

Strength, power and energy : in search of a new order

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In international relations, the criteria of power are customarily presented as a question of numbers, mass, surface area, economy, diplomatic alliances, military might and so on. However, beyond this inventory of ways and means, the essential element is to be found in the meaning accorded to identity and purpose. This is not to propose a corrected version of the inventory, rather to draw attention to the relativity of traditional factors. To gauge capabilities it is not enough to draw up a framework or sketch a format : power lies more in renewed ambition and shared aims : alongside an organised and armed entity, there must already exist a shared sense of purpose, directed to a common destiny. This assertion is illustrated by recent reflections on defence in France : more than just a matter of having the organisations and equipment for the relevant activity, defence must also, and perhaps above all, be based on a shared identity and a will to work together, if it is to be a durable and consolidated power rather than just a reservoir of capabilities.

As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, www.diploweb.com is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, June 2009, pp. 125-32.

RECENT STUDIES and work on the subject of defence, not simply as a tool, but as a concept, have acted as both accelerator of progress and generator of uncertainties, leading to a questioning of the paradigm of 'power'.

This notion of power is at the heart of international relations. From the inventory of capabilities, of ways and means, it is a part of the definition and the hierarchy of international actors and of sovereignties : power remains the essential condition of existence, of being recognised and of carrying weight on the international scene. It is not, nonetheless, a very explicit concept ; [1] it is too often characterised by the traditional references to numbers, weight, surface area, whereas power reveals something more than mere quantity or strength. Nor can it be explained by any single factor, and it rests on the crystallisation of determining criteria. Its usual definition is basically directed towards an inventory of causality, whereas it could be better apprehended transversely. From this perspective, the least traditional and the most immaterial parameters appear more and more significant, in acknowledgement of the clairvoyance of Thucydides : 'The strength of a city is not in its walls, but in the will of its citizens.'

This observation is valid for France and its defence : beyond the material manifestations, an identity and energy must emerge and govern. This approach blends perfectly with the physical concepts of strength, the application of strength, power and energy. Looking to the future, we can decry the crumbling of traditional criteria and in parallel, the highlighting of renewed centres of gravity, notably in the complex and volatile world of today.

The disintegration of strength

Traditionally, power is determined in five areas : political, economic, military, technological and cultural, and these are the classic factors in the assessment of relative strengths.

The mosaic of power

Let us look first at the abundance of references used to explain the everyday aspects of power : the demographic factor, the geographic size and spread, the strategic location, national cohesion, economic wealth, diplomatic alliances, military might, etc.

But the reconfiguration of the State as we have seen it develop over recent years tends to foreshadow a 'new Middle Age' marked by the retreat of the formula of statehood (plurality and homogeneity) in favour of a societal form (universality and diversity). The State is no longer a monolithic bloc, but has become a composite entity, and faced with a host of infatuated players, a planetary Balkanisation process is appearing. International fragmentation combined with globalisation is undermining sovereignty and generating a relative interdependence, the source of 'complex sovereignty' and of disintegrating power. This evolution is amplified by the abolition of distance and the imperative of immediacy. Thus new forms of power are emerging, for which 'the preoccupation of modern power is no longer the conquest of territory, as in the great invasions or the colonial period, but the acquisition of wealth'. [2]

In the military field, 'if military power remains useful, even indispensable in certain circumstances', [3] the host of battalions, the quantities of weapons and firepower are no longer the sole strength of the armed forces. Relying on and encouraging auxiliaries, the Great Powers are switching their priorities to the new technologies and to the mastery of engineering. From now on, the 'intelligence flow', strategic decision aids, weapons accuracy, surveillance, detection and target acquisition and communications are the basis of military power. The simple roll-call of troops has less significance than hitherto. Firepower is overshadowed by manoeuvrability, or by good intelligence. This is the very essence of 'economy of force'. Even more so when the most direct and visible attacks on our societies are more frequently the result of civilian anarchist extremist groups who have adopted military principles, as in the case of the organised quasi-guerrilla action of the Black Blocs during the latest NATO summit in Strasbourg.

And so, beyond such instruments as political institutions, finance, strong industrial ambition and so on that characterise traditional notions of strength, ever more relative, the power of influence appears ever more clearly as a vector of power.

Influence and soft power

Once upon a time, it was a matter of winning the war, of crushing the enemy ; now that is just one stage. First of all you have to create the conditions that can lead to the establishment of durable peace and the building of a social contract : from this point, power fades in the shadow of the ability to influence.

When Stalin scoffed at the Vatican, asking 'How many divisions does the Pope have ?' he pretended to ignore his influence. Likewise for the American paragon, its power is now as much, if not more, the result of its influence. American power is no more just Washington and the White House but increasingly its intermediaries, like Hollywood or Google. Despite their denials, more of form than of substance, people seem to share the American dream. This cultural globalisation is illustrated by the influence of the English language, the world's lingua franca, where even linguistic affinities create an intellectual, emotional and behavioural complicity.

Apart from such cultural and linguistic complicities, 'silent propaganda' [4] has emerged to infuse opinion without contradiction. This benefits the media and the image ; control of it sustains cohesion and influences minds. The relativity of a critical sense gives to communications tools an influence that is undeniably a source of power. Thus we see a cultural base used by transnational players and giving rise to a new form of power called 'soft power'. [5] In this domain, France (and indeed Europe at the supranational level), with its prestigious past, needs to increase efforts to develop its convergences of influence in order to stimulate cultural diversity and encourage creativity. At the risk of reduction to a soulless entity or to 'a pile of old ruins', it has to enlarge its perspectives and rely on the project of being the content rather than the container.

The conjunction of these determining criteria (strength and influence) could be seen as a guarantee of the creation of 'power'. Similarly, the conjunction of the power of culture, of business, of individuals and of society in diverse association indissociable from the more traditional dimension of power incarnate would seem to lead inevitably to 'superpower'. The truth is more subtle and complex : traditional criteria procure some freedom of action, at best ; international realities would not be satisfied with such a simple theoretical accretion, and demand the affirmation of something more substantial.

The quest for energy

Faced with the multiple uncertainties of relative strength and influence (relative to others) described above, it would seem that power derives its vigour and its essence more from a definition of its meaning (for oneself).

Knowledge and standards

Three of the traditional factors of power—territorial size, demographic weight, wealth in raw materials—are no longer such enviable trump cards, and can sometimes, paradoxically, be a source of handicaps. In this twenty-first century, new wealth derives more from human capital, from research and the ability to innovate : mere production of raw materials pales in comparison with the creation of grey matter. Human resources are becoming the chief source of competitiveness and performance, based on the triad of modernisation, education and training. As a result the quest for knowledge is pulled in two directions : access to capital and access to know-how (notably English, information technology and standards) and bears witness to the power of the collective intelligence. In this field, know-how is an element of the national conscience, which should not stop France in its efforts to maintain its reputation as a place of scientific innovation.

Similarly, while the right to interfere is set up in principle to penetrate sovereignties, the law, both an instrument (rules), an issue (contradictory interpretation) and an end in itself (a timeless and universal 'Law'), is no longer just a body of rules regulating society and the relationships between states but has become a mirror in which others seek their reflection. Thus the definition of standards accompanies and directs the forces for change, to allow them to obtain the esteem of the great and the respect of the small, [6] and in terms of power it has become more pertinent to impose one's will in determining the rules of a mandate than to restrict oneself unrewardingly to merely ensuring its implementation.

Memory and identity

The question of maintaining the power of a common purpose and positive solidarity rests primarily on the cult of memory. This return to a common past, albeit sometimes reprehensible or nauseating, is the first part of the rallying process ; the soothing memory is not to be found in yesterday's every deed and gesture, but between testimony and oblivion it creates an eased reconciliation with the present. Consolidation of the 'just memory', [7] dedicated as a bow in the direction of the national crucible, primes emotion ; this in turn leads to mutual understanding, enlightening and motivation, a convergence that constitutes the foundation of power. In this respect, France has a unique heritage ; but without looking only to the past, it should use it as a launch pad for the future. This heritage is a lever, and must not be limited to navel-gazing.

This memory must be given a soul, to make it an attractive reality, not just a motor : power must be desired, not simply accepted. Without this affirmation of cohesion and solidarity, no player has sufficient strength ; to take the example of the Battle of Valmy, where the break with tradition, (an army of ragged wretches defeating a professional army) is significant : 'over this young army there floated something, like an aura of heroism . . . this aura was faith'. [8] Already in 1996 the defence White Paper (p. 28) proposed that 'power stems less from the extent of national territory than from the social organisation, the education of the people, their solidarity and the values that unite them.' Faced with suicidal zealots, taking their blind fury to the limits, the nation has to consolidate in the way envisaged by Ernest Renan. Human confidence and motivation increase resources tenfold. Indeed the State is feeble if it is not based on a sense of identity. Only these intangible aspects of power will create meaning and federate energies to give them adamantine solidity.

By preferring fragmentation, the modern epoch creates a selfish society. It is good to show a taste for the audacious, even a hunger for the utopian, the wager of a harmonious society. In a power system based on the traditional balance of forces, if the power of one is indeed judged in the light of the power of others, this relation to others is born essentially from the relation to oneself. France as a nation offers the perfect example : it is not composed simply of institutions, of a body of law, of organisations, etc : it is also, and above all, a civilisation resting on a community of values. It cannot be considered as a power solely by virtue of its own declamation, structures or capabilities : there has to be an added meaning and a purpose. And from that flows energy, the product of power during the period in which it is exercised.

Thus defence is not just a matter of means ; neither money nor technology are the sole sinews of war, the more so in 'bastard wars' ;

[9] against the 'strong' with his budgetary and human constraints and tumultuous political environment, is opposed the 'weak', rustic, fleeting, boosted by 'the social dimension' [10] and never admitting defeat.

Evidently, we have moved on from 'authoritarian, hierarchical, vertical forms of power, to negotiated, reticular, horizontal forms, more civilised but more complex'. [11] In this formula, cultural influence, the creation of grey matter and the mastery of standards count for more than the traditional factors : demographic weight, size of territory, number of divisions. It seems, moreover, that the criteria that guarantee power are to be found in the sense of identity and purpose. We are not proposing some corrected order, to add to the confusion ; rather we

are calling attention to the relativity of the traditional factors : ‘Power cannot be measured absolutely. It exists only in relative form . . . Relative by definition, power is evolutionary by nature. Today’s power is not necessarily that of tomorrow.’ [12]

The defence of our sovereignty, our values, of our interests even, must be supported by a renewed ambition, by pride in our activity, by a breath of emotion. Alongside the armed and organised State there must be the shared sense of purpose, of a common destiny.

Our defence must cultivate the momentum of that spirit, that share of a dream which, despite any consideration of relative strengths, lives in the heart of every soldier and constitutes his daily bread. It is a part of the legitimacy of intervention, moreover, that depends far more on subjective elements than on the objective reality of a given situation, touching the basis or the motivation of an action, but even more ensuring that it is understood and accepted over the long haul.

And so France, which can lay claim to a glorious past, should encourage a ‘common purpose’, and assert its ambition to achieve great things. To do this it must consolidate its sense of identity to give it its full weight, forging a civilisation. Over and above fixed objectives, economic, legal or defence structures, power demands other qualities : diversities must be made to converge, to create a clear purpose, ‘clearly expressed’ [13] and allow it to maintain its standing. *La France puissance*, [14] to ensure its security but also to contribute to international harmony, needs a strategy of influence [15] that is suitably constructed and with a stubbornly ambitious sense of identity.

This is why it is not enough to assess capabilities, to design a framework, but, without excluding strengths and influence, to answer the question as to the purpose. To give meaning and dynamism to power, there must be a *raison d’être* and a purpose (the ‘why’) rather than gesticulation and an inventory of strengths (the ‘what’). ‘Discipline is a word, or if you prefer, a glue that melts in the heat of action, like wax in the sun ; duty is something with limits that each may choose to impose. Only the heart knows no limit to its strength, and only it will give the necessary courage.’ [16]

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Défense nationale et sécurité collective is a publication whose purpose is to tackle all—national and international—political, economic, social and scientific issues by considering them from the viewpoint of defence. This specific aspect enabled it to outlive WW II and later on all the crises, hardships and regime changes that followed. Its readers in France all still share a common interest in defence and security, despite any differences in opinion, origins or political sensitivity. [See](#)

P.-S.

Commissioner Frédéric Sternenberg, an Army officer, is currently at the Human Resources

division of the French MOD.

Notes

[1] 'I define power on the international scene as the ability of a political entity to impose its will on other entities', Raymond Aron, *Paix et Guerre entre les Nations* (Paris : Calmann-Levy, 1962). 'In international politics, power is the ability of a player . . . to influence the behaviour of others,' Samuel P. Huntington, 'Why International Primacy Matters', *International Security*, vol. 17, no. 4, Spring 1993.

[2] I. Ramonet, *Guerres du XXIe siècle* (Paris : Galilée, 2002).

[3] White Paper on defence and national security, 2008, p. 114.

[4] I. Ramonet, *Propagandes silencieuses* (Paris : Galilée, 2002).

[5] Joseph Nye, 'Redefining the National Interest', *Foreign Affairs*, July-August 1999.

[6] 'We must pay attention to a constant, inherent in the nature of imperialist practice : in full-scale, truly historical imperialism, what counts is not just the military and maritime potential, nor even economic and financial prosperity ; what is decisive is that faculty of defining by oneself the content of key notions of law and of politics', Carl Schmitt, *Les formes de l'impérialisme dans le droit international moderne*, 1932.

[7] Between an excess of remembrance and an excess of oblivion : P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (Paris : Seuil, 2000).

[8] J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*.

[9] A. de La Grange & J-M Balencie, *Les guerres bâtardes* (Paris : Perrin, 2008).

[10] G. Chaliand, *Le nouvel art de la guerre* (Paris : L'Archipel, 2008).

[11] I. Ramonet, *Géopolitique du chaos* (Paris : Galilée, 1997).

[12] P. Boniface, *La puissance internationale*' (Paris : Dunod, 1994). See also Pierre Hassner, 'Le siècle de la puissance relative', *Le Monde*, 3 October 2007.

[13] 'A clearly expressed purpose is the most durable constituent of power', Raymond Aron, op. cit. in note 1.

[14] Editor's note : a France that counts in the world.

[15] N. Tenzer, 'Pour une diplomatie d'influence', *Le Monde*, Thursday 10 July 2008.

[16] J. Tezenas du Montcel, *L'heure H, étapes d'infanterie 14-18*, 2002.