Power

Power in general

Power is the currency of international relations. It is a psychological relationship between conflicting wills that both aspire to the deviation of the other from its original course of action without using actual force.

Thus, power is the ability to get others to behave in ways that they ordinarily would not by encouraging certain actions and prohibiting others. That is achieved either by exercising pressure toward a state's interests or manipulating the factors that determine its policy. Power has also been defined as the ability to a) cause outcomes that would not have taken place otherwise, b) change the highly probable outcomes, c) participate in the decision making process and d) alter the changes that would have taken place otherwise.

This is the dynamic form of power. Power can be viewed as strength as well, which implies the static side and refers to the states' capabilities and how states wield actual or potential influence and coercion. In this context, power is the strength that can be used effectively.

Power can also be expressed as influence, and therefore it exists even when it is not being used; that is, when it is static. Deterrence is an example. The power of the state that deters is influencing the decision of its rival to not attack without actually actively using its power.

However, a state's power does not exist in a vacuum but inside the international system, and thus it is just a part of the international distribution of power. Therefore, states' power is always viewed in correlation to the others' power. A state can possess at the same time more, less or equal power than its adversaries.

Balance of power

The balance of power is the core theory of international politics within the realist perspective. There can be found up to 9 different ways in which the balance of power concept can be interpreted:

1) Every even or uneven distribution of power between states or coalitions; 2) an endeavour to balance another actor's power; 3) a situation in which the allocation of power does not allow any state to enforce its will to the others (equilibrium of power);4) a state of hegemony or the pursuit of it; 5) stability and peace in the system; 6) instability and war; 7) power politics; 8) a universal law that exists throughout history and operates like a mechanism to achieve the balance of power; 9) a method and a practical guide for politicians. Still, the first three are the most prominent ones.

The second approach refers to the effort of a nation in the context of a self-help system to protect itself against another nation or group of nations by matching its power against the power of the other side.

The kind of balance of power described by the third approach can be found in a bipolar and multipolar system. On the one hand, the Cold war is an example of a balance of power between 2 actors, none of whom can prevail militarily. On the other hand, the European balance of power that followed the treaty of Westphalia is a perfect case of a balance of power in a multipolar world.

Soft power

The soft power concept was first developed by Joseph Nye, who elaborated what Thucydides has described as honour.

Soft power is the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion. It is the ability to shape the preferences of others, making them want the same thing that you want. It can be explained as "direct communication with foreign peoples, to affect their thinking, and ultimately, that of their governments".

Soft power is the product of a country's foreign and domestic policy behaviour and style, its cultural values and how these are diffused abroad, its political principles, and its adherence to global undisputed norms and values. It arises from the attractiveness of a country's culture, political values, and policies. Public diplomacy and nation branding are used to project further a state's soft power in the international system.

One of the problems of soft power is its inability to be measured. It is not possible to prove that a state changes its behaviour and actions because of another state's soft power. Soft power also tends to have diffuse effects on the outside world and is not easily wielded to achieve specific outcomes.

Smart power

Power is one's ability to affect the behaviour of others to get what one wants. Hard power rests primarily on coercion and payment. Soft power is the ability to obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payments.

The term "smart power" was developed by Joseph Nye in 2003 to counter the misinterpretation that soft power alone produces effective foreign policy. Smart power refers to power conversion strategies that effectively combine hard and soft power in different contexts.

It means developing an integrated strategy, resource base, and tool kit to achieve a state's objectives, drawing on both hard and soft power. Smart power is neither hard nor soft—it is the skilful combination of both.

It is an evaluative term applied to the effectiveness of strategies rather than a distinct type of power. The smart power approach underscores the necessity of a strong military but also invests heavily in alliances, partnerships, and institutions at all levels to expand state influence and establish the legitimacy of its action.

Sharp power

Sharp power refers to the aggressive and subversive policies employed by authoritarian governments (which cannot be described as either hard power, soft power, or smart power) that target liberal democracies to undermine their ideals and mindsets. In other words, it is the devious use of information (manipulation and misinformation of public opinion) for hostile purposes.

Authoritarian states seek to penetrate the informational and political environments of their targets, aiming not to exercise soft power but to direct the desired audience through manipulation or distortion of the information it has access to.

Sharp power takes advantage of the asymmetry between free and unfree systems, allowing authoritarian regimes to limit free expression and distort political environments in democracies while simultaneously shielding their own domestic public spaces from democratic appeals coming from abroad.

Beyond politics, the corrosive effects of sharp power are increasingly apparent in the spheres of culture, academia, media, and publishing— sectors that are crucial in determining how citizens of democracies understand the world around them.

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