Power and the Realisms

POSC 3610 – International Conflict

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U N I V E R S I T Y

Goal for Today

Discuss power as structural property and the various realism paradigms surrounding it.

MIC of the Day: Crimean War (MIC#0057)

Figure 1: Franz Roubaud's (1904) Siege of Sevastopol

... ... ? Common sense is sufficient to enable any one to discern the folly of such a marvellous absurdity as the late Vienna Conference without the papers and discussions relative to its proceedings being produced. That Conference could only end in one of two ways—a miserable and humiliating compromise, or a signal and abortive failure. The Western Powers having once declared, through their Ministers, that Sebastopol is a standing menace to the Ottoman Empire, and that its existence in its present fortified state with a Russian fleet in its harbours is incompatible with the due balance of power in the Black Sea, committed themselves to the single alternative of either taking possession of it, or of losing the *prestige* of their power in Eastern Europe. For the Allies to quit the Crimea now without the capture of Sebastopol is impossible, if the military honour of France and England is to remain untarnished. ...

Figure 2: An Excerpt from John Coleman's (1855) "The Four Points"

What is Power?

Two conceptualizations of power focus on:

- relations
- resources

Power as Relational

Common argument is that power is some kind of coercion.

- i.e. the ability to get someone else to do what they would otherwise not do.

Various aspects to power in this framework.

- Persuasion
- Rewards
- Punishments
- Coercion
- Generally: force-price-legitimacy framework

Problems With This Interpretation

Several problems follow this concept of power for our purposes.

- Counterfactuals are hard
- Unobservables
- Attribution

Power As Resources

More common interpretation in IR: power is resources.

- Major advantage: not conflating "power" (i.e. the cause) with outcomes we want to study (i.e. the effect)

Elements of Power

Any number of ways of measuring power (e.g. (in)tangible, observable/latent).
Practically we go for:

- Terrain
- Natural resources (e.g. oil)
- Industrial capacity
- Military quality/preparedness
- Population
- Wealth (latent)
- National character (largely unobservable/stereotypes)

Measuring Power

CoW's National Military Capabilities (NMC) data offer a crude measure of this concept of power.

$$CINC_{it} = \frac{tpr_{it} + upr_{it} + ispr_{it} + ecr_{it} + mer_{it} + mpr_{it}}{6}$$

..where:

- tpr_{it} = total population ratio of country *i* in year *t*
- upr_{it} = total urban population ratio of country *i* in year *t*
- $ispr_{it}$ = iron and steel production ratio of country *i* in year *t*
- ecr_{it} = primary energy consumption ratio of country *i* in year *t*
- mer_{it} = military expenditure ratio of country *i* in year *t*
- mpr_{it} = military personnel ratio of country *i* in year *t*

CINC Scores for the U.S., UK, Germany and Russia, 1816-2016

The U.S. has long been the most powerful country in the world, but notice the various power transitions implied by these data.

— Germany · · · Russia — United Kingdom - - United States
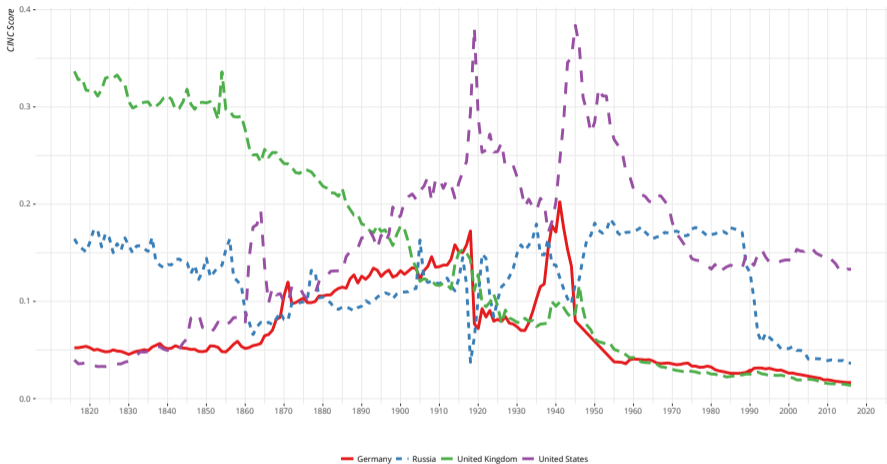
Source: Correlates of War National Military Capabilities Data (v. 6.0)

Power as Structural Cause

We focus on the distribution of power in the international system because long-running paradigms are built around it.

Classical Realism

Drawn from Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*.

- Heavily inspired by Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*.
    - Anarchy reduces "Man" to his "nature".
- The state, *viz*, "Man" is hardwired to will for power.
- End result: bellum omnium contra omnes (war of all against all)

The state (i.e. "Man") pursues power to dominate his rivals.

- Nothing can be done to avoid this.

Neorealism

Neorealism (aka "structural realism") remains the most prominent approach in security studies. The argument:

- The *structure* of the international system, not "human nature", forces states to pursue power.
- Anarchy has a single logic that forces a state to see means to protect itself.
- Power is the *means*, not the end.

Neorealism's Assumptions

Neorealism is built on a few core assumptions (think: parsimony).

1. The international system is anarchic.
2. All states possess some type of offensive military capability.
3. States can never be 100% certain of other states' offensive intentions.
4. States are motivated to *survive*.
5. States are rational/strategic actors.

These assumptions will differ slightly from argument to argument.

- They actually come from Mearsheimer (2001).
- Most neorealist scholarship has done a poor job outlining its assumptions, as we shall see.

Neorealism's Main Conclusions

All told, these assumptions imply states seek a **balance of power** in the international system.

- States eventually fear each other.
- This fear can never be inconsequential.
- International politics becomes a self-help world under anarchy.
- Power becomes the means to security.

Power-seeking leads to the famous problem of the **security dilemma**.

Neorealism's Hypotheses

Several hypotheses follow these arguments.

- Bipolar systems are more stable than multipolar systems.
- States engage in balancing behavior, such that power distributions converge on a balance.
- States mimic, or echo, one another's behavior.

As we will see, these explanations are flawed in multiple ways.

- The assumptions do not logically imply the hypotheses.
- The empirical record does not vindicate the hypotheses.

Bipolarity and Stability

Polarity constitutes possibly *the* core argument of neorealism:

- Bipolarity: peace
  - Reasons: certainty
- Multipolarity: war
  - Reasons: uncertainty.
  - More specifically: **buck-passing** and **chain-ganging**

International system was multipolar before the Cold War

- The period saw multiple systemic wars dating back to 1648.
- Cold War was only point in history in which the two largest powers did not (directly) fight each other.

Problems with the Polarity-Stability Hypothesis

- Not implied by any of the assumptions
- There was nothing special about the "long peace."

The Hypotheses Do Not Follow the Assumptions

By itself, neorealism's assumptions do not imply the relationship between polarity and stability.

- i.e. "certainty" may embolden risk-taking, "uncertainty" may foster risk-aversion.
- We'd have to add another assumption: all states are equally risk-averse in the face of certainty.

If we relax this even a little bit, we've violated core assumptions of neorealism.

- Violates the unitary actor assumption
- Reduces hypothesized effect of polarity on stability to zero.
- States no longer mimic each other.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a world with A and B in which there are 300 units of "power".

- A: 150
- B: 150

Such a bipolar system would be stable.

- Neither A nor B could destroy each other.

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a different world with A and B with 300 units of power.

- A: 151
- B: 149

Neorealism assumes this should be stable, but A could destroy B.

- Only when power is perfectly balanced does bipolarity produce peace.

Objection: power is balanced "enough".

- However, this would deny neorealism's own claim. Bipolarity is supposed to reduce uncertainty!

The Polarity-Stability Relationship

Consider a five-country system as follows (with 300 units of power).

- A: 75
- B: 74
- C: 75
- D: 74
- E: 2

This system is incidentally stable.

- No one can be eliminated, not even E.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Can we salvage the bipolarity-stability argument if we relax the "uncertainty" claim?

- After all, our simple example may not do justice to understanding the real world.

Assume A thinks there's chance *p* it could eliminate B.

- *p* = A's resources/(B's resources + A's resources)

A does not attack B if:

$$p(U_{AW}) + (1-p)(U_{AL}) < U_{ASQ}$$

...where U_{AW} = utility for A winning and U_{AL} = utility for A losing.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Assume U_{AW} = 1 and U_{AL} = 0. When would A attack B?

$$
\begin{aligned}
p(U_{AW}) + (1-p)(U_{AL}) &> U_{ASQ} \\
pU_{AW} + U_{AL} - pU_{AL} &> U_{ASQ} \\
pU_{AW} - pU_{AL} &> U_{ASQ} - U_{AL} \\
p &> \frac{U_{ASQ} - U_{AL}}{U_{AW} - U_{AL}} \\
p &> \frac{U_{ASQ} - 0}{1 - 0} \\
p &> U_{ASQ}
\end{aligned}
$$

A attacks B if the probability of winning is greater than A's utility of the status quo.

Bipolarity, Uncertainty, and Stability

Assume a world of 300 units of power.

- A: 60
- B: 240

When would A attack B?

- $p = \frac{60}{60+240} = .2$
- If A is really dissatisfied with the status quo (i.e. $U_{ASQ} < .2$), it'll attack B.

This is intuitive but it violates a neorealist assumption of security-oriented behavior!

Stability of International Systems (1492-1990)

i.e. there is nothing special about the "Long Peace" of the Cold War.

Duration (in Years) of Era

Year of Change in List of Major Powers
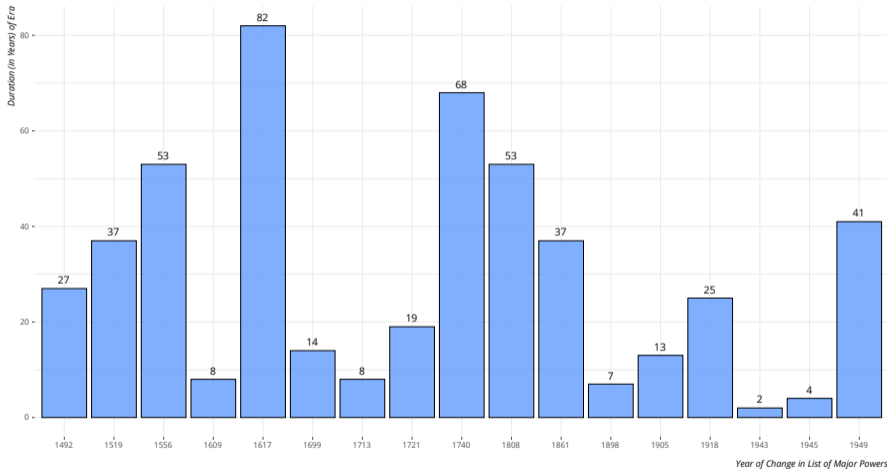
Source: Bueno de Mesquita (2010). Note: 'Stability' defined as a change in the composition of major powers.

Conclusion

We study power because we believes its distribution matters to war and peace.

- For our purposes, better to focus on resources than relational power.

Neorealism purports to be a parsimonious explanation of international politics.

- It's also the most common approach in security studies.

However, neorealism suffers from major flaws.

- The assumptions do not imply the hypotheses.
- The hypotheses, however derived, are not supported by the empirical record.

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