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# The Meanings and Problems of Power

When we speak of politics we are dealing, of course, with the realities of power. Power seems to imply coercion, and in that respect puts politics already at odds with reconciliation. When we move then to consider war as an instrument of politics, we discern even sharper antipathy between politics and reconciliation, for power in war implies forcible defense, efforts to dominate and even destroy an opponent, and therefore destruction and killing. And when we declare that any imaginable earthly peace is a particular organization of power, we seem to have moved reconciliation out of the realm of discourse and into a private and interpersonal world. Are we not back to our earlier portrayal of a fundamental and insurmountable contradiction between war and reconciliation?

If there is any way past this contradiction it requires a reconsideration of the nature and role of power. We can do that in terms that are theological on the one hand and nontheological on the other. As to the first possibility, we must recall the place of preservation in the work of God to sustain and renew the fallen creation. God does not destroy humankind as punishment for its wickedness but holds it in being through all its perversions and tribulations to the end of forming a new creation. Holding the world in being requires preservation. Preservation involves power. Power therefore plays an important role in the reconciling work of God. As to the second possibility, we must analyze the nature of power more fully, not allowing it to be equated simply with coercion or force. We shall do that directly in this chapter, and follow the analysis with a distinction between substantial and relational power. Those efforts will allow us to move in later chapters to consideration of the civilizing of power and the necessities and possibilities of understanding peace as an organization of power.

## Power as Force and Consent

Perhaps the principal conceptual difficulty with power as a political means, and with peace as an organization of power, derives from the tendency to equate power with force. The notion of "power politics," which pertains mainly to the state system and balance-of-power politics deriving from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), suggests the muscling of states by each other mainly in terms of military threats and actions. In the effort to move away from that understanding, and to open the concept of power to its actual diversity, I define power here as a variable and fluid combination of force and consent. It is variable, because either force or consent may be preponderant—or they may be in relative balance—in any particular organization of power. Power may be simply the imposition of will of the stronger party over the weaker. Or it may embody significant consent to the exercise of leadership and control. In the former case peace is established by maximum and unqualified force, in the latter by widespread agreement to the arrangement based on acknowledgment and protection of interests, rights, and traditions, and participation by all parties in the processes of governance. It is fluid, because the relationships can change—sometimes dramatically—with time and circumstance. One can argue with support from history that sheer force will not maintain a lasting peace unless degrees of consent emerge based on rights and interests respected and justice done, or that a consensual arrangement will not hold together unless there is some central and effective mechanism for judgment, decision, and implementation. That is true enough, but it does not change the fact that peace in one form or another—in a moment or across a span of time—is an organization of power—a variable combination of force and consent.

## The Elements of National Power

I am aware, certainly, that the notion of power as exercised by states is more complex than the simple binomial of force and consent. More than sixty years ago, Hans Morgenthau identified the elements of national power as geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, and the quality of diplomacy.[1] Recently Joseph Nye has advanced the notion of a nation's "soft power"—"getting others to want what you want"—in contrast to its "hard

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1. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 80–108.

power," that is, its military and economic capacity. He writes, "A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness."[2] Walter Russell Mead has extended the categories into what he calls sharp power (military), sticky power (economic), sweet power (American values and culture), and hegemonic power (the ability to set the agenda and frame the debate). The latter two are Mead's refinement of Nye's "soft power."[3] These distinctions support the analysis of power into its variable combination of force and consent.

## The Concept of Relational Power

My own contribution to the analysis of power is to distinguish substantial power from relational power. Substantial power is the combination of elements of power a state actually has at its disposal and can bring to bear on the pursuit of foreign policy objectives—something like Morgenthau's enumeration of the elements of power plus Nye's soft power. Relational power is the ability of a state actually to use these elements of power to impose its will and/or achieve its objectives in particular situations. It is evident from even a cursory reading of contemporary international relations that the United States cannot do just anything it wants to do despite its massive military and other forms of power. Neither North Korea nor Iran is any match for the United States, militarily speaking, yet the U.S. has not been able to press either state to meet its demands and expectations. The hopes for making progress in that regard rest on the cooperation of other states—another form of relational power. The military might of the United States is designed to meet and defeat the forces of other states in large battles, but it adapts only with difficulty to "asymmetrical warfare"— the strategy of insurgents to turn their weakness into strength by employing tactics that make it difficult for the heavily armed, highly organized opponent to respond effectively. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and the retreat of insurgents into the shelter of civilian populations are cases in point. The prospects for success rely less on the preponderance of substantial power than on the ability actually to deploy it effectively in relation to the situation of conflict.

2. Nye, *Paradox of American Power*, 8–9.
3. Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War*, 24–25.

## Nuclear Weaponry as Relational Power

Let us apply the concept of relational power to the particular case of nuclear armaments. During the high-tension time of the nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union, it was said often that the two great powers had enough nuclear weapons and delivery systems to destroy the world's cities several times over. Why then the need for such excess destructive power? The question was of dubious relevance, because the intent of the weapons capability was not to destroy but to deter.[4] The operational question was the relational one: what kind and extent of nuclear systems capability does it take for each nation to constrain the military threats and actions of the other? In that setting, whoever engaged the morality of nuclear deterrence had to work through the ethical analysis of two issues, not just one. One issue was the moral usability of the weapons systems themselves—a problem dealt with by examining the weapons and their probable effects using just war *ius in bello* principles of discrimination and proportion. The question then was whether the utterly devastating effects of such weapons—ultimately affecting the entire world and incapable of making distinctions between combatants and noncombatants—would permit them to serve discriminately and proportionately any conceivable formulation of the just war *ius ad bellum* criterion of just cause. The answer, in brief, was no. The burden of proof here was on those who said nuclear weapons were justifiable, not on those who said they were not.

The other issue was what to do next, once one had decided that the weapons were inherently immoral and therefore morally unusable—but nevertheless existed and were central to the architecture of opposition between the superpowers. In this case the primary moral responsibility was not discharged by a judgment on the weapons systems, although that was part of the process of moral reasoning, but by designing a politics of carefully moving back from the brink while recognizing that the weaponry was a constant and inherent element of the political process. In other words, the inquiry into moral responsibility should start with the counterpoised

4. Note that I refer to the "high tension time" in Soviet-U.S. relationships, that is, to a point in the history of nuclear weapons development when both nations credibly could threaten each other with total destruction. Andrew Bacevich argues that when General Curtis LeMay was the head of Strategic Air Command, he built up a strike force with the purpose of destroying the Soviet Union totally, without regard to combatant-noncombatant distinctions or other moral limitations. The purpose was deterrence, but in LeMay's view no number of weapons and delivery systems was too high. Bacevich, *Washington Rules*, 43–57.

relationships of power and their implications, not with an abstract moral analysis of the weapons, and not even with a measurement of the elements of substantial power possessed by each side.

The dilemma posed by the juxtaposition of the two problems was that if one side began immediately to engage in nuclear disarmament (in consequence of deciding that the weapons were morally unusable), that move might dislodge the relational power system and bring about precisely the terrible destruction that the decision sought to avoid. That is, the opponent might see unilateral disarmament as a trick designed to draw it into an irreversible condition of vulnerability, or perhaps as evidence of weakness inviting attack. Moreover, elements of the political and military establishment of the disarming side very well might react negatively to the proposed change and use the occasion to seize power, thereby exacerbating the relational tensions. On the other hand, if the decision were taken gradually to defuse the situation by incremental means, the implication would be that nuclear deterrence is necessary to protect and assure the transition.[5] That implication would validate continued possession and positioning of the weapons systems, if only for that reason.

5. The original draft of Schema XIII of Vatican Council II included a flat rejection of the morality of nuclear deterrence. The final draft, in the "Constitution of the Church in the Modern World," Chapter V, Section 1, condemns total war and the indiscriminate destruction of cities and their populations but avoids a clear rejection of nuclear deterrence. Instead, it states vaguely that "many regard [nuclear deterrence] as the most effective way by which peace of a sort can be maintained between nations at the present time" (para. 81). It then goes on to warn about the insecurity and instability of the arms race. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in their pastoral letter on war and peace ("The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response," May 3, 1983), sustained the somber attitude toward nuclear war and deterrence, but built on a grudging concession by Pope John Paul II to declare, "Deterrence is not an adequate strategy as a long-term basis for peace; it is a transitional strategy justifiable only in conjunction with resolute determination to pursue arms control and disarmament" (from the Summary, Section I, B.3).

In 1986, the United Methodist bishops rejected nuclear deterrence but did not follow the logic of rejection to argue for immediate, unilateral disarmament. Instead, they advocated an "ethic of reciprocity" in which both sides would be encouraged to take incremental steps to avoid the ultimate terror. They did not face the obvious fact that reciprocity would work only if some degree of nuclear deterrence remained in place and the opposing sides continued to feel threatened by it. United Methodist Council of Bishops, *In Defense of Creation*, 47–48. For a spirited response to the bishops of his church, see Ramsey, *Speak Up for Just War or Pacifism*. My own contribution to the discussion can be found in *Modern War and the Pursuit of Peace*, reprinted in Thompson, *Moral Dimensions*, 283–314.

The point of this analysis is that nuclear weaponry must be understood and evaluated primarily as relational power in the context of the international system, not primarily as substantial and destructive force at the disposal of individual states. It is also the latter, of course, but the starting point for thinking about it is the counterpoised relationships of forces and the implications for everyone throughout the world of any disturbance of the anxious and fragile equilibrium. Moral questions must be raised about weapons as such, but the main context for moral and political analysis (they may come to the same thing) is the relational power system itself.

## Nuclear Power and the International System

To pursue the truth of this claim, let us note that nuclear weaponry still plays an important role in the preoccupations of the international system and will continue to do so, but it is quite a different role from that of the years of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry. In those years the counterpoised nuclear weapons and their delivery mechanisms were central and integral to the architectural structure of the relationships that were most significant and most determinative in international society. Destabilization of that structure risked setting off the nuclear war that no one wanted. As we move along into the twenty-first century nuclear weapons and nuclear capabilities are a permanent and worrisome concern, but they do not dominate and threaten the international system to the extent and in the same ways that they did in the past. Which countries in the world must or can the United States deter relying primarily on nuclear power? None. To the extent that a policy of deterrence is necessary and relevant, the United States can implement it with nonnuclear power alone. North Korea and Iran are aspiring nuclear powers, but neither of them is a match for the U.S., militarily speaking, and they know it. The U.S. can destroy the military forces and the industrial capacity of either country without employing its nuclear armaments. China and the United States are respectful of each other's nuclear capabilities, but those capabilities are not central to the relationship as they were in the U.S.-Soviet opposition. At present, their competition mainly is economic. Deterrence doesn't work against terrorist activities, because terrorists have no state and no governmental structure to protect, and therefore cannot be deterred by threats of military reprisal of any kind. Moreover, they are suffused in a culture of martyrdom. They do not fear death; they welcome it.

However, to say that the United States does not need to deter with nuclear power is not to say that no other countries feel that way. Israel is not going to dismantle its (undisclosed) nuclear capabilities so long as Iran threatens it with destruction. India and Pakistan feel insecure vis-à-vis each other, and are not yet prepared to resolve the political differences that would allow them to get rid of that part of their weaponry and begin to work cooperatively on the solution of common problems. North Korea has decided—perhaps because of the example of Iraq—that it needs nuclear weapons in order to deter the United States. What this means is that there can be no elimination of nuclear weapons worldwide without the resolution of serious political differences and insecurities that lead some states to feel that the risk of having nuclear weapons is more tolerable than the risk of not having them. If all nuclear weapons were to be removed from everywhere, differences of interest would remain as would differentials of power. For that reason, nuclear disarmament cannot be approached as a problem in its own right apart from the organization of power in the international system.

Some of the systemic issues are clear and salient. If Iran develops a nuclear capability, for whatever reasons of its own, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey may feel compelled to develop theirs also, thereby rearranging and destabilizing the balance of power in the Middle East. If North Korea succeeds in pursuing its nuclearizing mission, Japan and South Korea may consider it prudent to create their own nuclear capability. What, then, will be the responses of China and the United States? And then there are the problems of loose nukes, nuclear scientists for hire, nuclear entrepreneurs (e.g., the Pakistani A. Q. Khan), and the terrorist cells eager to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction that can be deployed without reliance on complicated and expensive delivery systems.

All of these problems are systemic within the international organization of power. They are not problems of nuclear weapons only or even exclusively of individual states. Nuclear weapons to one degree or another will continue to be an element in whatever organization of power constitutes world peace in the present and future, as well as a threatening element of instability in the organization. To control their production, proliferation, and possible deployment is a task not for the International Atomic Energy Agency alone or the United Nations or individual interested states, nor is it a task discharged by a policy of nuclear disarmament. It is a problem of full international cooperation—a matter of the organization of power in

the comprehensive international system. What is essential is that nuclear weapons systems not be allowed to organize the peace around their own potential for destruction, but that they be constrained and limited within the relational system of force and consent organized by the international system as a whole.

## The Analysis and Its Prospects

This descriptive and analytical approach tells us that power is not inherently contradictory either to reconciliation or to peace. The reduction of the theoretical contradiction requires the advancement of consent over force in the practical exercise and organization of power. It requires also a determined process of the civilization of power to equip consent with the institutional means of giving it authority and stability. The civilization process will provide different possibilities for peace as an organization of power, and thereby for improved efficacy for reconciliation in relation to war. We shall turn now to an examination of this process.