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Quick Concepts Series:

GREAT POWERS

Great powers are state actors with both of two types of capability: global force projection capability *and* agenda-setting capability. Great powers must possess the ability to coordinate and deploy power around the globe across multiple domains. In addition, great power must possess agenda-setting capability to create global order and governance (prestige) or the authority to respond to transnational and multi-lateral challenges (importance). When there are multiple great powers at the same time, each of their attempts to vouchsafe their capability, establish prestige, and maintain importance interact to create global competition.

Great Power Capability

"Great power" status in international affairs has often been measured in terms of the capability to project conventional and nuclear force globally along with the economic resources to sustain that force (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Bennett & Stam 2000; Freedman, 1994; Lemke & Reed, 2001; Wayman, 1984). The key capability threshold that great powers must cross is the ability to coordinate and deploy military or economic power around the globe across multiple domains. Clearly, the capability to deploy forces across the globe is meaningless without associated capacity to coordinate and communicate with those forces. In the 21st century, capabilities in the space and cyber domains play pivotal roles in how global coordination and communications occur. Space contains key components of communications infrastructure for international and domestic financial networks, geolocation, weather monitoring, navigation, and many others. Cyber-space transmits various, often sensitive, data concerning military and intelligence systems. The multi-domain combination of deploying, communicating with, and coordinating armed forces are critical capabilities necessary for major power status.

Measures of economic and military capability of states are relatively straightforward. The former often involving the size of the state economy, net strength (trade or growth minus debt), and the latter size and lethality of military force, near-global force projection, etc. Status concerns are just as central to identifying great powers as assessing capabilities, but not as obviously measured.

Great Power Status

Insight from international relations research furthermore suggest that capability *alone* reveals who the major powers are but does not capture an additional necessary criterion of great power: global status (Abdelal, Herrera, Johnston, & McDermott, 2006; Larson, 2018; Mercer, 1995; Wohlforth, 2009). As John Harsanyi (1976) noted, "Apart from economic payoffs, social status (social rank) seems to be the most important incentive and motivating force of social behavior." Possessing global status means the state actor undertakes activities aimed at creating global order and governance (*prestige*) and/or activities in pursuit of agenda-setting authority in responding to transnational and multi-lateral challenges (*importance*). In other words, great powers are not only defined by what they *could* do; great powers are also marked by what they believe they and others *should* be doing.

The *prestige* of great powers relates to how much influence the great power has (or at least perceives itself to have) with respect to exploiting the cluster of institutions that help govern how states interact with each other, such as security institutions (e.g., NATO, United Nations), regional institutions (e.g., ASEAN, the European

Union), economic institutions (e.g., IMF, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the WTO), and hybrid organizations that blend features of several categories (e.g., the Economic Community of West African States [ECOWAS] and its military arm, ECOMAG).

Perceptions of its ability to control and manipulate these institutions matters to a great power because these institutions collectively embody and shape the rules of which state(s) will govern the system, as well as which ideas and values will predominate. The rules prescribe acceptable kinds of behavior and proscribe unacceptable ones in complex interdependent systems. The rules shape expectations in almost every area of global governance, from trade between countries to disease surveillance to coordinated responses to climate change or force structure inter-operability within alliances. Great powers design these rules and institutions and, more critically, can empower actors and agents both to enforce and to decide permissible exceptions to these rules.

The *importance* of great powers relates to how much control over agenda-setting the great power (perceives it) has with respect to interventionist responses to transnational and multi-lateral crises. Agenda-setting capability is important to importance because this capability grants the power to define what counts as a matter of international concern—that is, which issues receive global attention for appropriate intervention or enforcement.

For example, consider three international challenges in the past 30 years, two of which were named as “crises” while the third was ignored. The Congolese crises of the late 1990s, in which over 6 million non-combatants died as a result of Rwanda’s foreign-sponsored regime changes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, was not labeled a crisis. Official responses to any of the aspects of the Congo crisis—mass killing, mass displacement, external involvement in a domestic conflict—was muted. In contrast, North Korea’s nuclearization and Syria’s Arab Spring crises, both have spurred a litany of great power involvement.

Agenda-setting capability sustains a great power’s global influence by granting it power over the range of political options and settlements possible in crises responses.

To return to the examples above, the United States has made it clear, using its agenda-setting capability, that denuclearization is, and from its perspective ought to be, the chief goal of multi-lateral diplomacy concerning North Korea. While other countries (who are not great powers) may have other security concerns such as the ballistic missile threat and humanitarian concerns about refugee flows, it is North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons that has remained prominent on the agenda. The United States has prevented acceptance of a nuclear North Korea as a viable political outcome, just as China has largely pushed multi-lateral kinetic responses to nuclearization off the multi-lateral agenda; essentially, because of the clash of great power agendas, there will be no Desert Storm equivalent on the Korean peninsula. In Syria, the international response to the

uprising and its aftermath is paralyzed, as the United States and Russia disagree about whether regime change (the removal of President Bashar al-Assad) should be an aim of intervention. In contrast, there has been coordinating joint action in the areas where the great powers agreed, such as defeating ISIS.

The Great Powers Club: Who's In and Who's Out

Some illustrative questions are provided below to help determine which actors are great powers.

1. **Prestige**: Is there evidence of activities wherein the great power is trying not to be left out of key global decision-making procedures? Is there evidence that the great power is building institutions in specific regions as an alternative to status quo-sponsored institutions operating in that same region?
2. **Agenda Setting**: Is there evidence that the great power is seeking a role in defining or framing mediation responses to international crises? Is there evidence that the great power is seeking to circumscribe certain political alternatives?
3. **Force Projection Capability**: Does the state actor possess a secure, second-strike nuclear capability and operate normally with each leg of the nuclear triad at functional capability? Does the state actor have the ability to project military might beyond its immediate neighbors and world region? Is the state undertaking actions to increase or secure its access to the space domain? Does the state have a cyber-security policy?
4. **Economic Dominance:** Is the state maintaining the ability to prevent being locked out of areas of the global/regional energy market critical to their strategic interests?

In the current international system, these criteria yield only three great powers: the United States, the People's Republic of China, and Russia. Other major actors lack either global operating capability (e.g., Nigeria, India, Brazil, South Korea, the European Union, Canada, and Japan) or lack agenda-setting capability (the United Kingdom, Canada, and Japan). These states are critical "middle powers" for regional stability, but are not great powers (Larson, 2018; Wohlforth, De Carvalho, Leira & Neumann, 2018).

The United States incontrovertibly possess superior global, armed forces projection and coordination capability. In addition, whether concerning humanitarian crises (e.g., Syria) or financial crisis (e.g., Asian crisis of 1997-1998 or the Global Financial Crisis of 2007-2009), the United States uses its economic and military power to shape global agendas across a wide range of forums (Mastanduno, 2009). Finally, strategic economic dominance and access to strategic resources has been a foundation of each American president's national security strategies since the Cold War (Gavin, 2002).

China increased its prestige activities in the wake of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–9. China complemented its offers of economic assistance to affected countries with polices of non-devaluation of its currency and more active engagement with Asian multilateral security and economic organizations such as the ASEAN, and global organizations, such as the World Trade Organization. China's prestige activities extended beyond the economic realm. China augmented and grew its agenda-setting capability through informal arrangements (e.g., ASEAN Plus Three arrangement), regional partnerships (e.g., Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and security governance (e.g., Nuclear Suppliers Group, membership to the Missile Technology Control Regime). It also began contributing more units to UN peacekeeping and peacebuilding operations to extend Chinese areas of geographical engagement (Foot, 2006).

China's conventional force projection capabilities are modern, improving, and regionally powerful; in addition, Chinese forces have recently demonstrated the capability to conduct operations further away from China's immediate periphery, sufficient to classify them as a great power (Rinehart & Gitter, 2015). According to the Department of Defense's Annual Report (2015) to Congress about Chinese security policy and military power, Chinese's global operating capabilities has emerged from modernization efforts emphasizing joint operations and naval and air power in a "high-technology, networked force." The same DoD assessment evaluates China's space program as the most rapidly maturing one in the world, largely funded and supported by the People's Liberation Army's investments in manned space missions and counter-space capabilities. Cyber forces appear to complement counter-space capabilities in current Chinese national security policy; alongside directed-energy weapons and satellite jammers for scrambling communications are three types of cyber forces: (i) specialized military network warfare forces in the PLA, (ii) domestic non-government reserve forces for network warfare operations, and (iii) PLA-vetted network warfare specialists in government organizations (DOD CMSD, 2015; McReynolds, 2015).

China's nuclear component of its global projection capabilities are an older part of Chinese national security doctrine emerging the 1950s crises in which the United States used nuclear coercion against China in the Korean War and cross-Taiwan Strait crises. China maintains a minimalist nuclear deterrent to prevent nuclear coercion from occurring again (Lewis, 2007). China's latest Defense White Paper (2006) articulates China's two principles of minimal deterrence. They are the non-first use of nuclear weapons, and the non-use of nuclear weapons against non-nuclear-weapon states.

China's economic strategy aims to increase its exports of manufactures, while securing and sustaining itself as the center of an East Asian production sharing network (Rodrik, 2006). Toward this end, China has actively prioritized strategic partnerships to maintain its access to key resources and military technology imports as it builds

out its own domestic capabilities. These strategic partners are Russia, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Thailand, and Malaysia within its immediate region and Brazil, France, Germany, Iran, Sudan, and Venezuela beyond its region (Foot, 2006).

Russia's force projection and coordination capabilities, like China's, are on the upswing, and though less than United States' capability, exceed the threshold for global power. The period since the 2008 modernization announcement has witnessed demonstrable improvements in Russian conventional military capabilities (Trenin, 2016). This 2008 modernization programmed emphasized a shift from mobilization to rapid reaction, increases in the efficiency of command structures, and the modernization of weapons and technology. Russia's pursuit of conventional military power is in service to agenda-setting capability; according to Bettina Renz (2016), Russia's force modernization are designed for "swagger," rather than increased likelihood of offensive action. Robert Art (1980, p.10) defined "swagger" as the: "conspicuous display" of armed force to "look and feel more powerful or important, to be taken seriously by others in the councils of international decision-making, [or] to enhance the nation's image in the eyes of others." Modernization, in other words, is designed to help Russia maintain its claims to great power status by demonstrating great power capability, so that it can ensure its inclusion in decision-making concerning regions where it seeks influence, often by limiting or complicating what may have previously been uncontested American pursuit of foreign policy objectives (Kuhrt & Feklyunina, 2017).

Russia's foreign aid is also in line with these status goals, as articulated in the 2007 Concept of Russia's Participation in International Development Assistance. Foreign aid, for Russia, officially seeks to "create a belt of good neighborliness along the Russian national borders," "strengthen the credibility of Russia and promote an unbiased attitude to the Russian Federation," and "influence global processes with a view to establishing a stable, fair and democratic world order." These are status goals designed to maintain and expand Russia's agenda-setting capability.

In conclusion, the possession of two types of capabilities—force projection and coordination capability as well as agenda-setting capability—distinguish the great powers from other states in the international system. Although there are three great powers, one state, the United States, possesses relative fore projection capability advantages over the other great powers. This asymmetry of force can be either stabilizing (by creating a clear pecking order) or de-stabilizing (by tempting the United States to roam far afield). The other two great powers are growing their force capabilities to increase their agenda-setting capabilities by increasing their status and, through different mechanisms, constrain United States' influence and unilateral approaches to agenda-setting.

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