

## THE CONCEPT OF POWER IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

**Col.assoc.prof. Dorel BUȘE\*, Ph.D.**  
"Carol I" National Defence University

*The concept of power has long been debated by most academic fields, be it sociology, political science or international politics. The main goal of the political life, no matter if we talk about the national or international environment, has always been to pursue, gain and maintain the political power. In international relations, power is at the same time, an end in itself and a means of achieving other objectives.*

**Keywords:** power; centre of power; balance of power; global power; niche power; emerging power; sources of power.

Power, as a concept, has great semantic amplitude, and is used for an extremely diverse area of the social, economic, military etc. situations. Most definitions have in common an actor's ability to exercise influence over another, and, in this respect, one of the most accurate definitions is the one given by Robert A. Dahl, who sees the power as "the ability to make others do what they otherwise would not do", but this can only happen if that actor has the ability to do so, in other words if it has a potential. Traditionally, the power potential was estimated by adding human and economic resources, territory, the size and quality of military forces<sup>1</sup>. Thus, power is not an abstract notion, but a concrete, very dynamic and very complex concept. Sometimes, power means wealth and the ability to gain wealth, but some other times, power is only one vector. In fact, the power of states is a sum of vectors of power, an assembly of these.

The decisive factor for the dynamics of the contemporary international system determines states, as actors with a determining role, to rapidly react to changes, but especially to determine the desired content and direction through

---

\* e-mail: [dorel\\_buse@yahoo.com](mailto:dorel_buse@yahoo.com)

<sup>1</sup> Teodor Frunzeti, Dorel Bușe, *Relații internaționale*, "Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest, 2011, p. 147.

initiative and determination, according to their interests and possibilities. The concepts defining the dynamics of the state action and their effects are based on power, an engine that allows controlling others' will and actions.<sup>2</sup> Derived through developing the concept, the political power brings the psychological relationship example to state level, by shifting from brute force to threat by force, with specially designed for this purpose power tools. It rises above the military power by keeping the dominating psychological element as a threshold that ensures superiority by avoiding contact.<sup>3</sup> The history of international relations has shown, through multiple examples, that states have converted the power capital into various tools and actions with specific purposes, closely linked to their fundamental interests on the basis of the four distinctions of power mentioned by Hans Morgenthau<sup>4</sup>.

The concept of power has long been debated by most fields, be it sociology, political science or international politics. The main goal of political life, no matter if we talk about the national or international environment, has always been to pursue, gain and maintain the political power. Hence, all political actors define their action strategy in relation with this main goal. In international relations, "power is, at the same time, an end in itself and a means of achieving other objectives."<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, the main actor of the international politics, which is the state, also has as its main purpose the gaining and amplification of power. Max Weber defined the concept of power as "*the probability that one actor within a social relationship to be in a position to promote their own will despite resistance.*"<sup>6</sup> From the same perspective of viewing power as a state's ability to impose its will over another, Alvin Toffler believed that "*power involves the use of violence, wealth and knowledge to make people act in a given direction.*"

Hence, Alvin Toffler, in his *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century*, defined the concept of *centre of power* and characterized competitors in the new security environment edification process, taking into account the following vectors that project power at international level: the military potential, the economic and financial capabilities, scientific, technical and information potential available to them. Moreover, there must be added the demographic potential, the territory, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politica între națiuni. Lupta pentru putere și lupta pentru pace*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p.69

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>5</sup> Teodor Frunzeti, *Geostrategie*, Centrul Tehnic-Editorial al Armatei Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> Carlsnaes de Walter, Thomas Risse, Beth A. Simmons, *Handbook of international relations*, SAGE Publication, London, California, New Delhi, 2005, p. 180.

geographic position and the neighbours, natural resources and, last but not least, the dynamism and the ability to make timely decisions and turn them into facts / actual actions, leading to the established end and with the vision of previous evolutions. Of course, the dynamism of a centre of power also includes other factors of which we mention the following: internal cohesion, main psychosocial characteristics, leaders' (civilian and military) personality and professionalism, the ideology of the ruling political forces, the involvement and reaction of the population and opinion makers in decision making, the principles and possibilities of media involvement / commitment, the degree of protection from pressure / external interferences, social, ethnic and religious homogeneity, self-confidence and the perception of others, etc..<sup>7</sup> Drawing upon the interpretation of history, we can easily notice how the international system was often the result of the actions of great European, and later, world powers. Thus, the birth of the modern state is the result of the convergence of European powers actions, which will initiate a system of power balance with which to stop the gain of power by hegemony. In the same way, the 19<sup>th</sup> century experiences a new attempt of the European powers to control the destructive effects of a state's use of power by adopting, in liberal spirit, the concept of *international governance*.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century is witness to the entry on the international stage of a political actor whose power would help shape the current international system, namely, the USA. Theoretically, the concept of power was ignored in the U.S. think-tanks from the beginning of the twentieth century. Thus, classical legalistic thinking that characterizes North America in this period emphasized the importance and ability of international institutions to regulate relations between states, without, of course, ignoring the existence of the conflict<sup>8</sup>. The representatives of this thought, like Elihu Root, and the American Secretaries of State of this period, Richard Olney and Philander Knox, did not consider the concept of power as essential to the study of international relations. Instead, they put emphasis on the international law ability to become a neutral and apolitical space for solving international disputes.<sup>9</sup> The experience of the League of Nations failure and the outbreak of World War II demonstrated the clear link between power, international law and state behaviour, a link that the classical legalism representatives had failed to notice. In this context, realism would place the concept of power as essential for understanding states behaviour. Choosing

---

<sup>7</sup> Vasile Paul, Ion Coșcodaru, *Centrele de putere ale lumii*, Social and Political Sciences Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> Richard H. Steinberg, Jonathan M. Zasloff, *Power and International Law*, in „The American Journal of International Law”, Vol. 100, No.1, Jan. 2006, pp. 64-66.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

the primacy of power and the necessity of coercion, realists consider the international legal frame to be just another place to continue national policies<sup>10</sup>, because international law does nothing more than reflecting the interests of the powerful states, and the international system is only the result of the balancing of these centres of power.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the concept of power, in international relations, has gained a great theoretical importance with the release of the realist and, later, the neorealist thought. In order to understand the importance of power, Morgenthau used a psychological understanding of power, so that it was defined as the human ability to control the minds and actions of other people.<sup>12</sup> Designed in the political environment, for Morgenthau, power becomes "a psychological relationship between those who exercise it and those on which it is exercised".<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a strong relationship between those powerful states that succeed in pursuing their interests by exercising control over other countries is also established at international level. Also, Morgenthau mentions the necessity of distinguishing between the political power of a state or a leader and the ability to use physical violence.<sup>14</sup>

From the same perspective, Barry Buzan, in his *People, State, And Fear*, distinguishes between strong states and weak states, taking into consideration not only the military capacity, but also other factors such as economics or the socio-political cohesion degree.<sup>15</sup> In this respect, a state power is also the result of its ability to ensure the survival of individuals, of its values and interests.<sup>16</sup> The states interests, as Morgenthau mentions, is defined in terms of power so that the concept of power will become defining for international relations because it is causing all the mutual relations between states in the international system<sup>17</sup>. Thus, international relations are actually defined as power relations between the nation states of the international system.<sup>18</sup> Once with the inauguration of realism and the primacy of the concept of power, politics becomes a sphere independent of the economy, religion or other fields.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the statesmen actions are

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 73.

<sup>12</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> Barry Buzan, *Popoarele, statele și teama – o agendă pentru studii de securitate internațională în epoca de după Războiul Rece*, Cartier Publishing House, Chișinău, 2000, p. 106

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Andrei Miroiu, Radu Sebastian Ungureanu (coord.), *Manual de relații internaționale*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 101

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

guided by the need to maximize power, relating to other states,<sup>20</sup> in order to ensure the state security and survival, its values and interests.

A similar view that had long preceded the realist perception of state behaviour, was the one developed by Cardinal Richelieu, France's prime minister from 1624-1642, who elaborated an essential idea on politics that put the concept of *raison d'Etat* at the roots of every state action and that determined the evolution of the international system.<sup>21</sup> The state interest was promoted by the adoption of certain decisions aimed at maximizing the power in relation with the other states in the international system. Morgenthau puts the basis of this new paradigm, a basis that includes the six basic principles of realism. These principles place the nation-state at the roots of the international politics, which in turn is dominated by objective laws derived from the selfish and dominated by the desire for power human nature.<sup>22</sup> Hence, Morgenthau believes that states are involved, on the international politics stage, in a constant competition for power, taking into account, obviously, that not all actions taken on the international stage are political.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the realistic paradigm defines the relationship between states as being characterized by a power struggle to defend the interests, bringing states actions out of the moral sphere.<sup>24</sup> Those who followed to this paradigm, J. K. Waltz and Mearsheimer, were to put the basis of neorealism. If for Morgenthau and thinkers such as Th. Hobbes, Spinoza or J.J. Rousseau, the causes of war were motivated by the imperfect human nature dominated by the desire to seek power, for Waltz, the states system is subject to the adjusting effect of its structure.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is introduced the concept of *power structure*, that can be understood as a certain distribution of power within the international system at a given time. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer consider that the world of states is an anarchic one, in which they seek to survive, power becoming not an end in itself but a means of survival.<sup>26</sup> In what concerns the universal moral principles invoked to characterize the actions of states, Waltz argues a state leader has to choose between "behaving immorally in the international politics to defend the country and to get rid of the moral obligation to ensure the survival of the state, to pursue a preferred conduct in the international politics "<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, the leaders of a state are

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 101.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>24</sup> Andrei Miroiu, Radu Sebastian Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 128.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 135.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth Waltz, *Omul, statul și războiul*, Institutul European Publishing House, Iași, 2001, p. 211.

entitled to act *immorally*, if these actions are necessary for ensuring the survival of the state.<sup>28</sup> But, if for Waltz, the anarchic structure of the system "encourages states to seek to maintain the balance of power,"<sup>29</sup> Mearsheimer's *offensive* neorealism argues that states, in their fight for survival, have the main advantage of the offensive military capability through which they maximize their power in relating to potential competitors<sup>30</sup>: "The greater the military advantage one state has over other states, the more secure it is."<sup>31</sup> Also, Mearsheimer considers that conflicts are more frequent in a multipolar world in which asymmetries of power are defining.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Mearsheimer states that the international politics is a brutal stage on which "states are permanently involved in a fight for power, in which each state wants to become the most powerful, but also to prevent others to get a higher position."<sup>33</sup> Waltz believes that the international law is not a neutral and apolitical institution, but that, under the rule of power, it can be defined only by knowing the powerful states interests.<sup>34</sup>

The precursors of this structural realism, Jack Goldsmith and Eric Posner, abandon this sharp vision on the international system, adopting the idea that the international law results from the coincidence of the powerful states interests or from the exercise of the powerful states coercion.<sup>35</sup> The concept of power faces an important change in its approach with publication of Harold Lasswell and Abraham Kaplan's *Power and Society*<sup>36</sup>, in 1950, which transforms power from a resource to a relationship. Thus, defining power as a relationship, through this concept we understand an A actor's ability to modify, at least in part, the behaviour of a B actor.

The most important concept in international relations and an instrument vigorously promoted by the representatives of the realist paradigm is the *balance of power*. Although this concept was inaugurated with the Westphalian state system formation and officially recognized by the Peace of Utrecht (1713), we can identify its underlying principles starting with the antiquity - Thucydides having used these principles to explain the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War, and David Hume having written an essay on this

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 216.

<sup>29</sup> Andrei Miroiu, Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>31</sup> John Mearshiemer, *The False Promise of International Institutions*, in "International Security", Vol 19, No. 3, Winter 1994-1995, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Andrei Miroiu, Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu, *op.cit.*, p. 132.

<sup>33</sup> John Mearshiemer, *The False Promise of ...*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Richard H. Steinberg, Jonathan M. Zasloff, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 75.

<sup>36</sup> Carlsnaes de Walter, Thomas Risse, Beth A. Simmons, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

theme in the eighteenth century, to be best encoded by the representatives of realism and neorealism<sup>37</sup>. Morgenthau defines the *balance of power* as a balance between forces that dominate the international system, and which, as in fields such as physics, biology, economics or political science, means "*stability in a system composed of several independent forces*"<sup>38</sup>. Morgenthau also defines two models of the balance of power behaviour, namely the model of direct opposition, where the balance results directly from the desire of each nation to impose its policies on the other, and the competition model, where the balance of power helps small nations to maintain their independence<sup>39</sup>. According to Hedly Bull, the balance of power is defined as a "state of facts in which no power is in a dominant position and cannot make the law for the others."<sup>40</sup> Consequently, the balance of power can be defined as an even distribution of power in the system. Apart from this perspective, the balance of power must be seen as equilibrium. Thus, the balance of power is not permanent and has a strong changing character, power being constantly redeployed within the international system<sup>41</sup>. Consequently, the balance of power, which is more an attribute of the international system, adapts to the changes that occur within the power structure in the system<sup>42</sup>.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Buzan Barry, *Popoarele, statele și teama – o agendă pentru studii de securitate internațională în epoca de după Războiul Rece*, Cartier Publishing House, Chișinău, 2000.
- Frunzeti Teodor, *Geostrategie*, Army Editorial Technical Center, Bucharest, 2009.
- Frunzeti Teodor, Bușe Dorel, *Relații internaționale*, "Carol I" National Defense University, Bucharest, 2011.
- Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politica între națiuni. Lupta pentru putere și lupta pentru pace*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007.
- Mearshiemer John, *The False Promise of International Institutions*, in "International Security", Vol. 19.

---

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 182.

<sup>38</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 208-211.

<sup>40</sup> Hedly Bull, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

<sup>41</sup> Andrei Miroiu, Radu-Sebastian Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 201.

Miroiu Andrei, Ungureanu Radu Sebastian (eds.), *Manual de relații internaționale*, Polirom Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006.

Paul Vasile, Coșcodaru Ion, *Centrele de putere ale lumii*, Editura Științelor Sociale și Politice, Bucharest, 2003.

Steinberg Richard H., Zasloff Jonathan M., *Power and International Law* in "The American Journal of International Law", Vol 100, No.1, Jan. In 2006.

Walter Carlsnaes de Risse, Thomas Simmons, Beth A., *Handbook of International Relations*, SAGE Publication, London, California, New Delhi, 2005.

Waltz Kenneth, *Omul, statul și războiul*, European Institute Publishing House, Iași, 2001.