reflected in attempts to make a list of components of the power of a nation-state. However, those components usually are seen, in fact, as the real capabilities of one actor to achieve its aim by using some sort of power.[2] The focal capabilities of nation-states in direct relation to their potential or real power are the next five:[3]



1. **Military capability:** It is the question of how large military forces one actor has, how many weapons possesses, and of what kinds of weapons, and of what quality? In other words, the greater the military capability of one actor taking into consideration all of these dimensions, the greater is its real political and military power in the international arena. Many Great Powers reduce their army's size when they get more sophisticated weaponry. The realist school understands the power in international relations almost exclusively attached to the military capacity of a nation-state. Military capacity is a basic force of power as it enables a state to protect its own borders, people, and territory from external aggression but as well as to impose its interests across its borders by a policy of occupation and expansion. From a very military viewpoint, the crucial factors are, therefore, the size of the army, its effectiveness in terms of morale, training, discipline, command, and its possession of the most advanced weaponry and equipment.
2. **Economic resources:** From an economic standpoint, the power of the nation-state depends on how large is a GNP, how much the nation-state is industrialized



and technologically developed, and how much its economy is diversified? In other words, the weight of the nation-state in the international arena is closely connected to its wealth and economic resources. We cannot forget that in practice, military power directly depends on the economic development of the actor for the very reason that economic wealth enables nation-states (and other actors in international relations) to develop large military forces, possess sophisticated weapons, pay for the mercenaries or wage costly wars (for example, the US military intervention in Iraq in 2003). Modern technology with advanced industry is as well as an expression of the economic wealth of a nation which gives political power in relation to trading and other partners. It is true particularly in those cases when national currencies are very strong and stable to the extent that other nations are using them as tools of international exchange (for instance, a petrodollar).

3. **Natural resources:** It means, how much an actor has access to natural resources for the sake of supporting its own economic capabilities in general and in particular its military?
4. **Population resources:** The power of a nation-state very much depends on its population number what is of extreme importance for both national economy and military as a large population usually contribute to a larger military and labor force. However, in this matter, it is necessary to respect a population's age, gender, level of literacy, skills, health, and education as all of these factors have a direct influence on the actor's economy, technological advantage, and military strength. Modern economic, especially industrial, development requires mass literacy and certain levels of work-related skills. Today, a higher level of scientific and technical skills has become a crucial requirement for national economic success. However, politically, it is a question is the population of nation-state united around its Government, or there are political, ideological, confessional, etc. cleavages which are threatening internal national cohesion?
5. **Geographic features:** The chief significance of geographical elements as land area, location, climate, topography, and natural resources, are always stressed by human geographers and geopolitics to be of extreme importance for the national power. In other words, from a geographical point of view, it is important to how large the territory of a nation-state is, does it possess direct access to the sea/ocean, does the terrain of the state can provide natural defenses (mountains, marshes or rivers, for instance)? Finally, it is as well as a question do climate, geographic features, and terrain in general permit agriculture and strengthening a defense system in general?[4]

How Many Principal Forms of Power?

In political science usually, power is classified into five principal forms: **Force, Persuasion, Authority, Coercion, and Manipulation**. Nevertheless, most political sciences claim that only coercion and manipulation are undoubtedly forms of power in politics.

1. *Force* implies the control of some actors in politics because they oppose the will of those who use the force which is the real reason to use it. In other words, only when he complies because of the threat of force in the relationships can be labeled as power. However, in such a situation, this becomes coercion.
2. *Persuasion* means that the powerless (slave) may persuade the powerful (ruler). The offering, in this case, of ideas and wishes is not controlled until it creates a dependency and, therefore, the capacity to manipulate.
3. *Authority* is understood as legitimate (according to the law) power that means in reality the existence of different (legal) rights to command duties to obey. Therefore, authority constitutes a significant resource for power.
4. *Coercion* is, in fact, a synonym for power as this form of power is controlling people by using the threats (open or hidden).
5. *Manipulation* as a form of power involves control exercised without direct use of threat or force but using resources of information and ideas/ideology. Manipulation is a more durable form of power – a kind of soft power.[5]

How Many Powers Are in IR?

We can say that almost all forms of politics are about power and, therefore, politics as an academic discipline is usually understood as the study of power. Contemporary political studies raise two focal questions concerning power:

- 1) Where power is located or who has it?; and
- 2) How many powers exist? That is the question regarding the changing nature of power.

The actors in international relations (IR), especially those who belong to the Great Powers[6], can use capabilities in different ways in order to increase their political, economic, military or so influence on others.

There are eight different and basic natures (types) of power used by actors in global politics and international relations but especially by those from the group of Great Powers in order to reshape World order:[7]

1. *Hard Power*: This is the ability of an actor (in fact, a nation-state) to influence another actor or actors by using threats or rewards. The actor using hard power is involving military “sticks” (punishment) or economic “carrots” (reward). The policy of hard power predominantly focuses on the use of economic sanctions, military threats, and even military deployment in order to coerce the compliance of others.[8]
2. *Soft Power*: **This is the ability to influence other actors by convincing them by different means to follow or agree to certain norms, aspirations, and politics that produce the desired behavior.** The term soft power is used in the studies of international relations to mark the use of economic, cultural, and diplomatic measures for the sake of attracting and shape the actions of other actors toward the desired direction.[9]
3. *Smart Power*: The policy of smart power is to combine both hard power and soft power to reinforce one another in the international arena. In other words, the main instrument used by smart power is, in fact, compelling and is a tactic/strategy used to force an actor to make concessions against its will by combining military threats with economic/financial rewards.

4. *Relational Power*: It means the ability of one actor to influence another actor or several of them in a direction that originally was not of their wish and choosing.
5. *Structural Power*: It is an ability to shape the frameworks within which actors in global politics relate to one another. Therefore, the structural power used by the supreme actor determines how politics is going to be done for the rest of the group. Structural power operates through structures that shape the capacities and interests of actors in relation to one another.[10]
6. *Compulsory Power*: Such power allows the actor to establish direct control over another by implying military, economic, or financial instruments.
7. *Institutional Power*: It is used when the actors exercise indirect control over as, for example, when states establish international institutions that work to their own long-term advantage and to the disadvantage of others (NATO, EU, IMF, ICJ, ICC, etc.).
8. *Productive Power*: This power is in essence inter-subjective power as it is the power that operates through the ability to shape an actor's own traditional beliefs, values, or perceptions. Productive power is influenced by social constructivists, poststructuralists, and feminist thinking and works by defining the so-called "legitimate" knowledge and by determining whose knowledge matters.[11]

Closing Remarks

Politics, either domestic or international, in essence, is a power that means the ability to achieve desired results by using different instruments and policies. The quest for power and influence are basic points of any politics. Power as a phenomenon was all the time central to studies of conflict and security. Nevertheless, power is a very complex and multi-dimensional phenomenon. From a purely academic point of view, power as a concept is extremely disputed as there is no agreed notion of power. Instead, only exist different rival notions coming from different schools.[12]

However, almost all schools in global politics and international relations agree that power has to be understood in terms of capability – an attribute that an actor (mostly nation-state) possesses; relationship – the exercise of influence over other actors; and property of structure – the ability to control the political agenda and direct things to the proper direction.

To conclude, regarding global politics and international relations, power is "the ability to convince another state to do what it would not normally do".[13] The first move of the state is to organize power domestically, and the second is to accumulate power internationally.[14]

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Notes

[1] Andrew Heywood, *Global Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, 210.

[2] Richard W. Mansbach, Kirsten L. Taylor, *Introduction to Global Politics*, Second Edition, London–New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2012, 253.

[3] These five capabilities or the focal elements of national power are usually taken into consideration to rank nation-states within a global hierarchy especially those from the club of Great Powers.

[4] See more in [Paul Cloke, Philip Crang, Mark Goodwin, *Introducing Human Geographies*, Second Edition, Abington, UK: Hodder Arnold, 2005].

[5] See more in [Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, Alistair McMillan, eds., *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Politics & International Relations*, Fourth Edition, Oxford, UK, 2018, 446–448].

[6] Originally, in the 18th century, the term Great Power was related to any European state that was, in essence, a sovereign or independent. In practice, it meant, only those states that were able to independently defend themselves from the aggression launched by another state or group of states. Nevertheless, after WWII, the term Great Power was applied to countries that were regarded to be in the most powerful positions within the global system of international relations. Those countries are only countries whose foreign policy is „forward“ policy and, therefore, states like Brazil, Germany, or Japan, who have significant economic might, are not considered today to be members of the Great Power bloc for the only reason that they lack both political will and the military potential for the Great Power status (a partial exception is Germany after 1990 as Berlin, especially since 1999, forwarding its neo-imperialistic policy within the frameworks of both NATO and the EU). One of the fundamental characteristics and historical features of any member state of the Great Power club was, is, and will be to behave in the international arena according to its own adopted geopolitical concept(s) and aim(s). In other words, the leading modern and postmodern nation-states are „geopolitically“ acting in the global politics that makes a crucial difference between them and all other states. According to the realist viewpoint, global or world politics is nothing else than a struggle for power and supremacy between the states on different levels as regional, continental, intercontinental, or global (universal). Therefore, the Governments of the states are forced to remain informed upon the efforts and politics of other states, or eventually other political actors, for the sake, if necessary, of acquiring extra power (weapons, etc.) which is supposed to protect their own national security (Iran) or even survival on the political map of the world (North Korea) by the potential aggressor (the USA). Competing for supremacy and protecting national security, the national states will usually opt for the policy of balancing one another's power by different means like creating or joining military-political blocs or increasing their own military capacity. Subsequently, global politics is nothing else but just an eternal struggle for power and supremacy in order to protect the self-proclaimed national interest and security of the major states or the Great Powers. As the major states regard the issue of power distribution to be fundamental in international relations and as they act in accordance with the relative power that they have, the factors of internal influence on states, like the type of political Government or economic order, have no strong impact on foreign policy and international relations. In other words, it is of the „genetic nature“ of the Great Powers to struggle for supremacy and hegemony regardless of their inner construction and features. It is the same „natural law“ either for democracies or totalitarian types of government or liberal (free-market) and command (centralized) economies. About Great Powers, see more in [Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, New York:

Vintage Books, 2010; Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020]. National interest is foreign policy goals, objectives, or policy preferences to be benefited by society. Public interest is, basically, a synonym for the national interest.

[7] World order can be understood as the distribution of power between and/or among Great Powers or other focal actors in global politics by different means establishing a relatively stable framework of relationships and behaviors in international relations. See in more detail in [Stephen McGlinchey, Rosie Walters, Christian Scheinplugg (eds.), *International Relations Theory*, Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017].

[8] NATO military aggression on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 illustrates how hard power works in practice as the Yugoslav army stopped fighting primarily because of the threat of use of additional and more effective NATO strategy and military actions.

[9] As one of the effective instruments used within the framework of soft power is, for instance, the NGOs [Karen A. Mingst, *Essentials of International Relations*, Third Edition, New York–London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004, 180–185].

[10] Garrett W. Brown, Iain McLean, Alistair McMillan (eds.), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, Fourth Edition, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018.

[11] See more in [Sorin Baiasu, Sylvie Loriaux (eds.), *Sincerity in Politics and International Relations*, London–New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017].

[12] See in more detail in [Stephen McGlinchey (ed.), *International Relations*, Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017].

[13] Steven L. Spiegel, Jennifer Morrison Taw, Fred L. Wehling, Kristen P. Williams, *World Politics in a New Era*, Third Edition, Thomson Wadsworth, 2004, 702.

[14] John Baylis, Steve Smith, Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Fourth Edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, 100.

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