

**A BRIEF APPROACH OF THE SYSTEM
OF POWER: *POWER AND POWERS***

TEODORA ALEXANDRU*

STEFANA BIRO

DIANA CIOCAN

Abstract. *This paper explores the main changes in the evolution of the international system of power, considering the role of world (great or small) powers and of the principle of the balance of power in the international relations and in diplomacy. Also, new concepts concerning the system of power in the nowadays international changes are discussed, concepts like mental map, failed state, rhizoidal power and the idea of power versus powers.*

Keywords: *balance of power, collective security, self-determination, great power, Martin Wight, mental map, failed state, rhizoidal power.*

The power system and its development

The international politics can be explained on the basis of the balance of power which involves criteria such as the moral importance and the material force of the powers. The first recording regarding the power equilibrium appears in the “Memorials” of Philippe de Commyes, Louis XVI minister. In his work, he actually describes the patterns of the power.

Balance of power is the principle of the power policy mechanics and it leads to potential military considerations, diplomatic initiative and economic force. It is a vague and ambiguous concept, because of its varied meanings and because of the different situations in which it appears. For example, it can be discussed when a power attacks another one and destroys it, and the third one, experiencing the threat from the first power, helps the second one; or when a power is coveted by both parties. In conclusion, when a power grows, the other ones will unite against it.

The modern European political history showed over the time that the weakest agent must not be destroyed by the union of the strongest. When the interests of a power change, so are the alliances between states, like Great Britain, Spain, Austria

* MA student graduated University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Department of European Studies, alexandru_teodora25@yahoo.com.

and France alliances. The partnerships between powers constantly changed, and stopped once with the French Revolution in 1789.

There are five ways to define the balance of power: a uniform distribution of the power, a situation in which no power is such predominant so that it can endanger the other ones; the power should be equitably distributed; it works by the principle that my part should have the kind of force limit that it can remove the danger coming from the distribution of power; the existing distribution of power; maintaining of the balance; the inerrant international policy tends to produce an equal distribution of power .

Toynbee defines the balance of power as a dynamic political system which enters this game every time a society divides into a number of local states that are independent in a mutual way.¹

Often, the balance of power as a law is connected with the balance of power as policy. It represents the policy through which more powers follow their defending instinct.

Martin Wight identifies a much visible similarity between the balance of power and a chess game than with a balance itself.²

The role of a state to maintain the power equilibrium in the relations between two or more states varies depending on the level of power that the concerning state exerts at an international level. If the power that interferes is weaker than each of the playing powers, then that power owns the role of a mediator. If, on the contrary, the power is bigger or stronger than the powers in game, it tends to become the judge or arbiter.³ It is the case of Great Britain which, on one hand, tried to distribute a balance between the powers of Europe, and on the other hand obtained the maritime area hegemony, which demonstrates that the mediator role can take the form of an advantage.

In Europe, the balance of power has reached a result by the end of the Second World War. The power balance can be considered an instrument for stability and at the same time the cause of the war, but, the history demonstrates in the majority of cases that the balance of power helped preventing the war.

Powers

Power politics refers to the relationship between independent sovereign powers, those relations being continuous and organized (political, economic, diplomatic, commercial, of war and peace relations).⁴

This organization and equity between independent powers represent the modern states' system. The system enters in force around the end of the sixteenth century. When the medieval Christianity disappeared, the effect to control the social, economic, cultural and political life minimized as well. This is the circumstance in which the sovereign modern state appears. Power is a sovereign modern state.

¹ Midlarsky, Manus, *Handbook of war studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 28.

² Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, Published by ARC, 1998, p. 176.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 185.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 31.

The Middle Age system tended to focus more on the whole than on the part. Religious loyalty, the King being God's representative and messenger on Earth, were ideas that dominated the political mentality of that time.

A power is composed and classified by its population size, its strategic position, the geographic extension, the economic resources and the industrial production.⁵

These can be followed by elements such as administrative and financial effectiveness, whose significance can be decisive in difficult moments in international politics.

There are two expressions of power: hard power, which is the ability to persuade others to act as you wish, against their own will, using threats and rewards. In such circumstances armament is used. Soft power works to convince the others to act according to your will when they are also interested to do so. More results are achieved through attractive persuasion than through force.⁶

(Hard) Powers

The myriad of efforts concerning the gaining of supremacy in the interstate's relationships may be seen as the main international history's issue that the great powers have been coping with. For instance, Spain was known as the first dominant power that attained the supremacy on sea, as well as on ground. Spain's reputation of dominant power started once the Habsburg King came into the Austrian's possessions. The next title of dominant power over the continent belonged to France, in the nineteenth century, followed by the Great Britain, well known for its economic and maritime supremacy and later on, at the end of the 20th century, Germany built a greater navy that would defeat the British one.⁷

Two dominant international powers showed up in the 17th century: The Western Europe was marked by the growing of France, Great Britain, Italy and Spain, and the Eastern side of Europe, the Baltic area, was influenced by the power of Russia and Poland.

These power relationships changed constantly over the time, because of different factors. These mutations led to frequent transformations among the power system.

A general definition outlined by Martin Wight shows that the dominant power is the power that has the ability to measure its strength against all of its rivals.⁸ Every single dominant power not only wishes a territorial growth, but it also shows interest in unity and international solidarity projects and it will aspire to become an universal empire.⁹ We should mention Hitler's politics in this respect. Also, the languages spread worldwide, are those of the most populated and powerful states.

The status of "great power" was established during the Congress of Vienna, in 1815. The most important effect of the international conference was the

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

⁶ <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/4290.html>, retrieved at 15.05.2012.

⁷ Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, Published by ARC, 1998, p. 38.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 44.

abandoning of the old order among suzerains, which meant that the empires, the kingdoms and the Republics were no longer being perceived and treated differently on a diplomatic scale.¹⁰ The meeting also facilitated the replacement of the old system based on traditions with a new one, based on the balance of powers.¹¹

The great powers would justify their actions as a way of strengthening the peace and security all over the world. In that sense, the classification made by Clemenceau during the Paris Peace Conference remains famous. He categorized the states into powers with general interests, which was the case of the great powers, and the powers with limited interests, the rest of them.¹² The great powers' general interests are supported by their capacity of force and military power, which every big power ready to start a war has to afford. Martin Wight says that the great powers were once dominant powers, now in decline and that every power aspires to regain the status of dominant power.¹³

There are many circumstances in which a power can grow or diminish, the war being the most common situation of changing statuses. Usually, by defeating another big power, a state will acquire the title of "big power". This happened to USA when the state became a great power after it won the Spanish-American War, in 1898. The war ended up with some privileges on USA's side, like its expanding control over Cuba and indefinite authority over Puerto Rico and the Philippines. But in the same manner, a great power could lose its status, by sustaining a defeat in a war. It is Sweden's case, which stopped being a great power after the loss suffered by the war against Russia, in 1809.

There is difficult to find a certain definition that would stand for all the cases of great power, but Martin Wight provided us in his book, "Power Politics" with the specific components of a great power: the number of population, the territorial expansion, the industrial resources, the social organization, a certain historical tradition and the will to grow.

The Prussian historian, Heinrich von Treitschke affirms that a state would be defined as a great power if its total destruction involved a coalition of other states in order to accomplish that destructive mission.¹⁴

Martin Wight listed Russia, Great Britain, France, China and USA among the greatest global powers immediately after the Second World War. In what concerns the 20th century, the representatives are USA, Great Britain, Japan, France, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Austria and Russia.

The great powers detained the priority to occupy a place in the Council of the League of Nations, which was the second League's organ after the Assembly, which was composed of the representatives of all the member states. The main purpose of the Council was to make from great powers, responsible states.

¹⁰ Willner, Mark, Hero, George, *The Ancient World to the Age of Revolution*, Barron's Educational Series, 2006, p. 520.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/parispeaceconf_clemenceau.htm, retrieved at 27.04.2012.

¹³ Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, Published by ARC, 1998, p. 57.

¹⁴ Treitschke von Heinrich, *Politics*, vol. II, London, 1916, p. 607 *apud* Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, Published by ARC, 1998, p. 60.

The great powers had the tendency to minimize their number and to boost their dimensions.¹⁵ This phenomenon happened due to the expansion of the European powers at a global scale.

The collocation “mondial power” refers to that kind of state that has interests all over the world, the kind of state that can exert inside the Europe’s borders a force that is derived from its external, noneuropean resources. For instance, Hitler thought about Germany that it would either become a mondial power, or it should disappear. Fortunately, Germany failed, after the both World Wars, to become a global power in the way that Hitler intended it to be. The expansion of Industrial Revolution inside The Great Britain constitutes another example of how an European country impacted the non- European civilizations, like the African territories or the Islamic regions that were largely exploited.

Francis Bacon confesses that the one who possesses the sea is in great freedom and he can take part to a war, as much or as little as he wishes, whereas the strongest on the continent are most commonly found in a tight corner.¹⁶

A sea power managed to live in tight connection with the most parts of the globe, while a continental power remained stuck with the areas around it or it had to depend on the other countries’ agreement to cross their territories.

Wight tackles Mackinder’s idea which supports the fact that the sea superiority of a state depends on its territorial advantages. Mackinder explains how the maritime force cannot be expanded unless there is a solid territorial base, that involves a certain capacity of economic and human resources.¹⁷ In Mackinder’s opinion, there is much chance for the continental powers to cope with the sea powers than the reverse of the situation. For example, during the Peloponnesian war, Sparta, the continental power, built a navy with which defeated Athens, the naval empire. Mackinder supports the theory that the sea power’s triumph in the First World War was accidental.¹⁸ From Wight’s point of view, Mackinder’s theory is superficial because he supported his arguments with old examples that have no relevance in the actual context.¹⁹ Moreover, the World War II confirmed that the air power has become the most important force for a state.

Minor Powers

Most of the states are minor powers.²⁰

They distinguish each other in terms of force — there are minor forces close to the power of the great forces, but there are also powers without military force, as in the case of Costa Rica and Luxembourg. The high and persistent culture

¹⁵ Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, published by ARC, 1998, p. 62.

¹⁶ Montagu, Basil, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, Pickering, London, 1834, pp. 107-108 apud Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, Published by ARC, 1998, p. 77.

¹⁷ Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, published by ARC, 1998, pp. 82-86.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 69.

was also produced by small political entities, for instance, Geneva, in the sixteenth century or Switzerland in the 19-20th century.

Some minor powers for Europe will be perceived by other societies as great powers. Saudi Arabia and Iraq are dominating the Islam area, as well as South Africa shows its significance for the Sub-Saharan Africa. Small powers usually belong to Asia, Africa and Latin America. Their role in the international system is limited.²¹

The system of power suffered lately many changes in the international relations. New concepts dominate it, concepts like failed state, mental map or soft power.

*The concepts of failed state, mental map
and symbolic soft power*

A failed state, in the contemporary society, is a form of political organization which is not capable or does not want to accomplish its obligations as a national state.

The characteristics of this kind of states are: poor institutions, absence of democratic debates, the juridical is not independent, being derived for the executive, the bureaucracy represents the cause of the oppression of citizens, infrastructure destruction, poverty, illiteracy, insecurity growth, corruption, the failure of controlling the national suburbs, refugees and involuntary movement of populations.

The main problem of the failed states is the long term politics inefficiency. This causes internal conflicts: tension, collapse, power disproof, regional instability. It seems that preventing the failure of a state is more favorable than the post conflict intervention. However, there have been many situations when avoiding the failure was extremely difficult even for the United Nations (see Afghanistan, Iraq).

A mental map is a mental structure in a constant adaptation, used by a person to obtain, codify, reuse, reorganize and apply information in their thoughts or actions about some circumstances in a society. These maps are used when making political decisions, serving as orientation systems.

Geopolitics representations are different depending their own images or mental maps. For politicians, the configuration of the representations will determinate the conversion of the interests in concrete geopolitical projects.

The geographical position of a state can be fixed, stabilized by the nature forces and expresses by natural marks. What about the geopolitical position? It is variable, depending on socio- economical and political factors. To identify its geopolitical position the state has to elaborate this mental map presenting the evaluations regarding its position and role, the force relationship with the neighbors, the regional context in which the international society activate and its primer coordinates.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 74.

Therefore, when we set the geopolitical position we must consider that we actually build a picture/ an image of the present and active forces, the basic targets of the global actors.

When setting the geopolitical location of a state we must consider elements like: the points of interest of the great powers in the analyzed area and the impact of their actions, the states hierarchy in the area, the basic cultural and spiritual values in the area, the relation with the great powers and the security vision.

The symbolic power is the oldest type of power. The most relevant example, the Church, pretended to be all-powerful, but has proven incapable in solving a lot of problems. It threw itself in the arms of military powers. Therefore the biggest symbolic power movement is the substitution of the religious power with the nation-state.

Power vs. Powers

Nowadays, most of the world's powers are organized in alliances, in organization, in order to ease the process of cooperation and of mutual help and assistance. This system of power seems to be the one that establishes and coordinates the international relations and politics in these days. But, even though the powers that take part of an organization are supposed to have the same status, rights and obligations, it is observed that in practice the game of power is not that stable as it should be.

This is caused by the fact that the powers inside an organization are not equally strong. Every organization confronts itself with the interest of some members which put themselves on a superior level.

The dichotomy power-powers is still striking in today's international relations and politics. Even though the past events confirmed the necessity of the international organizations, as the most appropriate forms for cooperation and sustainable development for the world's nations, the countries are still following strategies in their own interest, often neglecting the ones of the entire organization, in which they take part.

Two most relevant examples are offered by NATO and the European Union.

In NATO, the impact and relevance of the United States' politics on the entire organization are obvious. No decision in the organization is taken without considering the Americans' strategies and goals. USA is still considered a great power inside NATO, even though there are also other powers in this organization and this idea of power versus powers in the international relations is still an important coordinate.

The same situation can be discussed in the case of the European Union. Although it is an organization based on the principles of cooperation and mutual assistance and respect, the power is unequally distributed and some members have more advantages than others and their vision and opinions are taken for granted. For example, the position of Germany in today's European Union is by far on a superior level than the one shown by the other members. Its position is due to its economical sustainability which struggles to keep the stability of the

entire organization, in the circumstances in which the economies of Greece or Spain are collapsing. The Union depends on Germany's resources and abilities, which is the main reason that explains the position and the influence that this power has in the European Union.

In these circumstances, in which in the international relations and politics dominates the idea of power and powers and in which the world's organizations are managed by some of its members, the ones who can do it more than the others, another problem seems to appear. How far can these powers influence an entire organization? Usually, a lot. The main reason is that these powers, members of an organization seize the opportunities given in order to follow their own goals. We talk now of organizations dominated by hierarchy, by the ambition of some powers that use the resources put in common by the other members of the organization in their own benefit. USA interfered in a matter that did not concern it for its own purposes in the conflict in Kosovo. It claimed that the aggression was against the Treaty of NATO, but its goal was to interfere in a European conflict, where it could sustain its influence.

The ambition and the interests are still important aspects of the politics of a state or of a nation in today's international relations. Even though the system of power they claim to support is based on cooperation and mutual respect, these powers are not neglecting their own politics in front of the ones in the organizations they take part in. The distribution of power is not equal and some powers still try to consolidate their strength.

Rhizoidal Power

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theory of the rhizome outlines the loss of the personal contribution to one's identity. Instead of creating a personal identity, people's identities have become inspired by external factors and multiplied.

The authors speak in terms of "assemblage" to determine the sum of factors that influence objects' existence and their features. An object is determined when being put in connection with other things. The relation between objects defines their usage. Every object can be interpreted as external appearance and as spiritual reality, also.

For the traditional thinkers, segments must have unity. In order to achieve unity, things should pursue a linear direction. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome changes this view. For modern thinkers, this kind of unity is broken. The difference between objects and subjects or between natural and spiritual reality is concealed. "The world has lost its pivot... The world has become chaos." — They would claim in their essay "A thousand plateaus".²²

A rhizome is different from roots and radicals. Rhizomes are much more alike bulbs. Without rhizomes, roots would not exist. Every organ has its starting point in the existence of rhizomes. Rhizomes, also, assume a variety of forms and meanings.

²² Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix, "A thousand plateaus", Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p. 5.

Any rhizome can be connected to other rhizome. Through rhizomes, there are established boundaries between “semiotic chains, organizations of power and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles.”²³

The theory focuses on the importance of languages. The diversity of languages is being brought forward to prove, once more, that every political community is not actually based on its own genesis, but rather on the transformations that impacts it in time, due to different dimensions and registers which encounters during its evolution. Moreover, the deterritorialization of the world is marked by its continuing evolution, by its expanding structure. So Deleuze and Guattari’s theory is based on an anti-genesis concept. The theory admits the world’s unity, but only when the bond is composed of transformations, mixtures and successive stages.

A principle of the concept of the rhizome emphasizes the multiplicity given by the several relationships between rhizomes. The term “multiplicity” is used to reveal the changing nature of things and their tendency to connect with other things. Europe’s pro attitudes concerning sexual liberation or the different types of music exposed nowadays by the mainstream culture or by the multitude of subcultures are just a few examples that illustrate best Europe’s approach to multiplicity. Americans, who are still in search of their own discourse over their national provenance, are more likely to identify themselves through bands, gangs or outside connections.

Another principle shows that structures are never separated. Although a rhizome is broken, it will continue to function either on its old lines, or on a new track. Despite the separation of the lines at a certain point, they will end up being tied back.

The resemblance between rhizome and map would best explain how this organic structure works. Map’s characteristics such as detachability, connectivity and removability of blockages can be easily adapted to any individual, group or social formation. The metaphor of map signifies, in this context, the world’s stratification, its hierarchical organization.

Today’s history should be written by following the path of nomadic, “rhizomatic”²⁴ writing which involves a non-unitary state narration. Literature is also leading to a rhizomatic direction by turning its back on foundations and eliminating the endings or the beginnings. The politics of discourse emphasize discourse as a kind of power structure and analyze the power of discourse through the eyes of dominant characteristics such as culture, ideology and other norms. Discourses consist of the ways we think and talk about a subject matter, influencing and reflecting the ways we act in relation to it. This is the basic premise of discourse theory.

In Western-liberal societies, discourses of power are at a large level, adversarial. Power tends to be associated with competition, coercion or even domination, at worst. Regardless of the ideas’ relevance on the discourse, the power of discourse has found a huge fame inside the academic community.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

Nearly all powers, not only the well-known great powers such as the United States, but also the rising powers such as China, Japan and India, seek discursive power advantages through various means.

In conclusion, the international relations are lately determined by new concepts that have appeared as they adapted to the new situations. The balance of power cannot find its place today, but concepts like rhizoidal power or failed state do. The idea of power versus powers is still alive, despite the efforts put by the states in cooperation and mutual assistance.

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Deleuze, Gilles, Guattari, Felix, *A thousand plateaus*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1987;
Midlarsky, Manus, *Handbook of war studies*, Cambridge University Press, 1989;
Treitschke, von Heinrich, *Politics*, vol. II, London, 1916;
Wight, Martin, *Power politics*, ARC, 1998;
Willner, Mark, Hero, George, *The Ancient World to the Age of Revolution*, Barron's Educational Series, 2006.