This report has attempted to offer a comprehensive framework for evaluating the national power of countries in the postindustrial age. By its very nature, it is fairly detailed in structure and incorporates a variety of traditional and nontraditional indicators that bear on the production of national power today. This complexity is unavoidable, since the intent is to provide a framework for evaluating the national power of a few candidate great powers that are judged to be significant for future international politics. This framework must therefore be viewed as a complement to the single-variable measures of national power previously offered by many political scientists. These simple measures perform a useful sorting function in that they provide a means of identifying which countries are likely to be most relevant from the perspective of global power politics. But their very parsimony, which is so valuable for the purpose of rank ordering the many entities populating the international system, becomes a sharp limitation when detailed evaluations of a few, relevant countries are required.

The framework offered in this report is an effort to provide a template that allows a focused scrutiny of the national power profile of a single country (or of a few countries, one at a time). Toward that end, it has sought to capture multiple dimensions of power: (1) national resources, required to generate effective power today; (2) national performance, which derives from external pressures, the character of state-society relations, and the ideational clarity of both state and societal agents, and determines a state’s ability to develop the resources necessary to dominate both the cycles of innovation and the creation of hegemonic potential; and (3) military capability,
which constitutes the sword a polity brings to bear in international politics, manifested in the form of strategic resources, conversion capability, and warfighting competencies.

Admittedly, such an analytical framework privileges the state as the unit of analysis in international politics. It does not examine the extent to which the state may be either in retreat or growing in power as a result of developments in the substatal and transstatal realms. Incorporating variables from these levels of analysis remains work for future research. In any event, the present framework is offered as a first cut in search of further improvement. These improvements, ideally, can be incorporated at two levels: first, it is possible to propose a better framework than the one suggested here for purposes of creating a “national power profile” on key countries in the international system; second, even if the present framework is acceptable (with or without modifications), it is possible to propose better measures for many of the variables now incorporated. Finally, it would be useful to test this framework by using it to organize data collection for one or two countries on an experimental basis. This work, which is currently under way at RAND, will enable further refinement and improvement of the framework itself.

If such a framework is useful—after all the requisite improvements are incorporated—it could become the basis for assessing changes in national capability over extended periods of time. With a few modifications, it would also be useful when applied in a retrospective mode to assess the national capabilities of great powers in the past. Used in either way, it would improve our understanding of what makes nations powerful in international politics.