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# Taking power seriously – A holistic approach to assessing the international distribution of power

## ABSTRACT

The literature of international relations and political geography agrees that world order is in transition. Some claim that power is shifting east, others argue that American leadership is renewing, still others think that a post-polar world is emerging. Despite the debate, no principled approach to assessing the distribution of power has been proposed. Arguments regarding the evolution of world order have come up against the usual stumbling blocks of measuring power. Relying on the meta-analysis of the general definitions of power, a theoretical framework is derived, identifying factors that turn passive strengths into dynamic power. Putting theory to test, the practical notion of power is provided based on the content analysis of the national security strategies of the US issued in the post-Cold War period. The factors identified in the two analyses overlap significantly. A holistic approach is proposed using the systemic qualities that distinguish power from strengths and resources.

*Keywords: complexity, dependence, holistic, justifiability, power*

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## INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of world order lies at the foundation of the geopolitical calculations of all geopolitical actors, at all times. As obvious as the need to be able to read the distribution of power appears, the debate about the polarity of world order has been with us for over a decade<sup>2</sup>. The persistence of this debate shows that even the overall nature of world order can lack consensus – let alone a nuanced view of relative power positions.

One reason may be that any discussion of world order tends to be part of efforts to influence the distribution of power. Often referred to as applied political geography, geopolitics is by default in service of an interested party. Whatever world order is declared, the declaration will reflect the desires of one party or another and will influence the competition for international power.

Equally importantly, despite continued efforts, some even claiming to provide formulae to calculate it<sup>3</sup>, the persistent disagreement over the distribution of power, as mentioned above, demonstrates that little progress has been made in the methodology of quantifying power. The present study seeks to propose a methodology for assessing the international distribution of power. As the brief overview below will show, the problem of methodology arises from the misidentification of the relevant dimensions or attributes of international power that need to be operationalized.

One central claim of the study is that if we take the definition of power seriously, then a clear distinction needs to be made between resources, strengths and power, as separate levels of analysis. In disciplined use, the word ‘resources’ implies natural, demographic and geographical factors. Strengths are static assets that arise from the cultivation of resources. They can be economic or military strengths, for instance. These in themselves do not enable the player to impose their intentions on others even in the face of opposition, as the widely used definition of power says (Dahl, 1957). Approaches that try to reconstruct power by trying to quantify and add up debatable measures of debatably defined items are bound to miss the point, because they fail to account for those factors that turn static strengths, into active, dynamic power. They also fail to consider conditions that unravel power even if the given player otherwise appears well endowed with multiple strengths, for instance, has a high GDP, or a large military.

So, how to distinguish resources, strengths, and power as different levels of analysis? How are resources and strengths transformed into power? Can factors that turn strengths into power be isolated for use as analytical tools? These are the questions the present paper seeks to answer. First the major approaches to quantifying power are presented. Each approach is shown to have significant shortcomings. The paper then proceeds with the deconstruction of the general definition of power. Attributes

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<sup>2</sup> The debate has been manifold. Part of it has focused on the nature of the US-led liberal world order, and whether it is rising or falling, see Faust (2019) on the related debate conducted on the pages of Foreign Relations magazine in the wake of the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Another debate claims that power may be shifting from the West to the East (e.g.: Allison, 2017; Layne, 2018), while geopolitician George Friedman maintains his view that China is not remotely a rival to the United States (Friedman, 2020). The point of the present paper, however, is not to make any claims of where power resides, but to identify an understanding of power and a set of criteria that can help determine the international distribution of power.

<sup>3</sup> The dissertation by Karl Herman Höhn (2011) gives an encyclopedic compilation and overview of single and multivariate power formulas.

of power derived from theory are put to test by comparing them with power criteria employed by the United States national security strategies. Both theory and practice indicate that power emerges as the product of a complex system. As such, it is the attributes of the system that need to be investigated to determine the international distribution of power.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Stumbling blocks of measuring power

The notion of power, its mechanisms, ends and resources have been in the focus of studies throughout history. Attempting to measure power has been a central quest of geopolitics. But as the current lack of consensus on the polarity of world order demonstrates, these efforts have been as inconclusive as they have been abundant (Höhn, 2011). Several factors contribute to this problem. One is, as Baldwin (1979, p. 162) suggested, the ever more nuanced academic dissection of power, which has become a hindrance to analysis: “The increased precision in recent concepts of power has threatened to overwhelm the analyst. Even those most familiar with this literature have complained of interminable theoretical distinctions that make a broad overview difficult to achieve”.

Another reason for a lack of consensus may be the cyclical nature of relations in the international system (Flint & Taylor, 2018). The fundamental nature of the international system will appear quite different in various phases of world order cycles, affecting theorizing. A stable order emerging after the conclusion of major conflict, or stability amid fading memories of conflict, or times of increasing tensions as stability erodes lead to different kinds of biases. The end of history heralded by Fukuyama (1989) is probably the best-known example of such fallacies.

When the United States emerged as the unrivalled great power after the Cold War, the closure of great power rivalry needed explanation, and a strategy was required to enable the US to claim the opportunities offered by the historic situation. Addressing both, the concept of soft power emerged as members of the former Soviet bloc flocked to re-join the West. For about a decade, world order was shaped first and foremost through global trade and financial liberalization, rather than military measures. Today, when great power rivalry is with us again, varieties of coercive power are coming to the fore. Has the nature of humanity, or of power changed? Surely not. Alternating phases of world order, however, do pose a challenge to understanding power and the nature of humanity, as well as to determining what aspects of power should be measured, and how they need to be weighted to assess world order.

This section briefly presents major approaches to measuring power, focusing primarily on post-cold war thinking. Three such directions are outlined. The first one consists of assessing power by outcome. The second approach uses categories defined by mechanisms of power. The third relies on various ways of measuring power by quantifying its resources. All three are shown to fall short of their goal.

### Attempting to measure outcomes

A general definition of power has to do with causation, applicable to “all situations in which A gets B to do something he would not otherwise do, regardless of how such situations are labeled” (Baldwin, 1979: 162–163). While several authors (e.g., Baldwin, 1979; Nye, 1990; Beckley, 2018) mention the theoretical possibility of measuring power by outcome, they rightly discard it for purposes of real-time analyses. Judging outcomes requires an understanding of interests and intentions of the actors in question, as well as hindsight. As such it has little practicality for policymaking.

Even with the advantage of hindsight, however, outcomes may be hard to assess. In Nye’s words, “command power – the ability to change what others do – can rest on coercion or inducement. Co-optive power [is] the ability to shape what others want” (Nye, 1990, p. 181). How realistic is it to determine what a geopolitical actor wanted, and why? “The ability to establish preferences” (Nye, 1990, p. 181) may be quite hard to distinguish from submission attained by overwhelming power, or successful deterrence. It may also be the result of coinciding choice of tools. For instance, two countries may have shared interest in invading a third country, but with very different underlying motivations and interests.

Some authors, including Nicholas J. Spykman (1942), have said that the real test of power is war. But war tends to be a product of particular distributions of power, otherwise deterrence would not work. With other distributions, power can bring about peace, or stave off kinetic war as a means of conflict resolution<sup>4</sup>. Sun Tzu points out that the best general is the one who wins a war without needing to undertake a single battle, but such victories tend to remain invisible. Measuring power, including that underlying the Pax Americana through outcomes is not only inapplicable in geopolitics but is of limited reliability even for historians.

### Measuring strategies instead of power

Up until the end of the Cold War, power positions tended to be tallied based on material resources of coercion. The number of nuclear warheads, the number of troops, and so on, appeared fundamental, even though strategic nuclear weapons were deemed to lead to mutually assured destruction, hence, were not truly eligible for use. Ever since an academic distinction has been made between hard and soft power (Nye, 1990) it has been argued that being material in nature, hard (coercive) power is easier to quantify than soft (co-optive) power<sup>5</sup>. Yet the question of what exactly ought to be measured as constitutive of soft and hard power has proved impossible to answer. Associating various tools or resources with either soft or hard power is debatable. Tools or resources normally deemed constitutive of hard power, such as armed forces, have under certain circumstances been shown to enhance soft power. As Beckley (2018, p. 11) puts it, “Military resources [...] enable a country to destroy enemies; attract allies; and extract concessions and kickbacks from weaker countries by issuing threats of violence and offers of protection.” Threatening enemies and attracting allies may happen simultaneously, through the same act, exerting hard power in one direction, and soft power in the other. But armies

<sup>4</sup> Placing an unqualified value on peace may, according to some authors be without merit, as negative and positive peace can be distinguished (e.g.: Galtung, 2007, pp. 14–34).

<sup>5</sup> “[G]etting others to want what you want - might be called indirect or co-optive power behavior” (Nye, 1990, p. 181).

have also been deployed to deliver aid or help in rescue efforts after catastrophes, clearly building soft power. In a similar vein, the media, usually considered to fall in the realm of soft power, can also be used for coercion (Gallarotti, 2011; Mattern, 2005). It can be used to deceive an opponent to lure their troops into a trap during war, to undermine the social cohesion of adversaries, and to deliver leaks or accusations that can weaken, and possibly topple governments. But this role in the arsenal of power is not limited to the media. There are authors who see arts as always having been a “politicians’ toy” (Vuyk, 2010, p. 174). Deploying it for the purposes of one player will often mean that it is deployed against an opponent.

Another type of power often cited has been ‘smart power’. The phrase is employed in two different senses. Nossel (2004, p. 132) has used it for the availability of indirect means of imposing intentions, “through a stable grid of allies, institutions, and norms”. The same phrase (“smart power”) is used by other theorists to denote the combined use of hard and soft power in ways that “are mutually reinforcing such that the actor’s purposes are advanced effectively and efficiently” (Wilson, 2008, p. 110).

Soft, hard and smart power focus on mechanisms. Common to them all is that they answer the question of ‘how’ the given resources are used. Hence, they are not truly attributes or facets of power, but constitute strategies. Important as it may appear, attempting to quantify strategies is not quite the same as measuring power.

### **Measuring ‘resources’: what and how**

Even in times of stability, consensus is hard to attain on what exactly can be considered a power resource and may, as such, be worth measuring. A key challenge is that of definitions: where to draw lines in integrated socio-economic-power systems in which most resources and vehicles of power are multipurpose, how to account for dual use technology or infrastructure, for instance (Dunne, 1995).

Quantification is complicated by the need to factor in efficiency in the use of resources (Brooks, 2007). The most frequently used measures of relative power have been gross indices of military spending and economic performance. However, as Beckley (2018) suggests, these can be misleading, and should be replaced with the use of net indices (e.g., GDP minus liabilities, or factoring in the efficiency of producing a given output) to avoid significant distortions.

Even so, approaching power purely from the aspect of strengths does not necessarily say much about power in its sense of ‘the ability of A to get B to do something they would not otherwise do’. So, our question can be reframed as what transforms resources and strengths into power? If an answer is found, we may be closer to being able to assess the international distribution of power in a principled manner.

### **Deconstructing academic definitions and descriptions of power**

What distinguishes power from strength is that it is not static: it imposes or denies when active and deters when it remains a potentiality. Strength ‘is’. Power ‘performs’. In the following observations are made about what turns strengths into power based on the implications of academic definitions

and discussions of power. A de-construction of the general concept of power is sought for a holistic understanding, rather than a mechanistic one that misses its very essence.

According to its most basic definition, power is the “ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want” (Nye, 2008, p. 94), or the ability to produce intended effects even in the face of opposition (Dahl, 1957). Both wordings suggest some degree of interaction, which in turn necessitates the possibility of physical or virtual contact. Arising from this are the time and space requirements of power: geographical reach and the ability to act in a timely manner (availability).

The multiple mechanisms of power touched upon in the above – hard, soft, and smart power – indicate that different geopolitical contexts necessitate different strategies: attracting, deterring, coercing directly or indirectly. Taken as a whole, versatility and flexibility that provide room to maneuver are fundamental attributes of power. For this end, a broad array of strengths is required. As Kenneth N. Waltz (1979) suggests:

The economic, military, and other capabilities of nations cannot be sectored and separately weighed. States are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on all of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence (p. 131).

Hence, a key measure of power should be its complexity. As for its analysis, it needs to be kept in mind that power is, by default, “indivisible”, as Edward H. Carr (1946, p. 108) pointed out.

If intentions are to be imposed ‘even in the face of opposition’, efforts at denial by the opponent need to be overcome or eliminated, as a fundamental feature of power. Opponents may deploy military, economic or information measures, ranging from direct attack to cutting off resources. Overcoming them requires sustainable quantitative and qualitative superiority. Sustainability means strategic self-sufficiency. Strategic invulnerability to sanctions, boycotts, embargoes, or isolation are clearly a factor to be considered in judging the distribution of power.

Power has also been described as capacity, where capacity cannot be reduced to material vehicles of power. As Lukes (2005) points out:

As both France and the United States discovered in Vietnam, having military superiority is not the same as having power. In short, observing the exercise of power can give evidence of its possession and counting power resources can be a clue to its distribution, but power is a capacity, and neither the exercise nor the vehicle of that capacity (pp. 478–479).

Vietnam imposed losses on US forces, if at extremely high cost to itself, and these losses in turn placed the US war under the test of justifiability both domestically and internationally. It was a combination of Vietnamese resolve, and a failure of US political judgment (Summers, 1981), that undercut the justifiability of the war (Stillman, 1974, p. 41). In other words, it was a war won and lost not on the grounds of material power, but of legitimacy, or justifiability of sacrifice (McMahan, 2005). It is in part to overcome this strategic lack of justifiability that smart power interpreted in the Nosselian sense as the ability to act through, or at the very least with the endorsement of allies, institutions and norms

is indispensable. So, vulnerable as it is, and in need of incessant grooming, strategic justifiability is a crucial component of power.

To summarize, on the basis of academic definitions and descriptions of power, attributes that transform strengths into power include complexity, reach, availability, sustainability, quantitative and qualitative superiority and strategic justifiability.

## METHODS

Theory has often been accused of being utopian and detached from practice, so the question remains whether practice confirms the conclusions the deconstruction of academic definitions and descriptions of international power has yielded. To verify the alignment of theory with practice, the concept of international power used by United States of America in the post-Cold War era is examined.

The choice of studying the US and not some other player is an obvious one. Having achieved the status of leader of the unipolar world order, we can rest assured that whatever the US concept of power may be, it clearly is one that has worked. Furthermore, the geopolitical calculations of the US are publicly available for analysis: they are published in the form of national security strategies (NSS), as mandated by the 1986 Goldwater Nichols Act, with the purpose of harmonizing the strategies and actions of various subbranches of armed forces and government.

To identify the criteria the US sees as fundamental to its power position, the content analysis of the 15 NSS documents issued since the end of the Cold War in 1990 has been performed. The overarching content categories derived from the documents themselves were: situation assessment, strategic goals, threats, key strategies, and legitimation. Any content appealing to morality (i.e., that uses the qualifying categories of good and evil)<sup>6</sup> was set aside as instances of justification. Within each category, subcategories were derived from the documents, accommodating their full remaining content. Once all categories had been listed, the clear presence (1), the clear lack (0), or the clear reversal (-1) of each content item was marked for each document. Thus, a database was produced, which displayed the presence/ absence/ reversal of each content item throughout the period in one dimension and the full composition of each NSS document in the other. Semantic clusters of subcategories that were definitive throughout the period were identified to establish the aspects of power relevant to the US-led world order.

<sup>6</sup> The strategies claim moral superiority, which, from an external analytical point of view can be categorized as strategic justification. According to the functionalist definition, “[m]oral systems are interlocking sets of values, practices, institutions, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible” (Haidt, 2008, p. 70). Geopolitics is better served by a more schematic, solely functional definition of morality that recognizes the plurality of cultures and social systems, where morality means the use of the categories of good or bad from the point of view of sustaining a given relationship. It can apply to horizontal relationships, i.e., among peers, or hierarchical ones, defined by power. What sustains the relationship is deemed good, what weakens it is deemed bad.

## RESULTS

### Criteria of power identified

Seven requirements can be identified in the post-Cold War NSS documents that turn US strengths into US power. These are the following:

1. Complexity of power
2. Global superiority within each component of complex power
3. Geographical distribution of power: superiority in each region of the world
4. Dominance of all global commons
5. Freedom from strategic dependencies, which also relates to the complexity of power (#1)
6. Availability of power multipliers
7. Legitimation, which overlaps with the availability of power multipliers (# 6).

Each of the 15 NSS documents sets as a goal for the US to surpass all other states in each strategic area of strength: military, economic, institutional, technological, intelligence and moral (justification). This is a clear statement of the imperative for power to be complex.

In addition to having global superiority, it also needs to be superior in all strategic areas of strength within each geographical region of the world: “We will compete with all tools of national power to ensure that regions of the world are not dominated by one power” (NSS, 2017, p. 4). This is a reinstatement of the goal to prevent the rise of a challenger in Eurasia as stated by the first strategy of the period examined (NSS, 1990, p. 1). To pursue this goal, the US needs not only quantitative and qualitative superiority in all tools of national power, but also rapid response capability, with a global reach, as prescribed in NSS, 1993 (p. 15).

The global and regional prevalence through complexity of power does two things. On the one hand, it provides for flexibility of action by enabling the US to prevail through well designed, scalable, and targeted means of influence to address any strategic need that may arise. Just as importantly, this complexity creates a virtuous circle which ensures that the various components of power feed each other. Its elements are interlocked into a value circuit, where the individual elements of the value circuit also deliver tools of power that can be deployed directly. It is important to see these elements as part of a circuit rather than a value chain since the latter suggests loose ends.

The need for complexity is explicitly pointed out in strategies issued by President Clinton: “Our extraordinary diplomatic leverage to reshape existing security and economic structures and create new ones ultimately relies upon American power. Our economic and military might, as well as the power of our ideals, make America’s diplomats the first among equals. Our economic strength gives us a position of advantage on almost every global issue” (NSS, 1995, p. ii). The importance of this value circuit is underscored in NSS 2017<sup>7</sup> which clarifies in detail that any loss of complexity – for

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<sup>7</sup> The Interim National Security Strategic Guidance issued by President Biden on March 3, 2021 is even more emphatic about the need to eliminate the strategic dependencies of the US. This demonstrates that strategic self-sufficiency was not a goal specific to Donald Trump’s presidency but is key to the US as the leading global power, irrespective of who occupies the Oval Office. The Guidance was excluded from the present analysis because it is not a fully-fledged strategy.



instance due to any strategic dependence – may unravel power and lead to a collapse of preeminence. Hence, strategic self-sufficiency is shown to be a fundamental criterion of power (NSS, 2017):

A healthy defense industrial base is a critical element of U.S. power and the National Security Innovation Base. The ability of the military to surge in response to an emergency depends on our Nation's ability to produce needed parts and systems, healthy and secure supply chains, and a skilled U.S. workforce. The erosion of American manufacturing over the last two decades, however, has had a negative impact on these capabilities and threatens to undermine the ability of U.S. manufacturers to meet national security requirements. Today, we rely on single domestic sources for some products and foreign supply chains for others, and we face the possibility of not being able to produce specialized components for the military at home. As America's manufacturing base has weakened, so too have critical workforce skills ranging from industrial welding to high-technology skills for cybersecurity (pp. 29–30).

Strategic industrial dependence, which is first mentioned as a vulnerability in NSS 2017 is not the only type of strategic dependence that the US strove to eliminate. Earlier strategies identified energy dependence as a security risk. For instance, "Over the longer term, the United States' dependence on access to foreign oil sources will be increasingly important as our resources are depleted" (NSS, 1994, p. 17). Initially the US depended on the Middle East for its energy import, and at this stage a strong US presence in the region was key. By 1996, the US had shifted to Venezuelan oil. But NSS 2006 again points to the need to diversify the sources of energy import to reduce strategic dependence.

The United States is the world's third largest oil producer, but we rely on international sources to supply more than 50 percent of our needs. Only a small number of countries make major contributions to the world's oil supply. The world's dependence on these few suppliers is neither responsible nor sustainable over the long term (pp. 28–29).

The importance of strategic dependencies is hard to exaggerate. In the NSS documents the dependence of US allies from energy imports from parts of the world deemed unstable or potentially hostile to US interests first appears in NSS 2006<sup>8</sup>, and remains relevant to date.

Strategic dependencies are not restricted to material resources, but also are key to communication in the broadest sense of the term, that is, including travel, transportation and telecommunication of all types. All 15 NSS documents call for the preservation of US domination of all global commons. These include the seas, air space, and outer space, and with the maturing of technology, cyberspace. As multiple strategies explicitly state, sea, air, and space domains are to be safeguarded "to ensure free access for all in time of peace, but to be able to deny access to our enemies in time of war" (NSS, 1990, p. 27). The same applies to cyberspace (NSS, 2010):

Many of these goals are equally applicable to cyberspace. While cyberspace relies on the digital infrastructure of individual countries, such infrastructure is globally connected, and securing it requires global cooperation. We will push for the recognition of norms of behavior in cyberspace, and

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<sup>8</sup> This concern arose after Nordstream AG consortium was founded in Zug, Switzerland in 2005.

otherwise work with global partners to ensure the protection of the free flow of information and our continued access (p. 50).

The NSS issued by President Trump takes this further, saying: “The Internet is an American invention, and it should reflect our values as it continues to transform the future for all nations and all generations. A strong, defensible cyber infrastructure fosters economic growth, protects our liberties, and advances our national security” (NSS, 2017, p. 13). US domination of global commons secures freedom of global access for the US and is a form of strategic dependence imposed by the US on other players. The domination of cyberspace and outer space by the US as a nation state has become uncertain with the defining role played by private enterprise in the control of both global commons, as NSS 2017 attests (p. 18, p. 35).

Power multipliers, which were seen as unique to the US throughout most of the period since 1990 are partners to the US in its various endeavors in leading and shaping the world order. A detailed explanation is provided in NSS 1994:

[...] we should pursue our goals through an enlarged circle not only of government officials but also of private and non-governmental groups. Private firms are natural allies in our efforts to strengthen market economies. Similarly, our goal of strengthening democracy and civil society has a natural ally in labor unions, human rights groups, environmental advocates, chambers of commerce, and election monitors. Just as we rely on force multipliers in defense, we should welcome these “diplomacy multipliers,” such as the National Endowment for Democracy (p. 20).

Power multipliers also include multilateral organizations, such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and regional development banks that are shaped by the US. For example, “we must support the World Bank and other organizations that multiply our contributions to progress many times over” (NSS, 1997, p. pdf 4). The relative importance of various multilateral organizations fluctuates, partly in correlation with the ability of challengers of the US-led world order to exert their influence within, and through them. NSS 2017 states that revisionist powers (China and Russia), rogue states (Iran and North Korea) and transnational threat organizations all have in common a penchant for repressive systems, and their “[r]epressive leaders often collaborate to subvert free societies and corrupt multilateral organizations” (NSS, 2017, p. 37). With direct reference to the UN, the same document declares that “If the United States is asked to provide a disproportionate level of support for an institution, we will expect a commensurate degree of influence over the direction and efforts of that institution.” (NSS, 2017, p. 40). At the same time, it calls for the US to “continue to play a leading role in institutions such as IMF, World Bank, and WTO, but will improve their performance through reforms.” (NSS, 2017, pp. 40–41) – thus, the US is calling upon its power multipliers to enforce the interests of the US with more vigor.

Power multipliers play an equally important role of helping to create legitimacy for the US as a global leader. Allies are followers, who set an example of follow-ship to other states. Multilateral organizations communicate the norms of the US-led world order (UN), and impose them as obligations that come with membership (WTO) or access to assistance (World Bank, IMF). Privately

owned media disseminate narratives that support US foreign policy goals internationally as well as domestically, as required by the strategies, and regulated by relevant directives (NSS, 2000):

International Public Information activities, as defined by the newly promulgated Presidential Decision Directive 68 (PDD-68), are designed to improve our capability to coordinate independent public diplomacy, public affairs and other national security information-related efforts to ensure they are more successfully integrated into foreign and national security policy making and execution (p. 6).

The need for legitimation is the only area where the US has a systemic strategic dependency: it depends on its power multipliers by default. Without their cooperation as followers, supporters and transmitters of norms preferred by the US, Pax Americana, often referred to as American ‘hegemony’, and even ‘empire’, would be highly unlikely. This dependence, however, is diffused and embedded, which makes US leadership quite resilient in the field of legitimation manifested in “follow-ship” (Flint, 2017, p. 56).

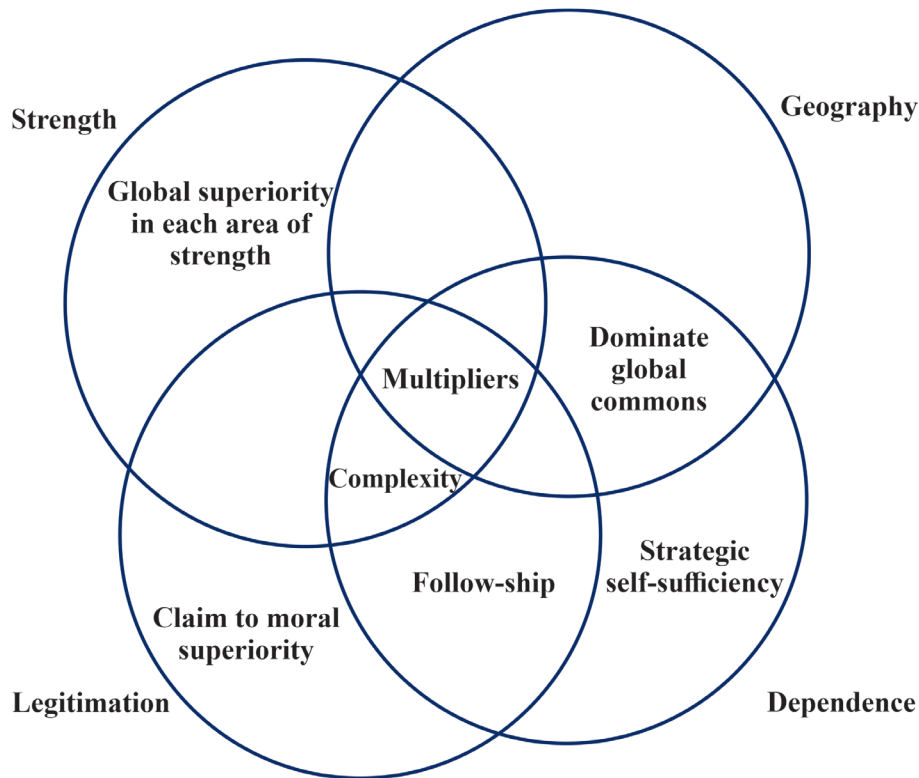
Convincing the international community of the validity and importance of goals defined by, or under the guidance of, the US, as well as leading by example are key tenets of each NSS. Legitimacy requires strategic goals that are accepted by domestic and international public opinion and the political leadership of strategic partners. It also requires an at least tacitly accepted US claim to moral superiority in terms of goals pursued as well as concerning the way they are pursued. The 15 documents all make claim to US moral superiority, with the partial exception of NSS 2010, which distances itself from the 2003 Iraq war as a war of choice, and from the acts of torture by the US military. Yet even this strategy (NSS, 2010) maintains the moral legitimacy of US leadership:

(...) over the years, some methods employed in pursuit of our security have compromised our fidelity to the values that we promote, and our leadership on their behalf. This undercuts our ability to support democratic movements abroad, challenge nations that violate international human rights norms, and apply our broader leadership for good in the world. That is why we will lead on behalf of our values by living them. Our struggle to stay true to our values and Constitution has always been a lodestar, both to the American people and to those who share our aspiration for human dignity (p. 10).

As we have seen, power that made the US capable of leading and shaping the world order in the post-Cold War period is a system of interrelated factors that provide it with quantitative and qualitative superiority in all areas of national strength, geographically structured for regional dominance and unimpaired global reach. The absolute superiority of complex US power is enabled by a diverse array of power multipliers, which also secure the legitimation and follow-ship required for leadership. The strategies invest significant energies into securing strategic independence, but with mixed results. In fact, this is the one area through which US power is threatened to the extent that it may unravel. In the period examined, the US finds that the diversification of energy imports is insufficient and energy security can only be attained through self-sufficiency and dominance. As open trade leads to strategic industrial dependence, this, too, is set to be remedied. The potentially arising new US strategic dependency on transnational corporations dominating cyberspace and outer space was left

unanswered by the 15 documents examined. Figure 1 illustrates the constellation and relationship of factors of power as pursued by the US.

Figure 1. The Constellation of US Power Factors as Reflected in NSS 1990–2017



Source: own editing based on own findings

The US power position was sufficient from 1990 up until 2015 for the US to be able to reserve for itself the possibility of unilateral military action, should the need arise. Unilateral military action that is likely to go largely unimpeded can be seen as the ultimate international power position that can be had. NSS 2017, however had no mention of this potentiality. Since the same document stated in its situation assessment that the complexity of US power had been lost due to strategic industrial dependence, the question arises if the US prescription for power is robust enough to be used for developing a methodology for analyzing the international distribution of power. The positive answer is provided by the NSS documents themselves.

The 15 documents examined give a clear explanation for the waning of US leadership. In two significant ways the US was inconsistent in the application of the rules of power it laid out a key to its global position. Chronologically the first instance was allowing itself to become strategically dependent on its transnationally operating corporations. Up until 1993, the US was one of multiple “industrial democracies”. In 1993, however, it launched the global free trade-based world order in which its first and foremost power multipliers were its private corporations. It was in the drive to open up all markets, including that of China, to US products and investment, to enlarge and deepen the

US-led world order, that jobs and strategically relevant industry were outsourced to the extent where US power became impaired. This is why NSS 2017 reversed the policy of engagement and unlimited free trade. Without the drive to pursue the policy of engagement globally, it is quite possible that China may not have risen as it has, and the US industry would not have become strategically dependent.

Before jumping to any conclusions about the shifting world order, it is very far from clear if China will be able to attain the complexity of power, or geographical reach, or obtain sufficient power multipliers, and the legitimation required for leadership – even for shared leadership, in a multipolar world. Unless the US eliminates its so far unwavering goal of preventing the rise of rivals, first expressed in NSS 1990 as a policy of the Cold War that is to be continued, China or any other challenger will be intensively impeded in their efforts by the US.

Also stemming from an unrestrained reliance on private enterprise as power multipliers, the US government allowed and encouraged private enterprise to gain strategic dominance over cyberspace, and, currently in process, outer space, as the NSS documents attest. These two types of global commons are the most relevant to hi-tech global reach in terms of all strength areas. The domination by the US as a nation state of all global commons appears to have been impaired, with the most important global commons lost to transnational corporations. Subsequently, it is quite possible that the new world order that comes after unipolarity will be a post-polar one, defined by transnational corporations rather than nation states as containers of power.<sup>9</sup>

The second instance when the US faltered in the use of its own recipe for power was the gradual neglect of its international legitimation. Initial NSS documents state that the purpose of the NSS documents is, in part to help win the support of US polity and society for foreign policy. This goal was more or less dropped by NSS 1997 and subsequent strategies, which state that some foreign policy decisions need to be made even if society openly opposes it:

We must, therefore, foster the broad public understanding and bipartisan congressional support necessary to sustain our international engagement, always recognizing that some decisions that face popular opposition must ultimately be judged by whether they advance the interests of the American people in the long run (p. pdf 7).

While this may be seen as a declaration that under special circumstances the *raison d'état* may overwrite public opinion, according to NSS 2010, moral superiority, and with it, social cohesion was lost due to the war of choice against Iraq and misconduct by US personnel.<sup>10</sup> Social cohesion has not been regained to date<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> The geopolitical as well as political role of transnational corporations has long been in the focus of attention (e.g.: Pasricha, 2008), but literature has tended to emphasize that the state continues to define the international system. As the NSS documents attest, this may no longer be the case. It is worth noting that the economic ordering of the international system has a distinctly longer history than do transnational corporations (Fehér, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> The gradual loss of well-paying jobs to outsourcing as well as the 2008 subprime mortgage crisis are very likely to have contributed to the loss of cohesion that NSS 2010 and all ensuing strategies document, even though this connection is not made in the texts.

<sup>11</sup> Going way beyond lamenting the loss of social cohesion as can be seen in NSS 2010, 2015 and 2017, the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance issued in March 2021 calls for a war on domestic terrorism.

### Implications for methodology

We have looked at the factors that can turn strength into actionable power through the meta-analysis of definitions and descriptions of international power in academic literature. The practical concept of international power as consistently reflected in the national security strategies of the US in the post-cold war period has also been presented. The former yielded complexity, geographical reach and availability, strategic self-sufficiency, and strategic justifiability. The latter produced complexity, superiority in each area of strength, regional superiority, domination of global commons, lack of strategic dependencies, availability of power multipliers and legitimation. For convenience of comparison, the two sets of criteria are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. A Comparison of Factors of Power Derived from Academic Literature and from US NSS 1990–2017

Criteria of power derived through the deconstruction of definitions of power	Criteria of power used in US national security strategy	Match
Complexity	Complexity	yes
Superiority in each strength area	Global superiority in each strength area	yes
Reach (geographic)	Regional superiority Domination of global commons	yes
Availability (time)	Optimized for rapid response <sup>12</sup>	yes
Sustainability (implied strategic independence)	Lack of strategic dependencies Dominance of all global commons	yes
-	Power multipliers	no
Strategic justifiability – limited to justification of war	Displayed: ongoing claim to moral superiority, justification of action – preeminence in public diplomacy as part of complex power	partial

Source: own editing

The factors of power derived through the deconstruction of academic definitions and descriptions of power and those conceived by the US match very closely. The most significant difference can be found regarding power multipliers. The underlying reason is that the definition of power as ‘A being able to get B to do something they would not otherwise do’ does not directly imply that global hegemony with any stability should develop, and if it does, that it should have power multipliers.

Strategic justifiability and overall legitimation match only partially in the two sets. The reason is simple. Academic literature reflects upon the need for justification, whereas the national security strategies – being public narratives – exercise this rather than reflect upon it. The only exceptions in the NSS documents are the discussions of serious deviations from the standard, but even these are only partial reflections. Any further reflections in NSS documents might compromise the US’ own power.

The lack of strategic dependencies is a prerequisite indirectly deductible from the definition and descriptions of power, whereas the NSS documents very clearly discuss it. The strong connection

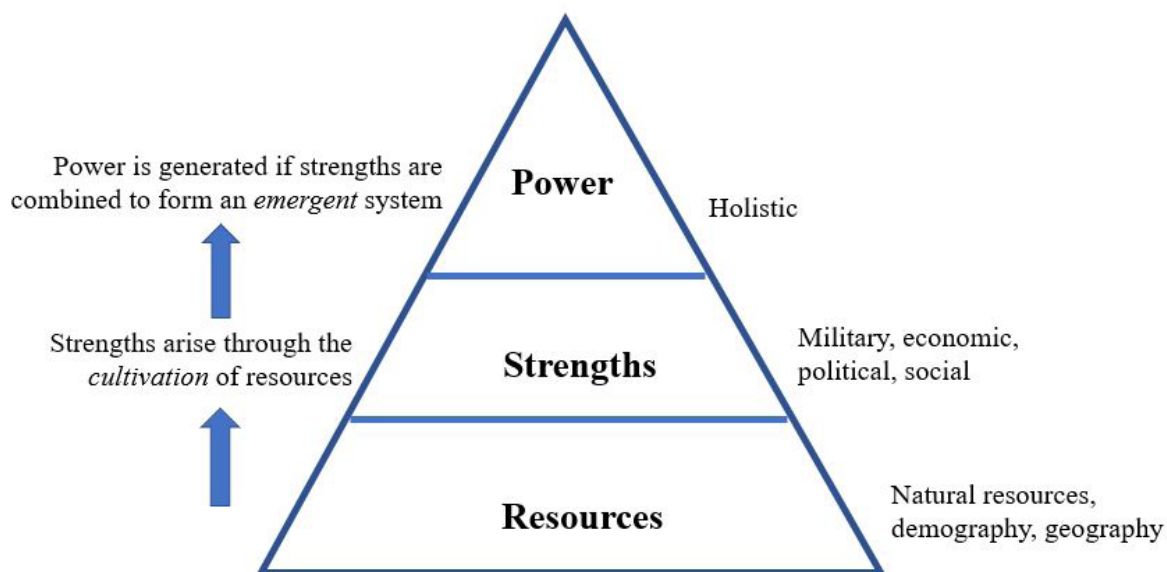
<sup>12</sup> NSS 1993 (p. 15) does specify the need for US armed forces to be prepared to respond rapidly, to deter, and, if necessary, to fight and win unilaterally or as part of a coalition” – but the ability of prompt availability appears to be perceived as more or less taken care of.

between areas of strength that feed each other is elaborated in detail in the NSS documents. This is endorsed by part of academic literature on power (Carr, 1946; Waltz, 1979), but ignored by those striving to quantify strengths as power.

The factors that turn strengths into power as identified in the practice of the US as the leader of the unipolar world correspond to the implications of the holistic definition of power. They do not correspond to attempts to measure power dissected into passive components, whether these are static resources, partial mechanisms, or elusive output. This makes power an emergent system. To evaluate power, a holistic approach is required.<sup>13</sup>

As US experience shows through the NSS documents, the relevant aspects of power create one system that needs to remain intact, otherwise the power that puts the US at the top of the international hierarchy may unravel. The dynamics of how strengths are turned into power as a self-reinforcing system, and how and why it can unravel, is a distinct level of analysis. It is on this level that a methodology can be developed for the principled ranking of holistic power positions. The three distinct levels of analysis – that of resources, strengths, and power – are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Resources, Strengths, and Power as Distinct Levels of Analysis



Source: own editing based on own findings

The advantage of ranking geopolitical players by holistic power positions is that it is not arbitrary, as opposed to measures such as GDP, where purchasing power parity and per capita calculations will produce quite irreconcilable assessments of the distribution of power, not to speak of the use of net or gross numbers, or any considerations of efficiency. Another advantage of ranking by holistic power positions is that its set of research questions can be clearly defined. They are derived from the verified general dynamics of holistic power, whose definition is consensually recognized as being

<sup>13</sup> A comparative analysis of factors that turn strengths into emergent power, leading to the rise and stability of hegemony with centrifugal and centripetal forces affecting the stability of the nation state (Pap & Tóth, 2008) may further refine processes of world order and the international system.

‘the ability of A to get B to do something they would not otherwise do’, and A is capable of imposing their intentions on B ‘even in the face of opposition’.

The research questions for establishing a ranking of geopolitical actors by holistic power are presented in Table 2, which also provides suggested evaluations. Since holistic power is understood as a dynamic system, it can only be successfully assessed in its entirety. To assess a player’s power, each research question needs to be answered. For a ranking of a set of players, each question needs to be answered for each player.

Table 2. Research Questions for the Analysis of Holistic Power and their Proposed Evaluation

Question	Evaluation
Whose power is complex?	Any actor whose power is not complex is highly likely to be subdued by one whose is. Complexity means having military, economic, intelligence, technological and moral power simultaneously. A player dubbed an economic powerhouse is not a power if it does not also have military might. Minimum capability is reasonable capability of denying attack that the opponent is capable of justifying, i.e., implementing without its own power unraveling for lack of justification perceived by its own society and allies.
Who is free of strategic dependencies?	Any strategic dependency, whether on imported energy, raw materials (also including water and agricultural produce) or industrial products will unravel the complexity of power, potentially paralyzing it in time of conflict, unless the dependency is limited and widely diffused.
Who has global superiority in each area of strength?	If complexity of power and strategic self-sufficiency both are given, the ability to deny the opponent success is high.
Who dominates the global commons?	More importantly, who dominates cyberspace and outer space? Of the two, the domination of outer space appears more important. While cyberspace is artificial, and so, a realm parallel to the existing one is conceivable, domination of outer space may entail the ability to deny access to rivals. It can ensure instantaneous global military reach, and with the advent of space mining may eliminate several critical terrestrial dependencies for raw materials.
Who has more rapid response globally?	Terrestrial global positioning through military bases may eventually lose its relevance to instant global reach from outer space, and the potential to weaponize civilian or dual-purpose systems through cyberspace.
Who has superiority in all or more regions?	This applies to the ability to block the emergence of rivals in any part of the world.
Who has power multipliers at their disposal?	If multiple players have power multipliers, world order will be seen as consisting of multiple blocs. To establish their relative power positions, the complexity of their power, the geographical reach of the blocs and the internal popular support for (i.e., the legitimacy of) the blocs need to be compared.
Who has strategic justifiability?	If action is attributable to an actor, it needs to be justifiable. Justifiability means being able to make the sacrifice needed to prevail acceptable to domestic and relevant segments of international public opinion. Interpretation of what prevailing means, and what time frame to achieve it is acceptable are essential. Sacrifice may include human lives, the livelihood or wellbeing of the populations concerned.

Source: own editing based on own findings

Today, a geopolitical player who scores positively on all questions has world leading power that is emergent. This is the top end of the scale on which the power positions of actors can be ranked. The power of an actor can fall short of such global and emergent power in many ways. Absolute scales against which a power position can be measured are yet to be designed. Whether any absolute



measures would be useful is doubtful, because the weight of specific kinds of weaknesses will depend on the given situation a geopolitical player is in.

The complexity of emergent power increases with the advancement of technology, as it widens the domain of communication, warfare, use of global commons, abstraction of the economy, and interdependencies. Assessing positions, determining strategies, even taking stock of one's own options of tools for deployment in a particular situation is becoming more complex than can be handled with confidence by the human mind. Artificial intelligence is becoming available for managing this increasing complexity adeptly, in analyzing situations and designing strategies. The enlisting of artificial intelligence will expand the list of criteria for assessing a geopolitical player's power.

As AI enters the foray, international power can be expected to become more unequally distributed, more global, and more efficient than ever before. AI is also likely to alter the role and nature of legitimation. Traditionally, legitimation – relying on moral claims – has been both a strength and a component of holistic power that helps transform strengths into power. When found wanting, it played a significant role in unraveling holistic power. Depending on how AI is used, moral arguments of good and evil might, in extremis, be replaced with purely rational appeals to necessity for material gain.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the present paper has been to identify those factors of power that need to be considered to assess the international distribution of power. To this end, the most widely accepted definitions and descriptions of power were deconstructed. This showed that if power is the “ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want”, even “in the face of opposition”, then its essence cannot be captured as the sum of passive features. Instead, it is complexity, reach, availability, sustainability, and strategic justifiability that make it eligible to exerting influence, pressure, or coercion when and where required in pursuit of strategic goals. To verify if these conclusions are grounded in practice, the content analysis of the 15 national security strategies issued by the United States in the post-Cold War period was presented. This confirmed the analytic criteria derived from the definitions of power and completed the list with the category of the availability of power multipliers for a geopolitical actor to prevail.

On the basis of these findings, the study proposes that three levels of analysis need to be distinguished for examining the international distribution of power. On the bottom level are resources, which include natural resources, demography, and geography. If cultivated, strengths will arise from these resources. Strengths constitute the second level, and can include economic, military, political and social strengths. If these strengths combine to create a virtuous circle in which they feed each other, they generate power. If thus construed, power is an emergent, complex system, which needs to be approached holistically, its analysis focusing on those criteria that convert strengths into power.

The proposed approach may help redirect efforts to better understand the processes of power and may offer an analytical tool for the principled analysis of world order. The quest for obtaining to

way to examine the distribution of power is most likely an infinite one. As the level of complexity of power changes, the methodology will need updating, to stay abreast of any shifts the factors that define power. As the complexity of power increases, the number of factors that drive the emergence of power increases. For this reason, it is likely that the inequalities in the distribution of power will also increase.

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