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CONFERENCE
PROCEEDINGS

Measuring National Power

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Summary

At the dawn of the 21st century, the concept of power is more important than ever and also more debated. How to measure the power of the United States is fundamental to the major debates over American foreign policy. If, as the globe's unipolar power, the United States has power beyond precedent, then its foreign policy problem is simplified, because friends and allies will have to follow it whether they like it or not and would-be adversaries will be cowed by the prospect of that power.

If, on the other hand, that power is less than sometimes assumed or less usable than hoped, the United States may face the prospect that erstwhile allies and friends will, almost as a law of physics, want to see it taken down a peg. They will, if not balance against it, then at least sit on the fence in circumstances like Iraq. They will be inclined to view the United States' travails with a certain *Schadenfreude*, happy to see its dominant power reduced to a more normal size but prepared to stand with the United States if it were in serious trouble.

Measuring State Power

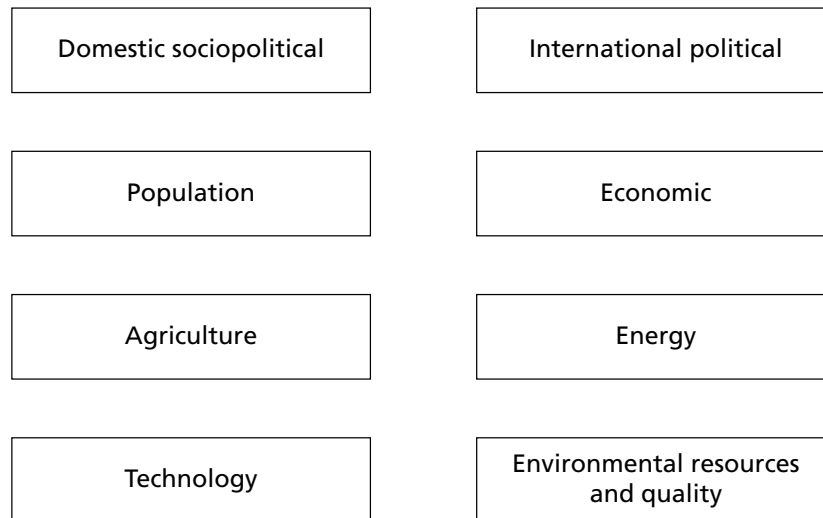
State power can be conceived at three levels: (1) resources or capabilities, or power-in-being; (2) how that power is converted through national processes; (3) and power in outcomes, or which state prevails in particular circumstances. The starting point for thinking about—and developing metrics for—national power is to view states as “capability containers.” Yet those capabilities—demographic, economic, technological, and the like—only become manifest through a process of conversion. States need to convert material resources into more usable instruments, such as combat proficiency. In the end, however, what policymakers care most about is not power as capability or power-in-being as converted through national ethos, politics, and social cohesion. They care about power in *outcomes*. That third level is by far the most elusive, for it is contingent and relative. It depends on power for what, and against whom.

The first day of the workshop concentrated on the first two levels: material capabilities and conversion. The main categories of capabilities in the Strategic Assessments Group assessment of power are gross domestic product (GDP), population, defense spending, and a less precise factor capturing innovation in technology. In the SAG estimate, the United States is first but hardly the only power. The United States holds about 20 percent of total global power, and the European Union (EU) (considered as a unified actor) and China about 14 percent each. India holds about 9 percent; Brazil, South Korea, and Russia hold about 2 percent each. Moving toward 2015, the United States will first gain power, then decline somewhat, ending up at about where it is now. The EU, however, will lose power, as will all non-U.S. members of the G-8. The gainers will be China and India.

The assessment suggests possible alliances that could match the power of the United States acting alone or with its traditional allies. It also examines the most likely locations for future conflict, based on six criteria. Asia is by far the most dangerous region, with six of the eight most conflict-prone bilateral balances involving China. The IFs model on which the SAG assessment is based is state-centric. It has data for 164 countries. As Figure S.1 summarizes, it uses eight blocks of drivers: domestic sociopolitical, international political, population, economic, agricultural, energy, technology, and environmental resources.

The work of Ashley Tellis and his colleagues examines how national resources or capabilities are transformed or converted through state processes into more usable power, in particular military power. The Tellis approach is still one of material capabilities, though it gets to what might be called *power-in-being*. It is about usable power, although it stops short of power as the abilities to achieve particular outcomes in particular circumstances. It probes beyond states as “containers of capability” to look at ideas, organization, and politics. The actual process of applying the framework to states is very data intensive, so it is important to focus on a handful of the most critical factors.

Figure S.1
Drivers of National Power



RAND CF215-S.1

Assessing Non-State Actors and “Softer” Forms of Power

The second day focused on the changing state system. The most obvious change is that states now have more competitors, named by what they are not—*non-state actors* (NSAs). They range from terrorists and drug traffickers to advocacy groups, think tanks, and private corporations. Those groups, and the transnational forces they create, then become the framework within which state power must be exercised. Sometimes, as with World Bank prescriptions for poorer nations, the exercise of these transnational forces is quite direct and raises questions about the differential vulnerability of states to those forces. Other transnational forces are values; they may be less easily manipulated by any actor but also may have differential

impact on states: for example, a new “wave of democracy” could be important for Syria but would not have much effect on Denmark.

The traditional distinction between hard power and soft power is not entirely persuasive. For one thing, economic power might be thought of by the United States as softer than military alternatives but still be regarded as hard by the recipient. More important, the language tends to regard soft power as subordinate and second-best, whereas in fact policymakers would prefer to achieve their desired outcomes with soft power. If state power ranges from coercion to bribery to persuasion, then the last is the most cost effective; it means convincing others that your aim is also theirs. Imagine, instead, a continuum ranging from *ideal* power (persuasion) to *worst-case* power (military).

Measuring softer forms of power is no mean feat, though some metrics are available—for instance, university attendance by foreigners, or content analysis of media. One direct way of making comparisons across states might be to ask the question: Where would you live if not in your own country? Looking at cases is an indirect way to understand softer forms of power. The recent treaty banning land mines was a remarkable confluence of NSAs acting in concert with medium-sized powers. The NSAs controlled the agenda, setting both the terms of and the deadline for a treaty. Another indirect way to measure the influence of NSAs is by looking at trends, of which all six seem to contribute to redistributing power away from states and toward NSAs:

- *Access to information.* The government monopoly eroded.
- *Speed of reaction.* Markets react in seconds, but governments are much slower, so the information technology (IT) revolution inevitably moved action away from governments toward nimbler organizations.
- *New voices.* The process created new channels of information and new, credible voices. The loudest voice, that of government, became less dominant.
- *Cheaper consultation.* Because of nearly unlimited bandwidth, communication costs began to approach zero. Coordinating large and physically separated groups became much cheaper.
- *Rapid change.* Governments, by nature, are more likely to sustain the status quo than drive change, and so NSAs are often the drivers by default.
- *Changed boundaries in time and space.* IT again is driving the change, just as the invention of the printing press undermined the church’s role as broker between people and their God.

According to one provocative argument, the soft power of the United States peaked after the fall of the Soviet Union when, in a quite real way, “entertainment—the power of ideas as spread by the media—finished the job of containment.” Now, however, the backlash, especially in the Muslim world, is not just a reaction to U.S. policies. To those for whom life centers on faith, America appears immodest and materialistic. It is not easy for the United States to do much about that backlash.

When, moreover, the United States acts like a “normal” power, it breaks the consensus on which soft power depends. For the unipolar power to act not only unilaterally but also as a normal power—that is, only in its own interest—is, by definition, to undermine the basis of the consensual hegemony granted to it by others who expect it to look after their interests as well. Now, the “other superpower” is not a state but global public opinion, and Nelson Mandela can be regarded as the leader of that superpower. For example, in the contest

for “whose story wins?” at Abu Ghraib, soft power topped hard power, and the United States was demoted from hegemon to preponderant power.

Next steps for RAND, the SAG, and the International Futures model will be to strengthen the International Futures data set by adding relevant variables; to improve the formulation for forecasting power; to enhance the model foundations for forecasting power; and to develop scenarios as a means of adding vividness and exploring discontinuities.