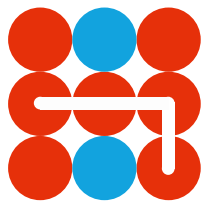Hybrid CoE Strategic Analysis 1

In the era of hybrid threats: Power of the powerful or power of the "weak"?

HANNA SMITH

Hybrid CoE

In the era of hybrid threats: Power of the powerful or power of the "weak"?

Analysis of power capabilities is also critical when trying to evaluate how different actors assess their objectives. Guessing those objectives wrongly can lead to unexpected outcomes. – writes Hanna Smith, PhD, Director of Strategic Planning and Responses.

Today's security environment could be characterised as "an era of hybrid threats", with old and new elements of tactics and strategy blended together.

Power is not easy to define. As Joseph Nye has stated, "Power, like love, is easier to experience than define and measure". A correct understanding of different state actors' power is essential to develop a successful response to today's security challenges. Analysis of this aspect has become overshadowed by concepts of hybrid warfare or hybrid threats. Both concepts are a product of their times and highlight an era that has moved on from post-Cold War and post-socialism times. Today's security environment could be characterised as "an era of hybrid threats", with old and new elements of tactics and strategy blended together. Hybrid here refers to a combination of different elements that are used to achieve strategic goals. At the core of both exercising and countering hybrid threats lie correct assessments of power. Analysis of power capabilities is also critical when trying to evaluate how different actors assess their objectives. Guessing those objectives wrongly can lead to unexpected outcomes. Without a sound analysis of the power capabilities of different state and non-state actors, conflict potential between different actors and alliances can grow uncontrol-

lably. Is power today a power of the powerful, or is it a power of the weak?

Traditionally power has been measured by material means; power based on resources. Even if analysis of what power is in international relations has been evolving, this approach is still strong and refers to the power of the powerful. When ap-plying this approach, states that have the capacity to turn their military capabilities, economic strength and natural resources into exertion of influence are also the most powerful. This way of looking at power views it as a means to an end, while the quest for power can also become an end in and of itself. This type of power has been labelled resource power and is very state centred.

The means of influencing are more complex and multidimensional than just material means.

With globalisation of the international system, the nature of power has started to change as well. From resource-based power, the concept has evolved towards relational power. This refers to the power to change others' beliefs, attitudes, preferences, opinions, expectations, emotions and/or predispositions to act. The means of influencing are more complex and multidimensional than just materi-al means. Included in this category are so-called "soft power" elements: education, cultural attractiveness, technology, science, diplomacy, good governance etc. This means that the power of different countries and ac-tors in world politics may vary signifi-cantly and is not necessarily connect-ed to "hard power". With relational power come two important elements that are in play today: the power of networks and power of the weak. Both types of power can be used as a significant source of power for the exertion of influence.

Power of networks is a phenomenon of the modern world and is related to globalisation.

Power of networks is a phenomenon of the modern world and is related to globalisation. Globalisation is not new, but with lowering the borders, interconnectedness, interdependence and new technologies (including cyber), the scope of globalisation has changed. Therefore, networks that can be popular movements and ideas find support beyond their own areas and regions and can spread faster than ever before. This is done by using media networks and with modern information technology. In this way, an actor without the traditionally understood means of exercising power can become powerful through control over information and access to knowledge. Within this framework, digital age technology, cyber and the information space, even the citizenry of the country itself, become the "battlegrounds".

These networks can be used by non-governmental actors, state actors, radical and even terrorist groups to enhance their power. Networks are used by an actor to try to disrupt the agenda of international security itself and the ways in which states or alliances seek to use their power.

The networks provide different actors with new and/or additional channels for the expression of power and the possibility to accelerate its application. Through network power, the idea of spheres of influence is also changing from geographically-bound analysis to interests and idea-based areas. For example, an actor can be powerful in energy markets or cyber space and exercise influence in different countries and issues around the world.

"The power of the weak": negotiation and bargaining skills, being able to time action correctly (for example provocations and/or inflict damage on reputation) and appearance of coherence.

Power of the weak is closely connected to asymmetrical power analysis relating to military/security studies and power of small states in the study of international relations. Asymmetrical power has been used throughout history to challenge the stronger actor, especially when seeking to redistribute power in the international system. It is as such nothing new, especially in military studies, and is rather an age-old strategic tenet, going back to Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese strategist. How asymmetrical power works can be illustrated by the ways in which guerrilla warfare has been fought. Mao Tse-Tung, famous for conducting successful asymmetric warfare, has described the essence of it: "In guerrilla warfare, select the tactics of seeming to come from the east and attacking from the west; avoid the solid, attack the hollow; attack; withdraw; deliver a lightning blow, seek a lightning decision. When engaging with stronger, guerrilla withdraw when enemy advances, harass when he stops; strike when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws. In guerrilla strategy, the enemy's rear, flanks and other vulnerable parts are his vital points and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted and annihilated." The study of small states' power in relation to that of great powers adds elements to the analysis of asymmetrical power. It is about a situation where a smaller actor extracts benefits from a great power, strengthening its own position vis-à-vis a great power.

The way smaller states have been able to survive and become stronger has much to do with studying and knowing well the stronger state in question. There are three areas especially where a smaller state can exercise "the power of the weak": negotiation and bargaining skills, being able to time action correctly (for example provocations and/or inflict damage on reputation) and appearance of coherence. Both asymmetrical power tactics and the "power of the weak" means are indeed nothing new. However, the way power works in any particular time and the reasons behind the use of power are important. Therefore power can only be assessed through the lenses of today and the future, not the past.

Today's security environment comprising power of networks and power of the weak concepts challenge today's powerful actors.

Looking at power in traditional measurable ways encompassing more modern "soft power" aspects, the Western world today appears the most powerful (in the international system?). In addition, individual countries like the United States, China and Russia also have strong militaries and so can exercise influence through traditional hard power. Countries with nuclear weapons also possess power capabilities in international politics and are sometimes able to punch above their weight. Today's security environment comprising power of networks and power of the weak concepts challenge today's powerful actors. They challenge the Western "soft power". Countering hard power has long traditions but the power of networks and power of the weak cannot be countered by measurable power as such. Both types of power use a combination of means, which create today's hybrid threats, and are products of the modern world and globalisation. The purpose of those actors using the power of networks and power of the weak is to avoid open wars but to reach their own strategic goals at a relatively low cost. They have also a very creative nature that is difficult to counter with just measurable power means, putting emphasis on traditional military power and economic means. One of the reasons why the Western countries appear weak has its roots in how they have been responding to today's security challenges whether created by state or non-state actors. The two power trends, power of the networks and power of the weak, are today countered mostly using traditional means.

Western powers lack the agility to respond to these networks. Too often they are on the defensive, when they should be proactive in their strategies. Threats can be created if fear guides the assessments and threats can be countered if the uses of power in world politics today are analysed realistically. Power today is the power of the smart.

Author

Hanna Smith, PhD, is the Director of Strategic Planning and Responses at the European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats. Prior to joining Hybrid CoE, she worked for 14 years at the University of Helsinki's Aleksanteri Institute as a research fellow. Her specialisation is international relations
(especially Great Power identity), Eurasian foreign and security policy and international organisations.

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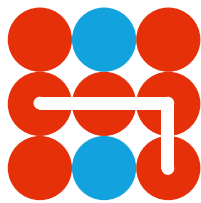
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