Chapter Two

“POWER” AND “NATIONAL POWER”: SOME CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

EXAMINING THE ABSTRACT CONCEPT OF POWER

The notion of “power” underlies most analyses of politics, yet it remains one of the most contested concepts in the social sciences. In its most general sense, power is often treated as a synonym for rule. At other times, it is assumed to be an attribute of individuals. And, very commonly today, it is used as a description of group capabilities in the context of social relations among various collectivities.1 Numerous other conceptions of power abound: it is sometimes treated as if rooted in psychology, and at other times it is viewed as a property of the political, organizational, economic, or military realms. It is also frequently seen as being connected to the notions of influence, coercion, and control. Given this vast diversity of usage, it is tempting to conclude that there are probably as many conceptions of power as there are theorists.

Yet despite the apparently wide variety of definitions and usage, it is possible to argue that most notions of power, at least in the social sciences, finally boil down to three connected but different approaches. In their succinct analysis of the term, Raymond Boudon and Francois Bourricaud argue that these three notions of power must be made explicit if the term is to be usefully employed as a concept of analysis. In the first instance, they argue that power refers to some “allocation of resources, of whatever nature these might be.” Secondly, it refers to the “ability to use these resources,” implying,

among other things, “a plan of use” and some “minimal information about the *conditions and consequences* of this use.” Finally, the notion of power refers to its “strategic character,” which is seen in the exercise “not only against the inertia of things, but also against the *resistance of opposing wills*.”

This tripartite approach to power can be restated using a simple taxonomy that describes power as “resources,” as “strategies,” and as “outcomes.”

Power understood as resources essentially describes the sum total of the *capabilities* available to any entity for influencing others. Traditionally these capabilities have been treated as akin to a stock concept, at least as far as international politics is concerned; thus a long and distinguished list of scholars have used such capabilities measures as the extent of natural resources, population, the armed forces, and the gross national product of countries to rank order the standing of nations. The advantage of this approach is that it allows one to rank diverse entities, be they individuals or states, in a fairly consistent manner using variables that are readily observable or measurable. The problem, however, is that it is not always clear which resources are appropriate as measures of real power, or whether the resources nominally possessed in any given instance are actually usable by the actor in question. Despite these difficulties, however, the concept of power as resources has remained attractive enough and will not be easily discarded.

Rather than focusing on capabilities in any tangible or intangible sense, the second approach to power—understood as strategies—attempts to capture the *processes, relationships, and situations* through which entities intend to influence one another. Thus,

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3A similar taxonomy can be found in Kal J. Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1983), pp. 164–168, who describes power in terms of resources, acts, and outcomes. The substantive content of the discussion following, however, varies substantially from Holsti’s original terms, especially in the discussion of power as strategies.

contrast to the focus on “objects,” which underlies the concept of power as resources, the emphasis now shifts to “context” insofar as the structure of relations and the specific forms of interaction between entities are held to produce outcomes that define either *ex ante* or *ex post* the true balance or extent of power.\(^5\) This focus on context derives from the general recognition that “capabilities,” at least in the political realm, may not be fungible in exactly the same sense as, say, money is in the economic realm.\(^6\) If this is true, then a simple rank ordering of capabilities will not identify the truly most powerful entities in a system, unless one has first assessed the structure of the situation and the resources deemed to be most valuable *in that situation*. The critical value of this approach to power as strategies, therefore, consists of making all analysis sensitive to the context within which the strategies take place and whence certain strategies may derive their efficacy.

Moving beyond both capabilities and context, the third approach to power—understood as outcomes—takes the logic one step further and focuses on *consequences* to test whether the targeted entities respond in the manner intended by the initiator. The claim of power in this approach rests simply on whether the initiator was able to influence the targeted entity to act in the desired way, even if that entails undercutting the target’s own interests. Power as outcomes, therefore, seeks to derive the extent of an entity’s capability not from the inputs that make it powerful or from the context within which its actions were undertaken, but rather—and more simply—from an assessment of whether the entity was able to attain its desired ends, the ends for which the exercise of power took place to begin with. The great advantage of such a concept of power is that it comports with the intuitive human sense of what it means to be powerful—getting one’s way—a notion captured by Robert Dahl’s now classic definition of power as the ability of *A* to get *B* to do something he


would otherwise not do. Despite its attractions, however, the notion of power as outcomes also has certain limitations: these include the problems of accommodating uncertainty about B’s original preferences and how changes in those preferences might alter B’s actions irrespective of A’s threats or coercion.

RELATING POWER TO NATIONAL POWER

These approaches to power in the abstract serve an important function in measuring national power in the postindustrial age: they identify the principal avenues through which to approach the problem of assessing aggregate national power. They also serve to preview the advantages and limitations that may attend various approaches to measuring national power. Based on the brief remarks above, it is possible to argue that the ideal measure of national power would be one that perfectly relates power understood as resources to power understood as outcomes in a seamless sort of way. That is, it would be wonderful to have a measure of national power that could demonstrate ineluctably that better-endowed countries always get their way in the context of encounters with lesser-endowed competitors. Such a measure would not only be intuitively satisfying, it would also have the advantage of being centered on the international distribution of capabilities—a measurable variable, at least in principle, that is upheld as significant by most international relations theorists.

The key problem, however, is that such a measure of power has been difficult to find. One study, looking at military capabilities (as a proxy for national power) on the eve of war, found that militarily stronger opponents emerged victorious less than half the time, whereas weaker opponents (measured again by strength on the eve

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of war) won almost two-thirds of the conflicts they engaged in.\(^9\) The moral of the story seems to be that greater relative power, at least when measured simply by the aggregate military power indexes that most analysts reach for when they think of the phrase “the international distribution of capabilities,” seems to correlate poorly with getting one’s way consistently in international wars or disputes. Organski and Kugler captured this sentiment perfectly in their discussion about great-power wars when they concluded that great powers “seem to fight, whether they are weaker, as strong as, or stronger than their opponents.”\(^10\) Relative capabilities \textit{a priori}, at least at an aggregate level, therefore, don’t seem to make a difference to outcomes like victory, or the avoidance of war, or the settlement of militarized disputes on favorable terms; in other words, they don’t seem to uphold outcomes as a consistently useful measure of national power.

The failure of the better-endowed states to “win” consistently—that is, the imperfect carryover from power as resources to power as outcomes—can be explained by a variety of hypotheses: the inability of stronger states to transform their power into effective battlefield outputs; the inability of stronger states to transform their unrealized potential power in contrast to less-endowed states that may be more efficient; the lack of “will” on the part of stronger states or their relative lack of interest in the matter in dispute; and so forth.\(^11\) These explanations focus mainly on the “paradox of unrealized power,”\(^12\) but there is another class of explanations that attributes the failure of stronger states to get their way to the lack of fungibility of power. From this insight has often come the conclusion that generalized comparisons about national power should be eschewed in favor of cross-national comparisons carried out only within a certain “policy-

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\(^{12}\)Ibid.
contingency framework.”¹³ In other words, the conspicuously inconsistent relationship between national capabilities and political success is less a substantive issue than a methodological one. The inconsistency in this view arises primarily because resources are treated as fungible—like money—without regard to whether the resources in question are actually efficacious enough to resolve the dispute to the advantage of the presumably stronger protagonist. Given this difficulty, the advocates of the power-as-strategies school would argue the need for a shift in methodology: instead of simply attempting to relate power-as-resources to power-as-outcomes, the focus should shift to the process, relationships, and situations within which such resources and outcomes interact. Lasswell and Kaplan underscore this contention clearly when they assert that all “political analysis must be contextual, and take account of the power practices actually manifested in the concrete political situation.”¹⁴

While the reminder that context is critical for purposes of comparing power is salutary and useful, carried to an extreme it can degenerate into “ad hocism” if the uniqueness of each situation is taken as exempting it from the application of some general yardstick for comparing national power. The best power-as-strategies proponents, therefore, would argue that the emphasis on context does not imply abandoning the search for a general measure in principle. Rather, they would urge the need to identify different and distinct yardsticks that would apply to a relatively small but specific number of issue-areas, like high politics, the economy, and the environment. In each of these issue-areas, different measures of national capacity would be regulative, thus meeting the requirements for both universal explanation—albeit on a reduced scale—and sensitivity to context and conditions.


WHAT NATIONAL CAPABILITIES MATTER MOST IN PRODUCING NATIONAL POWER?

How does one cut this Gordian knot of competing conceptions of power—understood variously as “resources,” “strategies,” and “outcomes”—in a way that advances the goal of developing a new template of national capability for the intelligence community? Any attempt must maintain fidelity to the purpose for which this exercise was initiated, and that consideration in turn suggests certain specific directions to be followed. The objective of developing a revised framework for assessing national power is clearly served by remaining sensitive to the need to better understand power-as-resources. This is because the intelligence community is by definition involved, at least in the first instance, in giving policymakers assessments of the national capabilities of various states, especially those likely to become potential peer competitors of the United States. Given this orientation, a concern with power understood as resources cannot be avoided, but this objective is best served by severing all connection with any effort at relating how such power could be used to secure certain political outcomes. The objective of the new template, in other words, must be to identify which factors matter most in producing national power, not to try to demonstrate that such power will actually enable a country to get its way in the context of some international interaction involving either another country, another subnational actor, or another transnational entity. The latter demonstration is also important, but it is best conducted as a separate “second-order” exercise that uses the relevant information derived from the power-as-resources approach but is not limited by it. In that way, the evaluation of a given country’s power can be integrated with other considerations relating, for example, to the context of the engagements, the character of leadership preference and risk-taking propensities, and the relative nature of the interests involved in the dispute. Focusing on power-as-resources alone, to the neglect of the relationship between resources and outcomes, no doubt makes for an analysis of narrower scope, but it still yields great benefits for developing better methodologies for individual country (and small-n comparative) assessments.

Focusing on power-as-resources in the manner hitherto typical to the intelligence community, however, may not provide an adequate solution, since the focus on countries as “resource containers” helps
to address some dimensions of potential power but not others. The notion of power-as-resources must, therefore, be expanded to include not only latent physical capabilities, both tangible and intangible (as the intelligence community has already begun to do), but also the all-important dimensions of external structural pressure, state performance, and ideational capability. While continuing to operate broadly within the general tradition of power-as-resources, the very concept of “resources” itself must thus be expanded to include what Lewis W. Snider in his insightful analysis called “power-as-performance.” This requires descending below the level of the “country” to the subnational level of the “state”—understood as the governing mechanism of the polity—in order to capture a view of “the state as an autonomous actor that formulates independent preferences and objectives which are not reducible to an aggregate of private preferences or the interests of a dominant class.” Only when the state is so captured analytically will it be possible to assess how it “attempts to implement its own objectives against resistance from politically mobilized groups in society and other actors in the global environment,” and thereby serves as one of the crucial transformative variables that enables the conversion of various physical and nonmaterial resources into the effective outputs like military capability.

It might be tempting to dismiss this modification entirely on the grounds that knowledge about a country’s military capabilities more than suffices to establish the extent of its national power and, as such, its standing in international politics. All the other information called for—about state capacity, state-society relations, and ideational ethos—is interesting, but is ultimately not necessary, if adequate knowledge about a country’s military capabilities can be obtained. Such a conclusion is misleading because military capability comprises both actual and potential capability. Most assessments of military power, focusing as they do on preexisting military power, concentrate solely on the former variable. Such an approach is satisfactory only if it is assumed that a country’s preexisting capabilities

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16 Ibid.
17 Ibid.
are what matter in international politics. If all international conflicts were relatively short, or if all conflicts were struggles between manifestly unequal states, then a focus on preexisting military capabilities (the “immediate” balance of power) would presumably suffice to establish the international order of precedence. In these situations, all the information required would be that pertaining to a country’s extant military power, understood to mean, of course, both “hard” factors like numbers and weapons characteristics and “soft” factors like training and leadership.

If, however, conflicts in international politics are neither short nor always between manifest unequals—as they usually are in the context of great-power rivalry—then the preexisting military capability of a country becomes only one component in the index of overall national power. In the context of long-drawn-out struggles between relatively equal powers, the ability to mobilize national resources, “potential capability,” for conversion into military instruments, “actual capability,” becomes an equally, if not more, critical dimension of national capability.\(^\text{18}\) Most assessments that acknowledge this fact attempt to integrate potential capabilities by scrutinizing a country’s raw material stocks, the level of its technology base, its investment in R&D, and other such tangibles. This is certainly a move in the right direction, but it is as yet incomplete. What is required for completeness—at least at a logical level—is an attempt to integrate some measure of “state” capability: that is, a measure assessing the robustness and effectiveness of a country’s governing institutions to direct the changes needed to transform its potential capability into an actual capability that would determine the outcome of a struggle with other comparably positioned countries.

It is in this context that the integration of measures relating to the external environment, state-society relations, and ideational ethos actually improves our ability to understand exactly that variable which most enthralls the realist—relative military capacity—except that in this instance, relative military capacity is discerned by evaluating not simply the stock of preexisting military assets but also the capacity to mobilize latent societal resources and transform them

into usable instruments of war. It is this perspective, deriving from a focus on militarily comparable powers, that more than any other demands that all reassessments of national power undertaken from within the power-as-resources tradition converge on the three constituent dimensions of national capacity: national resources (which are the building blocks of national power); national performance (which refers to how state activities can enable societal resources to be converted efficiently for national ends); and military capability (which, understood finally as combat proficiency, determines the political autonomy enjoyed by a given country in the international realm).

Finally, the injunctions of the power-as-strategies school cannot be neglected, but they do recede in salience given that this analysis explicitly excludes any effort to relate a country’s resources to its ability to obtain certain outcomes. Consequently, the stipulation requiring sensitivity to context will be incorporated only indirectly by recognizing that power-as-resources—no matter how widely or elaborately defined—must be assessed relative to a certain issue-area. This question speaks directly to the kind of yardstick against which the ingredients of national power are to be measured. The choice of the yardstick here is determined primarily by the theoretical judgment about what is most important when understanding national power. The best studies about the emergence of great powers in international politics suggest that national power is ultimately a product of the interaction of two components: a country’s ability to dominate the cycles of economic innovation at a given point in time and, thereafter, to use the fruits of this domination to produce effective military capabilities which, in turn, reinforce existing economic advantages while producing a stable political order which, though maintained primarily for one’s own strategic advantage, also provides benefits for the international system as a whole.19

If this represents in a nutshell the genesis and telos of power in international politics, then, good measures of national power ought of

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necessity to focus on whether a country has, or is developing, the resources and the performance that could enable it to become a true great power at some future time. This implies that all candidate great powers must be judged on their efforts to invest in developing the resources that would advantage them in the competition to innovate economically. Further, one needs to assess whether their state and societal performance will allow them to make the choices they must if they are to pursue courses of action that increase the likelihood of their being able to dominate the cycles of economic innovation in order to, inter alia, generate the resources necessary to develop and field the highly sophisticated military forces effective against a variety of adversaries. In identifying these issue-areas as critical for the measurement of national power, the framework proposed in this report will focus on specifying how they might be systematically scrutinized for the purposes of creating the kind of national power profile referred to earlier.

Having situated the proposed approach to national power amidst the larger traditions of viewing power in general, the next chapter will briefly review some traditional measures of national capability before discussing how the new framework, introduced in Chapter Four and elaborated in Chapters Five through Seven, expands on the best of the traditional wisdom on the subject.