

Power and the Realisms

POSC 3610 – International Conflict

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Goal for Today

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

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.

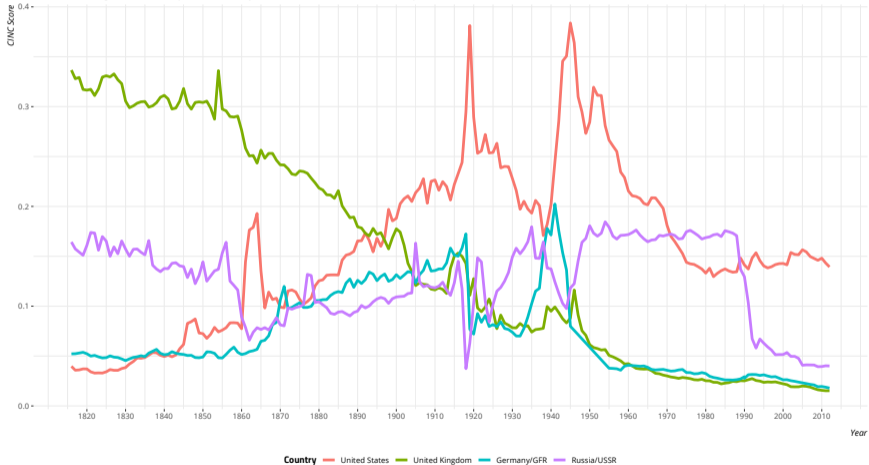
$$CINC_{it} = \frac{tpr_{it} + upr_{it} + ispr_{it} + ecr_{it} + mer_{it} + mpr_{it}}{6}$$

..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, 1816-2010

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



Source: Correlates of War National Military Capabilities Data (v. 5.0)

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.

- $p = \text{A's resources} / (\text{B's resources} + \text{A's resources})$

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

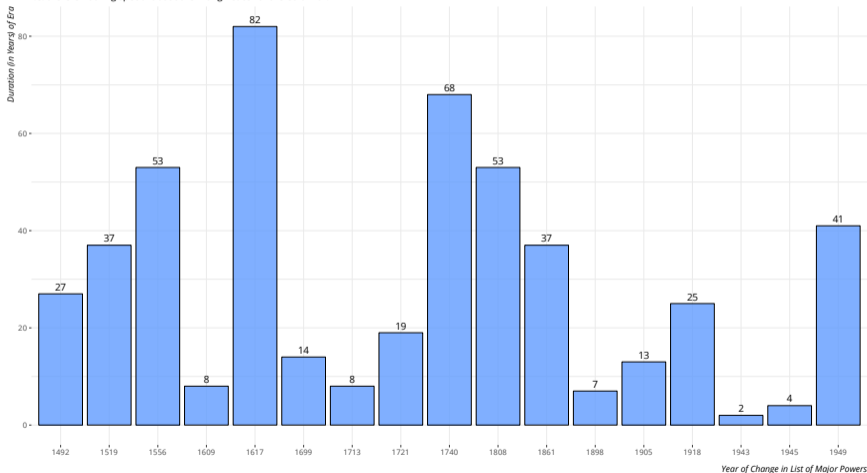
When would A attack B?

- $p = \frac{60}{60+240} = .2$
- 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.



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

Conclusion

We study power because we believe 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.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Power, Realism, and its Flaws

Measuring Power

The Realisms

Bipolarity and Stability

Conclusion