

The changing concept of national power

By: Amb (Retd.) B.S. Prakash Date: March 21, 2015 Venue: IIT-BHU, Varanasi

Today, I plan to explore with all of you the concept of national power. There are two reasons for my choice of the topic. First, there has been a buzz about 'power', the word and the concept in the last decade: it has been used frequently, widely, and I believe somewhat, loosely. To mention some typical titles of articles and books: "Emerging powers—the rise of China, India, Brazil and South Africa", (which is the reality the underlying concept in 'BRICS'), the decline of the US power, - the subject almost an industry in academics today; 'China, world hegemon'; 'India—the next super power' and so on. There are other titles of the "crouching tigers, fire-emitting dragons or the dancing elephants variety". Power is a word, much bandied about, as I said.

Second, I often find in my interaction with students, especially engineering students with their proclivity for numbers, that many display an interest in world rankings. 'Where does India figure in the world pecking order?' is a curiosity for some. Will China catch up with the U.S.? Is India already ahead of U.K.? Can we match China? : these are the kinds of questions that they tend to raise. All these in one form or the other relates to national power.

But what is 'power'? Do we all understand it the same way? Do the emerging powers, howsoever defined, see it the same way as traditional great powers did? Are there meaningful differences between notions of hyperpower, greatpower, emerging power and so on? What about the powerless- are they to be ignored in the world? These are my concerns today, in other words, to critically examine the notion of national power and to relate it to India.

Permit me, to spend a minute on how I became interested in this way of looking at things. As the Indian Ambassador to Brazil from 2008-12, I had begun to suspect that the ordinary Brazilian say the frolicking Brazilians on the beaches in Rio, or the hurrying, lap top carrying businessmen on the streets of Sao Paulo, were indifferent to the intoxicating talk of Brazil's rise as a power. The day Brazil got chosen to host the Olympics in 2016, I was sitting in a restaurant in Sao Paulo. As the news came in, I expected wild cheering and triumphal looks. But no, no one seemed jubilant. Whenever, in a seminar, there was talk of Brazil as an emerging power, there was not much exultation about the notion, unlike in India. I thus began to wonder whether there was a historical and a cultural component as to how power is perceived, conceived, or clamoured for. Since then, I have been interested in the notion of how power is constructed, on whether it is a universal value or not.

Make no mistake. Power is a central concept in politics, the same as 'energy' is in Physics. National power is a central concept in international relations. But we should note that it is not a static concept; power is not in a vacuum, but in relation to others. There are changes too in the way of understanding power. This is what I am analysing today (with the Power point presentation to highlight segments).

Looking at national power, let us first note that there is a difference between weight, influence and power, (a point made effectively by former NSA Sri ShivShankar Menon in one of his lectures). A country has 'weight' if it is large, populous, a high GDP, has resources and so on. In other words, a big country, big both in terms of size and population has a certain indubitable weight in international affairs. Without such size or weight to a certain degree, a country cannot be powerful, as we shall see. Influence is another matter. Because of a single man, Mandela, South Africa had a stature. Or with say Kreisky, Austria, a small country had some influence. We all know of Gandhi's influence, but was he 'powerful' or relied on Atma shakti, the spiritual force?

But, 'national power' is something else. It is best defined as the "ability to influence outcomes," in other words to bring about the desired changes in the external environment to advance national interests. It is not about size, about influence, but an ability to cause outcomes.

With traditional great powers—England, France, Spain, Prussia, Russia-- such power was mainly military and secondly economic. National power in the European context was tantamount to survival, conquest, expansion, and later colonisation for territory and economic exploitation. Military means and an ability to sustain such military force was the primary measure of power.

What of China, Japan, India, in the historical context; what of the mighty emperors of China, of Ashoka, the Mughal empire? Here again, the ability to defend the empire and to sustain it was the purpose of power. (But, we have methodological problems of how to compare these empires or kingdoms with our notions of modern nation-states in a Westphalian sense).

Without losing ourselves in history, let us turn to 20th century and the rise of the US as the world's super power, and after 1990, as the world's sole superpower. This was because of its preponderant military might, unrivalled economic strength, and technological prowess. All these were necessary attributes. Without corresponding economic strength USSR was regarded as a middle ranking state with nuclear weapons.

Today in the 21st century, we have a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the elements of national power. Most scholars agree that a nation's power has several dimensions: military, no doubt, but also economic, technology, institutional cohesion, what is termed 'soft power', and to start with a certain size or weight, of course. None of them alone is enough. Qatar has the world's highest GDP, at \$55,000, but no one will call it a world power. North Korea may have nuclear weapons, but is a bankrupt country, and not a power. Canada or Kazakhstan are huge and have plenty of energy, but not enough people, and hence are not major powers and so on.

Today, we have different models for looking at national power including much work in China on what they call 'comprehensive national power index'. It has many elements. In most such calculations, USA is number one, China number two, the European Union as a combined entity no. two or three. India, Brazil, Indonesia, Turkey all figure in the first ten or twelve. In India, many of us take satisfaction at our ranking – natural given our demography, size, the two trillion \$ GDP, the capabilities in S&T, the size of the armed forces etc. There is also loose talk of our potential as a superpower, for me a more problematic question, given the low per capita income, energy dependency and state of infrastructure and HDI parameters.

Having said that, let us look deeper. Why should a country bother about its ranking? What is power for? In asking these questions, we move into another level of discussion.

I submit to you that the traditional notion of a great power had a hegemonic aspect, or in other words the aspect to dominate others. It still has that dimension, but there are changes. Theorists of power today distinguish between 'powerover' i.e. domination over other countries and 'power to' i.e. the ability to do this or that, to ensure energy supplies for example or to develop technology or to shape the rules of international trade. So power is seen in an 'instrumental' way and not as an end in itself.

Further, it is less important, how much power a country has in terms of its military might, economic clout etc , but more important to see how it can apply that power. The exercise of power that requires national will, cohesiveness and consensus is crucial and even more important than the quantum of power. We lack a national consensus on many issues in our society and hence are unable to exert power in some cases. (Our dealings with Sri Lanka or Maldives on occasion are examples, not of our lack of power, but our lack of will or consensus.)

Third, today there is greater recognition that the nature of power is changing and that hard power is not necessarily an enabler. The U.S, the mightiest military power in the history of mankind was humbled by Al Qaeda, showing the asymmetry in power equations. The inability of the U.S. to exercise its muscle power in Syria or with regard to Iran also shows that the power of public opinion is as great an element in the calculus of power today as the power of the establishment. Then, there are non-state actors, NGOs, global corporations with loyalty only to their bottom line. How do we see the power of Google, of IMF, of ISIS – all different categories of non-state actors? In short, we are seeing a diffusion of power, both among States, and among other entities. My thesis is that we need to be looking at non-hegemonic and non-hierarchical ordering of power, a different way of looking at the world from the world rankings and pecking order.

Finally, from our policy statements at the most authoritative levels, India's objective is to transform itself into a developed country, in every sense of the term. We need the power to ensure that we are able to pursue that objective: security with regard to borders, ability to get energy and technology we require, unimpeded trade flows, and so on. Our power is to advance these outcomes that we seek; it is not to be number three or four, not to be in a race with U.S. or China, not to dominate smaller neighbours.

I believe that a place like Varanasi and a centre like IIT-BHU is an appropriate locale to ask and answer such basic questions about India's understanding of its place in the world order.