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## Power of the State: A Theoretical Approach

### Siła państwa w ujęciu teoretycznym

#### • Abstract •

Power is a fundamental category in the field of political and security sciences. It occupies a key position in practically every theory of international relations. Some of the categories that describe power can be defined using similar terms, although there are also those that define similar categories in a completely different manner. This is what happens when you find similar definitions for terms such as ‘power’, ‘strength’, ‘authority’, or ‘influence’. Identifying the factors that make up a state’s power is no less problematic. Even if some elements of power seem to be unchanged (military or economic factors) and important for all currents of the theory of international relations, the differences in their rank may be significant and crucial for understanding the differences between particular theoretical approaches. The aim of the article is to show both the fixed elements of individual theories (primarily realistic and liberal, but also radicalism and postmodernism) as well as the differences in defining the power of their individual representatives.

**Keywords:** power in theory; realism; liberal; radicalism; postmodernism

#### • Abstrakt •

Potęga jest podstawową kategorią w zakresie nauk o polityce i bezpieczeństwie. Zajmuje ona pozycję kluczową praktycznie w każdej teorii stosunków międzynarodowych. Część kategorii określających potęgę można określić przy pomocy podobnych pojęć, choć są i takie, które zupełnie inaczej definiują podobne kategorie. Tak się dzieje w przypadku znalezienia podobnych definicji dla takich określeń, jak potęga, siła, władza czy wpływ. Nie mniej problematyczne jest określenie czynników, które tworzą potęgę państwa. Nawet jeżeli pewne elementy potęgi wydają się niezmiennie (czynniki militarne czy gospodarcze) i ważne dla wszystkich nurtów teorii stosunków międzynarodowych, to różnice ich rangi mogą być istotne i kluczowe dla zrozumienia odrębności poszczególnych ujęć teoretycznych. Artykuł ma zadanie pokazać zarówno elementy stałe danej teorii (realistycznej, liberalnej jako głównych oraz radykalizmu i postmodernizmu), jak i różnice w definiowaniu potęgi przez przedstawicieli określonych ujęć.

**Słowa kluczowe:** potęga w teorii; realizm; liberalizm; radykalizm; postmodernizm

## Introduction

There is no single definition of power and it is understood in different ways in many schools of international relations (Kuzniar, 2005). This variety means it is difficult to compare its range and interaction, which makes it almost impossible to agree on one universal definition (Nye, 2011). The very term *power* is ambiguous and functions in the context of other words referring to it such as *force*, *energy*, *strength*, *influence*, or *authority* (Baldwin, 1989).

Power also defines the potential and scale of the state's authority over a territory or the environment where it operates. Force is understood as the ability to use power efficiently. Influence means the ability to achieve a specific result, control over other states, not necessarily by using coercive means or threatening to use them. Energy is the ability to initiate power, and force is a synonym of the capacity to use power. The concept of power refers to competences of the decision-maker who is in charge of the state's politics.

A key word in the definition of power is 'ability', which emphasises potential as a characteristic feature of power, and will being a psychological factor. Resources are an original concept describing the size/number of elements of the environment (e.g., natural resources – natural substances, including renewable and non-renewable ones, human resources, workforce resources, knowledge and competence resources, capital resources, economic resources, etc.). These factors are expressed by various indicators which are not sufficient to determine power explicitly (Sułek, 2004).

It is important to define the potential – being the interpretation of ability, force, capacity, skill, efficiency, a state's potential in a field, e.g., of economic or military.

Conversion of power is the ability to transform potential force, measured with possessed resources, into the real possibility of efficient interaction, defined by the change of other states' behaviour (Nye, 2009).

## Realistic and neorealist theories

Schools of international relations interpret individual categories related to power in different ways (Pietraś, 2006). A representative of classical realism, Hans Morgenthau, defines power as human control over minds and behaviour of other people. According to Morgenthau, human nature is pluralistic and consists of differently motivated behaviours, desire for power among them (Sułek, 2003). The society, however, introduces many rules and consequently most people are not able to fulfil their desire of gaining power. *Power*, according to him, should

be differentiated from *force* understood as acting with the use of physical violence (Fontana, 1993).

Morgenthau applies the concept of material understanding of power which consists of variable and invariable components. The most permanent are geographical elements, the significance of which, together with the development of communication, becomes limited; natural resources, the most important among which are food and raw materials; industrial potential, military advantage and demographic factors (the number of inhabitants and demographic trends). Subjective sources of power also include the character and morale of the nation, understanding of the extent and willingness to rule, support for the government's actions (Morgenthau, 1948).

On the other hand, John Mearsheimer described power being executed by means of resources possessed by the state. Mearsheimer divides power into potential and real, based on the economic and military power. According to Mearsheimer, military power is crucial for creating hegemony, that is why a state should prepare a strategy in which the ability to achieve a goal plays a major role. Equally important is to prevent other participants of international relations from increasing their power (Mearsheimer, 2001).

The originator of structural realism, Kenneth Waltz, focused mainly on calculating and comparing accumulation of such factors as the size of the population and territory, natural resources, size of the economy, military power, political stability and skills (the level of education and technology).

In his analysis Waltz distinguished three basic levels where international politics takes place: individuals, states, and the international system. At the individual level, a human being pursues power and its actions are directly proportional to its nature and character. At the second level, the behaviour of the state and society is analysed. The international system is arranged anarchically as opposed to hierarchical arrangement of the state, where power is superior. States in the international system wish to maximise their power but they are in relationships with other participants of international relations, which limits their pursuit (Waltz, 1979).

According to Waltz, power is only a means of states' actions, not the goal. The actual goal is security achieved by possessed military capacity. This assumption is questionable especially when the struggle for the growth of power is manifested by an increase in military power, which frightens other participants of the international system. Then there appears the so-called security dilemma which may result from the wrong assessment of the other state's intentions and is the source of misunderstandings and possible conflict. Therefore, the growth of power that was supposed to increase security, contributes to rivalry and creates the conviction in other countries that armament is a necessity.

For Waltz, difficulty in understanding power is to define variability in the structure of the international system. Attempts to explain this problem were made by Robert Jervis and Stephen Ever (Wojciuk, 2010), who came to the conclusion that states strove for ensuring security and maintaining their position only if they were satisfied with their own power. Therefore, striving for power and achieving the level of security is the same thing.

Robert Gilpin, referring to Waltz's theory, put forward solutions explaining changes in the system. He formulated the principle of unequal growth, according to which the main cause of wars was unequal growth of power among states. Distribution of power varies in time and space. As a consequence, it affects relations among states, and occasionally, the basic structure of the international system (Gilpin, 1981).

The power of the state often changes but the system evolves as well. Gilpin enumerates factors the change of which often leads to changes in the system. Environmental factors, changes to communication capacity, progress of technology and military technology and economic changes are of great importance. Participants' motivation is also affected by changes at the systematic level because the distribution of power has enormous influence on the work of the system. According to Gilpin, economic result is conclusive and leads to the change of power.

Gilpin also draws attention to the internal source of changes. The characteristics of the society is a key to understand how the state will respond to opportunities emerging thanks to changes in the environment and shifts in the international distribution of power. When the power of the state grows, it wants to increase its territorial control, political influence and the scale of dominance in the world economy, which in turn results in further growth of power. However, power cannot grow in a linear manner because in that case it would lead to establishing a universal empire. It does not happen due to the existence of forces balancing growth and the state begins to bear the cost of the growth of hegemony.

An interesting concept was put forth by Fareed Zakaria who determined the degree of influence of power on foreign policy. According to Zakaria (1998), rulers do not need to have access to all power resources of the state they rule, but it is important to determine to what extent they can use them. Zakaria believes that foreign policy is conducted by the government, and in this way, created power is at the state's disposal. According to Zakaria, wealth is the main measure of power and having accumulated it, the state wants to attain an appropriate position in international relations.

State power is the function of national power and internal power of the state. The stronger the state is internally, the more national power it can use for its purposes. Internal power of the state has many aspects. Important thing is who defines goals

and what their scope is: are they defined by the state apparatus or the society? The character of the central political apparatus is crucial: what is its access to material resources of the nation, what is the scale of centrally taken decisions on the growth of power and the influence of competition among administration members? Finally, is this state coherent, autonomous or divided, permeated with antagonistic social interests? (Zakaria, 1998).

## **Liberal and neoliberal theories**

Liberalism presented a slightly different view of power functioning. Its republican school paid particular attention to the fact that democratic states are more peaceful than authoritarian ones because potential war must be accepted by the society. In commercial neoliberalism it is emphasised that by exchange states create interdependence which prevents wars between them. Simultaneously, trade enables states to increase their power by means of economic growth, not war.

Normative neoliberalism puts emphasis on patterns regulating behaviours of states towards one another. This trend in neoliberalism points to deliberate human actions aimed at regulating the international relations sphere and ensuring peace (Wojciuk, 2010).

In its approach to power the most interesting theses are proposed by institutional neoliberalism. Representatives of this trend concentrate on the way in which states can achieve their own goals and, at the same time, impose limitations on the power of individual countries. Its most prominent representative – Robert Keohane – believed that the basic cause of conflict among states was the way they used resources of power. He emphasised that it was easy for the state to use its military and economic power. Interests of states are shaped by institutions which, in turn, influence their opinions. Institutions offer new solutions and benefits, and in this way change the perception of national interest (Barnett & Duvall, 2005).

International regimes constitute a factor being an intermediary between the elements of the structure of the international system. The international system becomes more complex, but the growth of resources does not have to lead to the growth of power.

States also operate through institutions which affect the co-operation between states, and simultaneously protect from the risk that the actors of international relations will be deceived.

Nye and Keohane propose creating a model of complex interdependence. According to the model, there exist various channels, including informal ones,

which connect the society, government, international organisations or corporations. These channels may be of traditional character (according to realists), but also of transnational character.

An invariable hierarchy between different fields of international relations does not exist. Therefore, military relations and security aspects do not necessarily dominate, and military power is increasingly less important in achieving political aims. Although survival dominates in the state's goals, the range of security has broadened and, as a result, states can concentrate their efforts on different areas of politics.

For neoliberals it is important to determine resources, interdependences and co-operation within international organisations. Institutions provide states with information concerning the expectations of other entities ready to co-operate. They facilitate long-term co-operation and reduce insecurity considerably. This contributes to reducing international anarchy to a great extent (Cooper, 2005).

Neoliberals also analysed the issue of the substitution of power resources. They concentrated on the way fields and use of resources of one kind can be combined in order to give results in a different field. Representatives of the trend place great emphasis on the principle of non-substitution of power resources. If military power, according to realists, increases the state's capacity of interaction and may replace economy and other resources of power, it is unlikely, according to liberals. For Keohane and Nye, interchangeability of power is quite limited. States with military advantage can rarely, and at great costs, use it in order to force other states to change their economic policy. Economic advantage gives little chance of introducing changes in other sectors of competition by means of economic resources. This means that the resources used in another sphere lose part of their effectiveness (Nye, 2008).

Keohane and Nye believe that the most important is the strategy of binding. The researchers drew attention to the fact that after World War II military power loses its significance. On the other hand, the one that is able to control resources and build strategic bindings in order to make an impact and achieve the intended goal, derives benefits. Therefore, it is important to create such a behaviour that will make using the strategy of binding possible and help to protect states from the influence of others, which in the era of interdependence is important for building power. Rivalry for power in the world of complex interdependences is about creating and preventing strategies of binding different elements of power. States try to manipulate in the fields where they have an advantage and avoid being manipulated in the fields where they are relatively weaker (Keohane & Nye, 1977).

In order to clarify the phenomenon of power diffusion, Nye divided it into three parts. In the first layer – military – the state dominates; in the second

layer – economy – power is dispersed and others should be taken into account in the decision-making process. The third group includes transnational relations where the game takes place beyond the control of governments and power is dispersed. The main reason for diffusion is information revolution. Thanks to it, corporations, but also terrorist groups, get hold of part of the power available through states. They can encourage public opinion to show hostility towards own or other states or actions conducted by them. The state can hardly balance that because in case of terrorists, nuclear deterrence does not work. What is worse, terrorists may obtain nuclear weapon and, as they operate beyond legal rules, take actions, the consequences of which are difficult to predict.

Nye's concept was reflected in Walter Russel Mead's work, which added *stick power* to the catalogue of hard and soft power. According to Mead, economic power is sticky because at first it attracts other states and gives them benefits of co-operation, but further on makes them dependent and the model of economic changes becomes impossible (Mead, 2004).

The issue connected with the definition of power was also discussed by Stefano Guzzini who proposed separating the understanding of power into its proper form, related to the operating entity, and the one that should concern structural effects, unrelated to the operating entity. The first concept concerned the entity operating on the international arena, in this case it referred to *power*. The latter concerned functioning on the systematic level where it is more appropriate to use the term *governance* (Guzzini, 1993).

Governance can be defined as inter-subjective (shared by many entities) abilities to produce effects. It concerns both constructing political options and the usual methods of political mobilization influencing social relations. Practices quoted by him refer to effects of interaction among entities as well as rituals and customs. The power of ritual is, to a great extent, based on the potential of symbols and their social context. The form and emotional involvement of people in political rituals is a key to their power.

According to Guzzini, soft power is not concerned with the conversion of power, which is the case of military or economic power because they have direct impact on the processes of political negotiations and actual influence on achieving final results. Moreover, power has different forms and that is why one should take into account the problem of power being dependent on a given place and specificity of the problem (Guzzini, 2000).

James N. Rosenau criticized Nye's concept emphasising its inability to understand resources. Rosenau claimed that possessing resources of power is only one of its aspects and that the power the state has becomes the subject of meaningful

evaluation only to the degree to which other actors of the international arena react (Rosenau, 1980).

D.A. Baldwin agreed with the above statement claiming that the power resources possessed by the state are important, but equally important is transforming these resources into actual influence on the results of political negotiation processes (Baldwin, 1989). In the course of the negotiation process such factors as diplomatic ability and communication power bring results which are in opposition with predictions based only on traditional power indicators. Therefore, in order to understand results of political processes, more attention should be paid to the process in the time when resources are transformed into effective influence on the results. In this way, resources may be considered to be a structural aspect of international relations whereas power itself is much more dynamic (Baldwin, 2016).

Many scientists emphasise the conflict aspect of power. Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan (1950) define it as a process of influencing politics of others in such a way that it is in line with their expectations.

Marshall Singer distinguishes between power and force, considering power to be the ability to take actions resulting from possessed material and psychological resources, but also other factors. *Force* is understood as the ability to use power effectively whereas *strength* as a synonym of using power. Power is used here as a certain potential and resource whereas force as using power in practice (Singer, 1972).

The problem of distinguishing between alleged and applied power was clearly noticed by Klaus Knorr. He assumed that if power was treated as the ability to make impact on other entities, it was necessary to determine two ways of understanding this concept. The term that he applied – ‘realized power’ – refers to visible changes in the behaviour of a particular participant of international relations. ‘Alleged power’ constitutes potential ability to make impact and instigate other entities to change their behaviour (Knorr, 1970).

An interesting concept of understanding the substance of power was proposed by Raymond Aron who clearly distinguishes between *force* and *puissance*. To Aron, power means military, economic and moral resources. Power refers to initiating these forces in particular conditions and for particular purposes. The same force produces another power in different circumstances, in the time of peace or war (Aron, 1995).

According to Aron, it is possible to measure force but it is difficult to do so in case of power. Potential force means all material, human and moral resources. Genuine force means these resources which were mobilized. During the war the genuine force is army, but in the time of peace military forces are not an indicator of power.

Aron determines three components of *puissance*: occupied space, sufficient resources, and knowledge – which allows processing resources into armament



or another means of pressure or persuasion, the size of population and ability to transform it into soldiers. Also, another important aspect is the ability to take mass actions, which includes organisation of the army and discipline of the participants of the fight, both military and civilian leadership; solidarity of citizens in the time of trial, the ability to make an impact and resisting influence and pressure. The concept of puissance may not be an absolute measure as it is shaped in relation to other political units.

### **Other theories: radicalism and postmodernity**

The radical stream encompasses the theory of the world system by Immanuel Wallerstein. According to Wallerstein, power is in the hands of the empire and it serves its interests. The state's power is not crucial because states constitute only part of the world system and their sovereignty is limited by the place occupied in this system. Power in this approach is classical in this sense that states are entitled to it. It is determined by the place a given state has in the system. Wealthy states occupy central position whereas poorer states marginal one.

For Wallerstein, all states are similar entities and all are involved in the division and pursuit of profits. According to Wallerstein, profit of one state means loss of another. As a consequence, every profit means growth of power. Power in the world empire system belongs to the centre and is used, e.g., for conducting economic policy. The model of the global system helps to notice that international politics can be understood only in the context of the structures of global capitalism. This structure is a hidden world system, organised in accordance with the rules of global capitalism (Czaputowicz, 2007).

Another interesting approach to power is demonstrated in postmodern ideas of Michel Foucault. This researcher believes that a discourse created by the procedures of exclusion, i.e., excluding some voices from the public life, is important in the scope of power. The discourse is, in a way, an act of violence, where binding knowledge and authority is important, which constitutes an important tool for achieving power. An ideal example is interpreting history which always comes from winners (Wojciuk, 2010). According to Foucault, force is a relation of human and material resources, the way they are used by means of a doctrine, organisation, purpose and will, which helps to survive in a difficult situation. Force should be considered in comparison with a potential opponent.

Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2005), in their work entitled *Empire*, came to the conclusion that power should be identified as functioning in a new order

which is not based on the state but on the so-called Empire where borders and territory do not matter. It is not an empire functioning according to classical rules but a completely new form of global sovereignty where power is of net-like character, belongs to some national states and capitalist corporations and transnational institutions. The empire in this form combines postmodern and Marxist ideas, adding others for understanding the substance of contemporary power (Hardt & Negri, 2005).

The empire is a post-modern power changing existing antagonisms into a consensus. It is shaped by means of the ability to convince that it serves peace and law. To Hardt and Negri, postmodern power finds its place in the sphere of discourse. Postmodern power differs from the classical one in the sense that it must be ready to react at any moment in the most peripheral areas of the world. The power, apart from consensual moral legitimization, broadly uses the economic discourse and production relations, and takes place in the net, not within hierarchical structures.

Modern power is softer in the sense that it operates without antagonizing and managing conflict. Postmodern authority is of net-like character and concerns the strongest entities whose centre is often impossible to identify. As a consequence, the borders between what is outside and inside become blurred, nets disappear and re-appear. Postmodern power must be of net-like character in order to fight a net enemy. According to Hardt and Negri (2005), today only net power is able to define the international order and maintain it. A characteristic feature of such power is inability to control it from one centre.

## Conclusion

A great number of definitions of power, briefly presented here, indicate that this concept is not clearly defined, which causes terminological chaos. One should accept, though, that force as opposed to power always tries to make an impact on another participant of international relations, to get them to do something even if they do not want to. Therefore, it is not a hypothetical possibility and its size depends on its usefulness in a given time and place.

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