Power in Australian Foreign Policy

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Abstract:

The 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper emphasises the importance of 'maximising' Australia's power and influence, however the White Paper and much of the commentary on Australian foreign policy do not clearly conceptualise 'power' or indicate how it ought to be increased. The Lowy Institute's recent 'Asia Power Index' implies one possible strategy via its resource-based approach to measuring power. We outline a different approach and argue that power should be conceptualised and evaluated as a specific relationship causing behavioural change, rather than as a general attribute of its wielder. To complement the Lowy Institute's carefully catalogued database, and facilitate a more focused conversation about maximising power and influence in Australian foreign policy, we offer a typology identifying five pathways through which states can translate their material and non-material resources into outcomes.

Keywords:

Australian foreign policy; power; coercion; persuasion; diplomacy; agenda-setting

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Introduction

'In a more contested and competitive world', Australia's 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper declares, we must 'maximise our national power and international influence' (Australian Government 2017, 2). But what does this entail for a state that has been variously described as a 'pivotal power', a 'middle power', a 'top 20 power' and a 'superpower' in the South Pacific (ASPI 2014)? In order to 'maximise' something one must be clear about what it is they are maximising. The 'Asia Power Index', recently launched by the Lowy Institute for International Policy, offers one perspective, by developing and aggregating 114 separate indicators to evaluate and compare the power of 25 states (Lowy Institute 2018). While not explicitly endorsed by the Index's authors, this methodological approach does imply one strategy for how Canberra might conceptualise and then pursue the White Paper objective—augment Australia's material and non-material resources along many (or all) of these quantifiable dimensions.

We outline an alternative approach to conceptualising and measuring power. Without denying the value of consistently quantifiable metrics as embodied in the Lowy Institute's impressive effort, we argue that power should ultimately be conceptualised and evaluated not as an attribute possessed by its wielder, but as the ability to achieve specific outcomes by changing the behaviour of others. To complement Lowy's carefully catalogued database of resources, we offer a typology identifying five discrete ways that states can translate resources into outcomes in world politics (what we term 'pathways' to power) and the respective mechanisms through which each operates. We suggest that focusing on *how* and under what conditions certain resources can be transformed into outcomes facilitates a more meaningful and focused conversation about 'measuring' and potentially 'maximising' power and influence in Australian foreign policy.

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Conceptualising Power in World Politics

To say anything meaningful about power and its use requires a clear definition. A central theme of international relations scholarship from the discipline's earliest beginnings, the definition, dimensions and measurement of power remain hotly contested. From the practical perspective of achieving foreign policy outcomes favourable to the national interest, we argue the simplest and most useful definition remains Robert Dahl's intuitive idea that 'A has power over B to the extent that [they] can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do' (1957, 202–3).

Dahl's conceptualisation has two key features: first, it is causal in the sense that the successful use of power means being able to bring about (or prevent) change; and second, it conceives of power as an actual or potential relationship between social actors whom we term *senders* (A) and *targets* (B). Thinking about power in such relational terms must be distinguished from viewing power as an attribute, defined in terms of an actor's (in this case a state's) possession of tangible and intangible resources. While the latter approach is popular with some scholars and many policymakers because it 'makes power appear more concrete, measureable and predictable' (Nye 1990, 178), it has at least three shortcomings.

The first is that unlike money in an economic transaction, power resources in political interactions are relatively non-fungible: those effective in one context 'may not only lose their effectiveness in another context; they may actually become liabilities rather than assets' (Baldwin 1979, 166). Nuclear weapons may be useful for a sender state deterring armed attack against its homeland, but they are unlikely to help the sender negotiate a favourable trade agreement.

The second is the issue of 'power conversion' (Nye 1990, 178). The ability of a sender to convert resources into outcomes, i.e., changed behaviour of a target, is conditioned by a sender's skill and/or motivation to deploy resources effectively. It is almost trite to observe now that having the largest and most technically advanced armed forces in the world is insufficient by itself to ensure military victory. Similarly, the fact that a

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sender is one of a target's most important trading partners will not always mean it can leverage that dependence into influence.

Third, and flowing from the previous, possessing resources alone is not meaningful unless one specifies the target(s) of the influence attempt and the matter(s) seeking to be influenced.[i] While resources are certainly a component of power relations, their possession is unreliable as a measure of an actor's ability to change others' behaviour. Context does not just matter; it is the most important feature in exercising power.

Tools purporting to measure and compare power must pay heed of such concerns. The Lowy Institute's 'Asia Power Index' is truly an impressive feat: drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data, it ranks 25 regional states from most to least powerful according to how they score on eight 'measures of power'. While the authors define power in relational terms in their methodology—as "the capacity of a state or territory to direct or influence the behaviour of other states, non-state actors, and the course of international events" (Lowy Institute 2018, 3)—they ultimately rely on resources as measures of power. Each of the 114 indicators used to calculate the eight measures represents a material (e.g. reserve currency, supercomputers, embassies) or non-material (e.g. military alliances, Google interest, political leadership) resource. Australia was found to 'punch above its weight', ranking sixth, but one is left wondering exactly what this means. Australia has the sixth greatest power in the region … but to get whom to do what, and how? The authors never say.

Beyond capturing the relational nature of power, a Dahlian conceptualisation of power has additional advantages. First, it is broad enough to incorporate influence attempts relying upon both material and non-material resources (Baldwin 2016, 42). Second, it is sufficiently neutral to include situations where a sender causes a target to act *in accordance* with the target's own preferences. As such, it is not restricted to situations where a sender 'wins' and a target 'loses'—it can capture dynamics of both conflict and cooperation. Finally, the notion of a sender causing a target to behave otherwise is flexible enough to capture all three so-called 'faces' of power popular in academic discourses: (1) the direct use of resources to change a target's behaviour by imposing

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costs or conferring benefits; (2) the ability to shape a decision-making agenda to which the target will be subject (Bachrach and Baratz 1962); and (3) the ability to shape a target's initial preferences (Lukes 2005).

In the context of Australian foreign policy therefore, we define 'power' as the capacity of the Australian government to take actions and implement policies that cause other actors in international politics (governments, organisations, individuals or other non-state actors) to do something they would not otherwise do—whether that is acting otherwise, or thinking otherwise. We now augment our conceptual framework by specifying the possible mechanisms through which the capabilities catalogued by the Lowy Institute can be translated into power.

Pathways to Power in Australian Foreign Policy

The following typology delineates five distinct pathways through which power (as we define it) can be exercised through a state's foreign policy. We begin by defining each pathway in the abstract to distinguish its unique dynamics. In practice of course, the boundaries between them will blur and policy-makers are likely to rely upon multiple pathways simultaneously in their influence attempts. We illustrate each by drawing on examples from the Australian experience.

Coercion

Coercion takes place where a sender imposes or threatens to impose costs on a target in order to cause the target to do what they would otherwise not do. It involves a sender harnessing its 'power to hurt' and issuing a '*threat* of damage, or of more damage to come' to a target (Schelling 1966, 2-3, emphasis in original). Coercion can be communicated via statement or positive action and may be directed either toward discouraging the target from changing their behaviour and thereby upholding the status quo (the traditional concept of 'deterrence'), or forcing the target to change their behaviour (Schelling's novel concept of 'compellence'). Coercion seeks to manipulate a target's decision-making calculus such that the costs of resisting the sender's demands

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(and protecting whatever interest is in dispute) outweigh the benefits. While coercion is typically associated with military force, senders can impose or threaten costs using numerous instruments of statecraft; for example, economic coercion via formal or informal sanctions that disrupt beneficial trading relationships.

The idea of militarily coercing a major actor in world politics 'seems far-fetched' to most Australians (White 2012). Nevertheless, Canberra is capable of exercising coercion on its own given the right target and context. In the 1997 Sandline Affair, Australia compelled the Papua New Guinean government to cancel a $36 million contract signed with a British company to procure arms, training and mercenaries for their fight against the Bougainville Revolutionary Army. Compellence came by threatening "dramatic and drastic measures that would harm PNG"—such as withdrawing Australia's $300 million aid program and a $12 million program for defence cooperation (Gyngell and Wesley 2003, 5).

Bargaining

Bargaining involves a voluntary exchange relationship, where a sender exchanges (or offers to exchange) something of value with a target in return for the target doing something they would otherwise not do.[ii] The most straightforward example is where a sender provides (usually economic) benefits—so-called 'carrots' or 'positive inducements'—in a direct *quid pro quo* for some change in the target's behaviour, such as a policy concession. Consider Australia's successful bid for a non-permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2012. Prior to the election, Australia increased its provision of financial and other aid to small states in the Caribbean and Latin America—states that do not typically receive a significant share of Canberra's aid budget. That such aid was wound back after Australia secured the votes suggests some kind of exchange relationship, however subtle.

Bargaining power can also be leveraged during international negotiations to affect distributional outcomes, insofar as the sender causes a target to accept a mutually beneficial agreement in which the sender nevertheless captures a disproportionate share

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of the benefits. Consider Australia's 2002 Timor Sea Treaty and 2006 Treaty on Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea with Timor Leste. Under these agreements Australia probably secured the 'better' deal—including 50 per cent control over the lucrative Greater Sunshine field despite uncertainty regarding Australia's rights and obligations (Smith 2011). Bargaining power stemmed from Canberra's relatively greater negotiation resources and the fact that the costs of non-agreement were higher for Timor Leste—swiftly securing a stable revenue stream was critical to the small nation's budget.

Agenda-setting

Agenda-setting occurs where a sender shapes the parameters of what is and is not legitimate or feasible for a target to do within a specific institutional framework or issue area. The core indicator of power having been exercised is the fact that a target does what it would not otherwise have done as a result of those boundaries, rather than any specific threat or exchange.

In the foreign policy domain, agenda-setting can take place in at least two distinct ways—one narrow, and one broad. The narrow instance occurs where a sender is able to manipulate the issues that will be discussed (*substance*) and the order and manner in which that will occur (*procedure*) within bilateral or multilateral international forums. For example, during its recent term on the UNSC Australia had various opportunities to shape the substance and procedure of international decision-making. When Australia twice assumed the monthly-rotating position of Council President in September 2013 and November 2014, it was able to schedule thematic debates that ultimately led to the adoption of new resolutions on police in peacekeeping and small arms and light weapons (Langmore and Farrall 2016, 63).

The broader instance of agenda-setting occurs where a sender state is able to create or shape international regimes: 'principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue-area' (Krasner 1982, 185). While the initial creation or shaping of regimes will often involve a sender exercising

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other forms of power (including coercion, bargaining or persuasion), once the regime is in place it can operate independently to limit (or enable) target states' pursuit of national interests. An example is the instrumental role Australia played in the creation of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in 1989. In shaping rules and decision-making procedures within APEC since that time Canberra has influenced the behaviour of other states in issue areas including trade, investment and health (Rimmer 2016, 637-8). Some also view Australia's enduring commitment to promotion of the Responsibility to Protect as having been critical in providing that norm with the legitimacy necessary for its application in, for example, the 2011 Libyan intervention (Ralph 2017).

Persuasion

Persuasion occurs where a sender state uses communication to alter the beliefs of one or more target states about what is true, right or appropriate without threatening to impose costs or promising to exchange something of value (Keohane 2013). Persuasion fundamentally relies upon the provision of information through a communicative act by a sender state directed towards one or more targets.

Persuasive information may help illuminate the target's interests or how they can be achieved, such as by clarifying causal processes or other relevant empirical facts. Persuasion helped Australia establish the Cairns Group in 1986. Relying on research by its Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Australia presented technical information about the costs of subsidies and protection in global agriculture trade to other agricultural exporting nations, helping mobilise the formation of a coalition to pursue common trade objectives in the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations (Higgott and Cooper 1990, 611-12). Clarifying common interests and catalysing states to join the coalition represented the exercise of persuasive power.

Information may also relate to normative principles. A sender might present a case to the target about the 'right thing to do' by reference to morals, values or other norms. For example, to secure the now popular E3 visa, the Australian Embassy in Washington

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argued to Congress that it was 'unconscionable' for Australia not to be afforded dedicated visas that—while absent from the Australia-US Free Trade Agreement—were included in agreements with Chile and Singapore (Tidwell 2017).[iii]

Attraction

Attraction is most akin to Joseph Nye's concept of 'soft power', and operates where a target's beliefs (and possibly actions) change to become more aligned with the sender's preferences due to an interest in, admiration of or desire to emulate the sender. It is the ability to make targets 'want what you want' (Nye 2004, 2). Many factors might contribute to a sender state's 'attractiveness'. Nye specifically points to a sender's 'culture, political ideals, and policies', and argues that these will be attractive to a target where perceived as 'legitimate' (2004, x).

The Foreign Policy White Paper underlines that the 'ability to influence the behaviour or thinking of others through the power of attraction' is 'vital' to Australian foreign policy (2017, 109). While attractive power alone may rarely shape the beliefs or behaviour of targets decisively, attraction will augment other influence attempts. For example, international students may find Australia more attractive after exposure to the nation's quality of life, culture and people (Laifer and Kitchen 2017). In the event that a graduate returns to work in their home country, a positive disposition towards Australia and its people—perhaps reinforced by a network of individual contacts—could well enhance their interest in cooperating or engaging with Australian counterparts, and even being persuaded by an Australian perspective.

Conclusion

Our overarching point is that meaningful strategising about the pursuit of power in Australian foreign policy requires answering the following question: "over whom, to do what?". Resource-based measures do not answer this question. Doing so requires instead specifying desired outcomes, the behavioural changes needed to achieve those outcomes, and then thinking carefully about which pathways to power Australian

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policymakers have the necessary resources, skills and resolve to pursue, and the mechanisms through which these will affect targets. The conceptual framework outlined here can assist with this task, and the Lowy Institute's Index provides a helpful inventory for beginning to think about the resources Australia might draw upon. Above all however, power cannot be possessed, compared or maximised in the abstract; its successful use is conditioned by the context of particular relationships, interests and circumstances.

End notes

[i] Dahl (1957) terms the former 'scope' and the latter 'domain'.
[ii] Schelling views coercion as a form of bargaining (1966, 2). We distinguish bargaining from coercion by requiring exchanges be voluntary and positive-sum.
[iii] The E3 category created 10,500 visas with generous conditions available only to Australians.

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