

# A USEFUL CONCEPT OF POWER

## INTRODUCTION

Power is a critical, therefore often controversial, concept in politics. In this course we will work with a broad definition of power -- power is the ability to make things happen, to do things. Defined as a means (the ability), it is a resource to achieve goals and not a goal in itself. Defined broadly, it includes all available resources that can be used to achieve goals, not only coercive military, economic, or political resources.

There are other views of power that serve various purposes in political science. We will use this view because we will focus on what decision-makers have at hand as resources at the time of making their decisions.

## WHAT IS POWER?

Power in international relations is usually thought of in military, political, and economic terms. It was this kind of power that brought the allied armies to Berlin and Tokyo in World War II and defeated Iraq in the Gulf War. It is this kind of power that the “realist” school of international relations appears to emphasize. From this perspective, power becomes “the ability to prevail in conflict and to overcome obstacles”<sup>1</sup> or “the general capacity of a state to control the behavior of others.”<sup>2</sup> Notice the emphasis on conflict and control.

Power defined in such terms is appealing and useful, but it omits much that motivates and animates political behavior. Where is the power of ideas, of ideologies, of nationalism, of morality, of legitimacy, of reasoning, of religion, and of social and cultural values? For instance, the Cold War was not only a conflict in political, economic, and military terms. It was fought with many types of power. Additionally, power defined in such terms tends to overemphasize the ability to use force, especially violent force. Our ongoing experience in Iraq suggests that such power is not enough. The United States and the United Kingdom won the military war and now are struggling to win the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. Moreover, the relationship among states is not necessarily competitive or combative. That relationship is often cooperative and peaceful, where other types of power are critical. These are the types of power that the “liberal” school of international relations tends to emphasize -- international law, institutional procedures, friendship, and habitual behavior. From this perspective, power is “the ability to influence others’ behavior”<sup>3</sup> or is akin to convincing or persuading others that what you want “of them is what their own appraisal of their own responsibilities requires them to do in their interest.”<sup>4</sup> Notice the emphasis on influence and bargaining.

Both perspectives are focused on the behavior of states and their ability to achieve their goals in relationship to each another. There are, however, forces that are not controlled by states with which states must content. Transnational forces, such as environmental and climatic change, disease, cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Deutsch, “On the Concepts of Politics and Power.” *Journal of International Affairs*, 236.

<sup>2</sup> Holsti, *International Politics: A Framework for Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 141.

<sup>3</sup> Keohane (ed.), *Neorealism and its Critics* (NY: Columbia UP, 1986), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Neustadt, *Presidential Power* (NY: Wiley, 1960), 46.

globalism, technology, and criminal activity, are not susceptible to power defined solely in terms of state-to-state behavior. Although states can try to manage the effects of these forces and, in the process, will use whatever means are available to them to alleviate the effects, they are limited in their ability to achieve their goals. From this perspective, the focus is not on a state's power, but on its power in conjunction with other states. For instance, no state can control pandemic disease alone. Indeed, in some cases, mankind has been unable to control such diseases.

In this course, power is defined in a manner to avoid the pitfalls of the perspectives discussed above. **Power is simply the ability to make things happen.** That ability is anything that can make things happen, from the ability to use physical violence through diplomacy to subtle psychological pressure and rational persuasion that often grow out of long-lasting relationships. It can be the ability to use weapons of mass destruction or what is called soft power -- the effect of culture, political values, and societal attributes that others admire.<sup>5</sup> It can grow from participation in an alliance or from the ability to create an international economic regime as the United States and Great Britain did at Bretton Woods in 1945. It can be coercive or persuasive, active or passive. It may focus on individual and state behavior or on aspects of the world that do not involve behavior. There is no specific emphasis. What should be considered is whatever is available for use by the states and the individuals involved. To have a specific emphasis is to start with blinders and to probably neglect critical factors. What is important is to make things happen that achieve one's policy goals. This broad, flexible definition of power, however, requires that two points be developed before the definition can be useful -- the relative nature of power and the effect of the situation on power.

**The relative nature of power.** Nothing is powerful in and of itself. Power is definable only in terms of opposing power. It is definable only in terms of all those who are involved and, when appropriate, in terms of transnational forces. Inherent in all definitions of power is the idea that there are others who oppose you or have different goals. When one uses power, there are others with power who must be considered during the decision process.

The power of one state is relative to the power of all other involved states and international actors. Whatever capability one state has to make something happen, other states have capabilities to defeat, prevent, modify or support the desired outcome. When one says a state is powerful, one must also consider the power of others to help or hinder -- their own capability to make things happen. Very rare is the case where a state can dictate the end result. Even the weakest states have interests they want to achieve and some ability to achieve those goals.

To say the United States is powerful has little meaning. To say that the United States is powerful relative to the other players in a particular situation means that, given the various abilities of the players to make things happen, the United States should be able to get close to the end result it wants. However, the United States is powerful in negotiations in so far as it can influence other states to accept its position. In order to get something that it wants, it may have to compromise with the other states, recognizing their interests and offering them something they want, while seeking areas of common interest. By all measures, the United States is the most powerful state in NATO, but one ally, even little, defenseless Iceland, can deny the U.S. what it wants because of the decision rules of the Alliance. No Central African state is powerful relative to the United States in world affairs, but they or elements

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<sup>5</sup> Nye, Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power (NY: Basic Books, 1990)

within them can deny the success of American policies in the region. As 11 September has shown us, even the weak can cause great damage to the interests of a state.

**The effect of the situation on power.** The capability to make things happen in one situation may not be as effective in another situation. This is different from power's relative nature. The power of two states is relative, but the power of those two states in a specific circumstance is situational. The United States relative to Russia is much more powerful by all measures, but American power if applied to the region of the Caspian Sea would be situationally much reduced. The distinction focuses on how the situation can affect the relative nature of state power. The United States relative to the OPEC states is much more powerful, especially when considering our allies, but the American capability to affect the OPEC states' control over oil prices is situationally dependent upon the market forces of supply and demand. When two teams meet in the Super Bowl, both are powerful relative to each other, but the weather would make a difference if the game were being played in Green Bay, Wisconsin, in January rather than in Miami, Florida.

**Therefore, there are three aspects of the concept of power that you must be able to understand: its definition – the ability to make things happen; its relative nature – power is definable only in terms of all states and organizations involved; and its situational nature – the situation can affect the effectiveness of power.**

**We will develop a fourth aspect when we discuss national interests -- goals. For the moment, it should be sufficient to state that power is neutral. It is the means to ends, not an end in itself.** Just as Scrooge McDuck learns that money is useless without a purpose, so power is of no value without being used toward a valued goal. To emphasize power's neutrality, however, does not mean that states and people have not sought power for its own sake. It is to emphasize that the goals of a society, while dependent on power, should be ultimately what guides the decision-maker. In a world of scarce resources, states will seek to increase their control over resources or increase the effectiveness of their use of their resources in order to achieve their goals. In the end, the question must be -- for what purpose?

### **THE INSTRUMENTS OF POWER**

Power is too broad a term to be of much use alone. Understanding the definition and the other aspects of power is a start. To be able to use the concept, however, we must have a better idea of what it is in concrete terms. A way is to describe the instruments of power. These are the grouping of kinds of resources into useful categories, such as military, economic, and political. Another way is to think of the effect of these instruments. The simplest is to think in terms of coercion, force and violence – hard power – and terms of influence, relationships, and persuasion – soft power.

**The Military Instrument.** The ultimate instrument and the instrument that states hold as legitimately solely theirs is military power -- the power to use or threaten to use combat violence for deterrent, defensive, coercing, or compelling purposes. It is useful not only as a way to military victory, but also as a way to cause the opponent to change behavior. Coupled with the diplomatic instrument it becomes coercive diplomacy, the iron fist inside the velvet glove. The application of this instrument can be as complex as general war or as simple as moving a carrier battle group into a disputed area.

**The Economic Instrument.** In a capitalist society within a generally free market world, this instrument cannot be controlled by the United States government. The effects of barriers to trade and

financial flows and of economic sanctions are slight when compared to the cumulative effects of private economic forces and the markets. This instrument is most effectively employed when a state can structure the economic environment, as the United States and the United Kingdom did at Bretton Woods, to suit its interests and preferences. It is also effective when a state has the ability to influence the decisions of economic institutions that affect the economic behavior of other states. Nevertheless, a large economy such as the American economy has inherent power and effectiveness. This power is not only of the moment, but if one includes technological and scientific growth as elements of an economy and the capacity to mobilize an economy, then the economic instrument is critical to the development of the resources necessary for other instruments of power. This was something Japan did not consider well in 1941 and a reason why the Soviet Union under Gorbachev decided not to continue the Cold War.

The Political or Diplomatic Instrument. Even the smallest state can use this instrument well. It requires little resources other than skill. If diplomacy is the official nonviolent relationship between states, the diplomatic instrument has broad scope. Where we see its effect most, however, is during negotiations. In these terms, the skillful diplomat applies or links his efforts to whatever instruments that may seem to have value. The task is to achieve one's goals, face-to-face or government-to-government, with a minimum application of resources. At one end may be the coercive threat of the use of violent combat and at the other end the persuasiveness of an argument and the ability to recognize overlapping or common interests. Although requiring little resources, a diplomatic corps and the supporting foreign service are not cheap or easily developed.

The Societal/Cultural Instrument. This is an instrument not easily wielded by a government. Much like the economic instrument and certainly linked to that instrument, it is primarily effective through private channels. The influence of the United States on the rest of the world can be seen in the concept of globalization, especially where globalization is seen as an American phenomenon for either good or evil. This power can be, by nature, either useful or harmful to our interests. A significant case is its effect on large parts of the Muslim populations. The positive effect is called by Joseph Nye, soft power. This is the power that arises when others want to follow a state, admire its values, emulate its example, and aspire to its principles.<sup>6</sup> In this form it is hard to create. However, as we structured the economic environment, so we have and can structure, to a degree, the preferences and interests of other states to be more in line with our own. While I agree with Nye in the importance of soft power, I prefer to reserve the term for a broadened aspect of power than his definition limited does.

The People Instrument. This is less an instrument than a fact of societies. The instrument is a catcall that emphasizes that people in societies are not necessarily in line with their governments, can and do influence their governments, and can and do act independently of the political leadership, and not only in democracies. The social and cultural instrument and the economic instrument are factors in the people instrument, but for clarity purposes it has a role of its own. The extraordinary role played by the Soviet population during World War II cannot be explained simply in terms of these other instruments. While it is early to draw firm conclusions, the behavior of the populations in Afghanistan and Iraq are powerful forces in their own right for whatever reasons that motivate that behavior.

The Government Instrument.<sup>7</sup> This is an instrument that can be consider to be under state

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<sup>6</sup> Nye, The Paradox of American Power (NY: Oxford Press, 2002) 8

<sup>7</sup> This is akin to but not the same as Raymond Aron's collective action as one of three fundamental elements of power. His term, however, includes aspects of the other instruments

control, although no government is beyond the effect of its political system. The instrument has four aspects -- the ability to make policy and decisions, the ability to coordinate these policies and decisions with the myriad of other policies and decisions it has and will make, the ability to oversee the implementation of those policies and decisions, and the ability to make policies and decisions specifically related to the development of instruments of power. The application of instruments of power can be ineffective if the decision-making is poor, or if even if the decision were wise, but only in terms of the specific issue and not in terms of other valued interests, or implementation were not in accordance with the decision. These are critical steps in any decision-making process. The government, however, has the sole responsibility to ensure that its instruments of power are continually developed.

Soft and Hard Power. Each of the above instruments can be used or believed by others to have been used as either hard or soft power, with the probable exception of military power. An instrument is neither soft nor hard necessarily in its use. What makes the instrument soft or hard is how it is perceived by the other players. If coercion, inducement, threat, or even violence is felt, then it is hard power, intended or not. If, on the other hand, persuasion based on reason, common interest building, mutual respect, and concern for continuing relations is felt, then it is soft power. The effect of hard power can appear to be more noticeable. The effect of soft power can often be much less apparent. While Nye's definition of soft power focuses on the behavior of others, it is obvious that he means something he has not defined. It is broader than something that causes emulation and admiration. A way to look at the outcome is that it is based on people doing what you want because they believe that they should. It is directly linked to the liberal definition of power noted earlier. One may wish to think in terms of a spectrum of power from hard to soft, within any specific situation a mixture of effects on the players, the resultant of which will probably be felt as either hard or soft.

## DIFFICULTIES

Power is often discussed from the perspective of how it is developed. What factors provide the basis for power? What factors allow the instruments to become effective? This is not a major consideration of interest in this course. We are concerned primarily with power and the instruments of power that exist when the decision-maker is considering what to do and what instruments will be most effective given the power of the others involved.

At the other end of the process is the implementation of policies, where the instruments are used. We will observe this when we view the history of the various policies. We will not spend much time evaluating the instruments and their implementation themselves. We can see the effects of the use of a mechanized infantry division, such as the Third Infantry Division in Iraq, but we do not have the time or the ability to understand how that capability along with all the other military capabilities made the instrument of military power as used in Iraq.

Of continuing interest and without much success is the effort to calculate the power of instruments in order to predict outcomes. The simplest is to count heads, numbers of weapons, dollars spent, and so on. I believe that the effort to be precise is a fool's errand. On the other hand, in making decisions and allocating the scarce resources of power, it is necessary to try to come to grips with what power can do vis-a-vis the other players. Potentially effective decisions require calculation with as much

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describe above. Aron, (trans. Richard Howard and Annette Fox), Peace and War (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1966).

precision as possible in order to be able to differentiate between policy options. This requires a degree of knowledge not available to us. This, however, does not mean that we should not weigh the various instruments. As we will discuss when we consider goals, the choice of goals can, and usually does, determine the choice of instruments. One does not negotiate matters of common interest with a friendly state while banishing the threat of using violent force. Moreover, the experts in one instrument are not necessarily able to weigh the likely effects of other instruments. At the level of abstraction where we, as citizens, operate, a general understanding of the instruments, their purposes, and likely effects is sufficient.

## **USING THE CONCEPT OF POWER**

Understanding the concept is not enough. You must be able to use the concept. This course is designed to help you learn how to use the concept. When we study the history of American foreign policy since the end of World War II, we will not concentrate on the story of that history, but on trying to understand why decisions were made and how those decisions related to the outcome. To do this we must try to understand what the interests were of the various states and what powers did they use to affect the outcome. When we look at today's issues and the policies of the United States, we will do the same, but with less information. Another difference is that in the historical case, the concept of power will help you understand what has happened and in the current situation, the concept will help you weigh your choices regarding what should happen.

A value of our concept of power is that it focuses on the situation at hand – what is available for use to the decision-makers in a specific circumstance at the time of decision. What might have been available is not important. What counts are the cards on the table, the players on the field, the horses in the race. However, the table, field, and race under consideration may be in the future and what could be available may be important. An aspect of the ability of states to make things happen is their capability to produce that ability. When Japan attacked the United States in 1941, Japan misjudged the ability of the United States to develop the military power to win the war. When Iraq invaded Kuwait and al Qaeda destroyed the twin towers, neither judged well the ability of the United States to create the coalition of states and relationships that would support the use of military power. What is available depends on the temporal scope of the situation.

A type of power is the capability to create power – to create the ability to make things happen. In some cases, this requires many years, in others, months, and in others, weeks or days. Resources can be used to produce the instruments of power that are used to get the end result. The following flow diagram illustrates the idea.

## **RESOURCES ➡INSTRUMENTS OF POWER ➡USE OF POWER ➡OUTCOME**

A state, such as the United States, with a large productive, cohesive population, an effective government, and an efficient economy, can produce the instruments of power it believes it will need – military, diplomatic, and economic. What it has available when the needs arise will depend on the decisions it has made in the past. Aircraft carriers, operational concepts, diplomats, and institutions do not come cheaply or quickly. In many cases, however, the needed instruments – social, cultural, soft, political – are not solely the result of decisions, but arise from the overall behavior of the society and its government. Respected behavior, friendship, habitual relationships, international law, support of the population, morale, technological knowhow, international regimes usually take years to develop into

sustainable, effective instruments.

In this course, we will not focus on resources or turning resources into instruments of power. We will focus on the use of available instruments of power and the ability to affect the outcome relative to the other states and organizations involved. That use of power has two elements – policy decision and implementation.

### USE OF POWER(POLICY DECISION ➔IMPLEMENTATION) ➔OUTCOME

At the time to decide how to use power, when the decision-maker has only what is available, the effective use of relative power will rely on what has been described above as the governmental instrument, especially the ability to make policy and decisions, the ability to coordinate these policies and decisions with the myriad of other policies and decisions it has and will make, and the ability to oversee the implementation of those policies and decisions.<sup>8</sup> Resources must have been applied to this instrument; these abilities must be developed. However, just as any other type of ability to make things happen, at the time of decision, the state either has or does not have the necessary capabilities. Leaders and advisers are in place with institutional procedures and relationships essentially fixed. Moreover, this, too, is a relative capability. The other players also have decision and policy management capabilities. The end result cannot be determined by calculating the instruments of power without considering the ability to use those instruments. Perhaps the most telling example of this in American history is the Vietnam War.

Once the decision is made and the implementation begins, the effective use of power is in the hands of those who are the instruments or who control the instruments. In some cases, these are the great diplomats and military commanders. In other cases, these are the code breaker, the infantryman, the lawyer, businessman, or the teacher. Great decisions and well-coordinated policies ultimately rest on those who must do the work. Moreover, the most highly honed instruments may fail or be unable to achieve the expected results – partly because of shortcomings of the instruments and partly because of the application of power by the other players.

When you are considering current issues and policies, you should focus on the point where decisions are to be made, the point where the instruments are essentially fixed, where implementation has not begun because the decision has not been made. This is the critical point for foreign policy analysis. Before the Super Bowl, each team creates a game plan designed to use its resources best (defensive lines, wide-receivers, coaching staff, etc.). At kickoff time, the initial decisions are made, although a good plan would have some built-in flexibility. Before implementation of a policy, a state develops that policy and plans for the use of its resources. In your analysis, you should try to determine how the United States should use its power to reach its policy goals.

When you are studying cases in the history of American foreign policy, you will focus both on the point where decisions are to be made and on the point where the results are known, after the implementation. Although implementation is the exciting part of the story, for our purposes, what is important is how power was weighed in the decision process and how the interaction of power caused the outcome. After the Super Bowl, which team proved to be the most powerful is no longer debatable. However, how the interaction of instruments led to the final score is not always obvious. One has to look

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<sup>8</sup> We will discuss these capabilities when we study how the United States makes and manages its foreign policy.

back into the game itself, into the implementation, the use of the instruments, to try to determine why one team won. In studying the history of foreign policy, we will look into the “game” to see how it was played in order to see the use or misuse of the instruments of power against an opponent in a given situation. We will try to extract from the story of the game how the United States used its power in an effort to reach its policy goals.

## **POWER AND GOALS**

The superb application of very effective instruments to the wrong or a poorly chosen goal is a terrible misuse of effort. An effective foreign policy requires the ability to use power well to achieve the necessary goals. How the state selects those necessary goals is a critical capability, a part of its abilities to make the appropriate decisions and to manage all aspects of foreign policy.

### **USE OF POWER toward GOALS ➡OUTCOME**

In the analysis of historical policy, there are three approaches. When considering what was done, the basic factors are the actual use of power to achieve the actual goals. When considering what should have been done, given the information available to the decision-makers, the basic factors are the best use of known and expected power to obtain the most appropriate available goals. When considering what might have happened from the perspective of the Monday morning quarterback, the basic factors are the best possible use of power and the most appropriate goals, knowing what we think we know today. In the analysis of a future policy, however, the aim is to try to achieve the wisdom of the Monday morning quarterback, while recognizing that the best we can do is somewhere between what might be done and what should have been done. The achievable will be to make an effective use of known and expected power to obtain appropriate available goals.

### **EFFECTIVE USE OF POWER toward APPROPRIATE GOALS ➡OUTCOME**