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The Dynamics of Global Power Politics: A Framework for Analysis

Stacie E. Goddard[1] and Daniel H. Nexon[2]

[1]Wellesley College and [2]Georgetown University

Abstract

We call for a research program focused on the dynamics of global power politics. Rather than link *realpolitik* to structural-realist theoretical frameworks or the putatively anarchical character of world politics, the program treats power politics as an object of analysis in its own right. It embraces debate over the nature of global power politics among scholars working with distinctive approaches. It sees the structural contexts of power politics as highly variable and often hierarchical in character. It attenuates *ex ante* commitments to the centrality of states in global politics. And it takes for granted that actors deploy multiple resources and modalities of power in their pursuit of influence. What binds this diverse research program together is its focus on *realpolitik* as the politics of collective mobilization in the context of the struggle for influence among political communities, broadly understood. Thus, the study of the dynamics of collective mobilization—the causal and constitutive pathways linking efforts at mobilization with enhanced power—brings together approaches to security studies in a shared study of power politics.

Key words: realism, power politics, *realpolitik*, critical security studies, contentious politics, power

In the wake of the Russian Federation's intervention in Ukraine, US Secretary of State John Kerry declared that "You just don't in the twenty-first century behave in nineteenth-century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pretext."[1] Indeed, a number of analysts see the return of traditional *realpolitik*: "Whether it is Russian forces seizing Crimea, China making aggressive claims in its coastal waters, Japan responding with an increasingly assertive strategy of its own, or Iran trying to use its alliances with Syria and Hezbollah to dominate the Middle East, old-fashioned power plays are back in international relations."[2]

Others express skepticism. They view international relations as more peaceful and less marked by *realpolitik* than ever before. States increasingly rely on international institutions and international law to adjudicate their conflicts and pursue their interests. Economic and political interdependence, long-standing consolidated democracies, and other developments create "security communities" within which states no longer use force to resolve their disputes. In many places in the world, the spread of nuclear weapons dampens the risk of local conflicts escalating to general wars.[3] Whatever the

1 http://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-march-2-2014-kerry-hagel/, accessed December 26, 2014.

2 Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Power Politics: The Revenge of Revisionist Powers," *Foreign Affairs* May/June 2014. http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141211/walter-russell-mead/the-return-of-geopolitics, accessed December 26, 2014.

3 For a good summary of these arguments, see G. John Ikenberry, "The Illusion of Geopolitics: The Enduring Power of Liberal Order," *Foreign Affairs* May/June 2014. http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141212/g-john-ikenberry/the-illusion-of-geopolitics, accessed December 26, 2014.

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cause, traditional power politics now lies at the margins of the contemporary world order.

This debate encapsulates enduring problems with the way that many think about power politics. Scholars on both sides associate *realpolitik* primarily with the machinations of military power. They insist that states remain the core practitioners of power politics. And they often treat the institutions of liberal order not as *changing* the dynamics of power politics, but somehow *supplanting* them entirely. When taken as a whole, such terms of debate reproduce a misleading baseline assumption still found in international relations scholarship: that the *nature* and *salience* of global power politics—"old-fashioned" or otherwise—stems from the states-under-anarchy framework associated with contemporary realist theory.

We argue that it is time for security studies to abandon this debate, to stop equating *realpolitik* with contemporary realism, and to set the parameters of a research program that we term "the dynamics of power politics."[4] The research program begins with a basic wager: that there exists an analytically distinctive mode of political activity that centers around the struggle for influence in global politics. *Power politics, therefore, constitutes an object of analysis in its own right*—one open to investigation through a variety of theoretical, methodological, ontological, and epistemological lenses. What binds the research program together is its focus on *realpolitik* as the politics of collective mobilization in the context of the struggle for influence among political communities, broadly understood. In particular, the study of the dynamics of collective mobilization—which examines the mechanisms and processes, or the causal and constitutive pathways linking efforts at mobilization with enhanced power—brings disparate approaches to security studies together in a shared study of power politics.[5]

The threads of this research program already exist throughout the field of security studies and extend into the broader discipline of international relations. Scholars drawing on "orthodox" approaches to security studies—such as classical and neoclassical realism—have long called for us to study the processes that drive a state's mobilization of its power, and particularly how failures to mobilize resources can undercut power politics. Other less mainstream—or "heterodox"—approaches push us to examine how, for example, actors deploy discursive resources and repertoires to mobilize some actors and silence others. But attempts to move this debate beyond claims of theoretical incommensurability remain inchoate. The reason, in no small measure, stems from the persistent effects of the shadow of realism that looms over our understanding of *realpolitik*—or, more precisely, a realism distorted by, first, the stubborn persistence of the states-under-anarchy framework and, second, a misunderstanding of what it means to claim that military power remains the *ultima ratio* of international relations. Widespread confusion about the categories "material" and "material power" only makes matters worse (Barkin 2003; Bially Mattern 2003; Nexon and Pouliot 2013, 333–34).

In relation to the so-called "paradigms" and "turns" of international relations theory and security studies, we thus locate the "dynamics of power politics" as *post-realist*. It borrows from realism a focus on global politics as a site marked by enduring struggles for power. It shares a profound skepticism concerning the potential for a durable "harmony of interests" among international actors (Fox 1949, 76). And it adopts the critical impulse of realism to uncover the workings of *realpolitik*—of power and domination—in the actions of states, leaders, transnational movements, and other actors in world politics.

At the same time, the study of the dynamics of power politics departs from realism and incorporates key arguments from heterodox approaches in security studies. First, *it treats the centrality of states to power politics as variable*. The outsized significance of states in power politics stems from their superior collective-mobilization capacity. Functioning states enjoy extensive symbolic and organizational infrastructure to direct and deploy resources, including people and wealth. But this does not imply that other actors cannot also mobilize resources in the pursuit of power (Cronin 2002/2003; Adamson 2005; Tarrow 2005). Nor does it imply "sameness" among states across time and space (Sørensen 1998). With differences in symbolic and organizational infrastructure comes consequential variation in the nature, scope, and dynamics of collective mobilization within and across political communities.

Second, *it takes for granted that non-military instruments matter a great deal for power politics*. Although force constitutes the *ultima ratio* in global politics, we disagree that this limits the significance of economic, cultural, symbolic, diplomatic, and other instruments.

4 We model both the sensibility and aspects of the argument on McAdam et al. (2001). That is, we see the study of "power politics" as intellectually and substantively similarly motivated to the study of "contentious politics." See also Slater (2010) and Aminzade et al. (2001).

5 The study of the dynamics of power politics thus finds kinship with calls to take practices, transactions, and relations themselves as basic units of analysis (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 2013; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Adler-Nissen 2012; Bueger and Gadinger 2015).

The study of the dynamics of power politics ignores non-military instruments at its peril. States and other actors cannot, for example, mobilize military force without legitimating, paying for, and making sense of its use (Ringmar 1996; Barkawi 2005; Schweller 2006; Taliaferro 2006). They often utilize propaganda, norms, and diplomacy to undercut or facilitate military power—whether their own or that of their friends and rivals. Much of the struggle for influence takes place short of force and the threat of force. Efforts to enhance relative position through the use of—and on the terrain of—wealth, legitimation, diplomatic ties, and other non-military resources are often more than "routine diplomatic friction" (Lieber and Alexander 2005, 54). They are the very stuff of power politics.

Third, the program rejects the claim that anarchy drives global power politics. Anarchy obtains when two or more actors interact with another in the absence of authoritative ties. Yet much of contemporary and historical global politics takes place in the *presence* of rules, institutions, and social domination (Donnelly 2009; Nexon 2009b). Hierarchy, not anarchy, conditions much of the dynamics of not just international, but global, power politics (Weber 1997; Hobson and Sharman 2005; Nexon and Wright 2007; Donnelly 2009; Lake 2009; Nexon 2009b, chap. 2; Towns 2009; Zarakol 2011; Goh 2013). It follows that international organizations, international law, norms, rules, and other favorite topics of liberals and constructivists are not "alternatives" to a power-political model of global politics. They are means, medium, subjects, and objects in the struggle for influence (Hurd 2005; Adler and Pouliot 2014).

The article proceeds as follows. We begin by defining "global power politics." We outline the connections between realism, power politics, and security studies. In the next section, we argue that at the heart of power politics are processes of collective mobilization, and that a focus on the mechanisms of mobilization can productively bring together orthodox and heterodox approaches to security. The paper then turns to how a focus on collective mobilization brings scholars beyond current debates about the role of states, military power, and anarchy in power politics. We conclude by further specifying the mechanisms of power politics and the implications of a process-based approach to the study of power politics.[6]

Realism and Its Critics in Security Studies

"International politics is by necessity power politics." So Morgenthau (1948, 15) proclaims in the opening chapter of *Politics among Nations*. Yet despite its centrality to international relations scholarship, the concept of "power politics" remains surprisingly ill defined. Indeed, much of the canon treats the term as essentially self-explanatory. Thus, we might turn to dictionaries. Merriam-Webster, for instance, defines "power politics" as "politics based on the use of military or economic power to influence the actions and decisions of other governments."[7] But one of the most influential approaches comes from Max Weber, who understood "power politics" as a condition in which politics "turn into a fight *for* power as a prelude to political action *by means of* power; the *means* of politics" thus "becomes the *goal* of the politician" (Bruun 2012, 264).

Following such approaches, we define *global power politics* as involving politics based on the use of power to influence the actions and decisions of actors that claim, or exercise, authority over a political community.[8] Further, we define the *study* of power politics as, in its primary form, an inquiry into the mechanisms, instruments, and logics by which such actors enhance their influence in global politics. It may also take a more critical-theoretic aim, such as debating how putatively moral policies serve power-political ends, how power-political maneuvers serve other interests than those explicitly invoked to justify them, and how they operate to reproduce various social and normative arrangements (cf. Kevlihan, deRouen, and Biglaiser 2014; Averre and Davies 2015; Chandler 2015; Headley 2015).[9]

Power Politics, Realism, and Security Studies

The study of power politics remains central to security studies. Actors' attempts to secure themselves will frequently, if not necessarily, involve competition over power. There was a time when few would contest such a claim. Arguably the "founders" of the field of security studies—scholars like William T. R. Fox at Columbia, Arnold Wolfers at SAIS, and Bernard Brodie

6 We define processes as "a causally or functionally linked set of occurrences or events which produce a 'change in the complexion of reality.'" We can disaggregate processes into constituent mechanisms: "delimited sorts of events that change relations among specified sets of elements . . . " However, we should think of the difference between processes and mechanisms as relative and analytical—more a function of our explanatory interest than a rigid ontological distinction (Jackson and Nexon 1999, 302).

7 http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/power%20politics, accessed May 5, 2015.

8 As we discuss below, we use the term "political community" in a very inclusive sense. It extends from states to non-state organizations, from activated and integrated political groups to aspirational ones.

9 Consider E. H. Carr's (1946) analysis of Anglo-American morality.

at Yale—saw security as intricately connected with a struggle of power. Studying security required, they argued, asking how actors could secure their interests against threats in the international system—a system in which all interactions take place under the "shadow of force"—that is, the potential for war.

During the post–World War II period, security studies became virtually synonymous with the study of power politics. This reflected the dominance of realism within security studies—in contrast to the fields of peace science and peace studies, which constituted themselves as explicitly anti-realist. By the "Second Cold War" of the 1980s, the structural-realist approach to power politics emerged as the intellectual focal point for debates in security studies. In structural-realist theory, the balance of power constitutes the primary logic by which states ensure their security. The prominence of realism in security studies cements the sense that power politics primarily involves balancing behavior, military force, and expansion backed by military capabilities. This entails significant attention to, on the one hand, the extraction of resources for military mobilization—internal balancing and expansionism—and, on the other, alignment and alliance politics, or external balancing and bandwagoning. This is not to say that realism eschews other concerns. Realists show significant interest in, among other things, the politics of deterrence. They also expend great effort to show that calculations involving military security, capabilities, and efficacy drive much of foreign policy. Rather, most of the major debates within realist security studies pivot around, in general, the workings of military instruments and, in particular, the factors driving states to expand and form alliances and go to war (see, for example, Keohane 1986; Guzzini 1998; Boucoyannis 2007; Wohlforth, Kaufman, and Little 2007; Barkin 2010).

In a highly stylized sense, the various "paradigm wars" of the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s involved heterodox approaches to security studies—approaches such as constructivist, post-structuralist, critical-theoretic, securitization theory, feminist theories, among others—that positioned themselves against various "core" propositions associated with realism (for discussions and examples, see Tannenwald 1999; Leander 2005; Wilcox 2009; Wibben 2010; Enloe 2014; Fierke 2015). These approaches challenged variously the salience of anarchy as a constitutive feature of international politics; the social ontology of security and power that undergirds contemporary realist theory; the status of states as the primary actors in world politics; and the realist dismissal of durable cooperation, international institutions, international law, and norms as critical features of international relations. For example, Browning and McDonald (2013, 236) describe critical security studies as rejecting the realist privileging of "the state as the referent object of security and 'threat and use of force'... as the subject of security."

Where has this left the study of power politics and *realpolitik* within security studies? The short answer is in a state of fragmentation. On the one hand, realists continue to claim a monopoly over "traditional" understandings of power politics. On the other hand, heterodox approaches offer a proliferation of understandings of power, security, and the proper focus of security studies. In the midst of continued paradigmatic bickering, it is difficult to find common ground. A research program on the dynamics of power politics provides, we submit, a way forward.

The Dynamics of Global Power Politics

We begin with a basic proposition: beneath their disparate analytical frameworks, social ontologies, and even conceptions of power, many of the different "paradigms," "turns," and "isms" found in contemporary security studies and international relations scholarship already share a focus on the *mechanisms of collective mobilization*: that is to say, these approaches seek to identify the *processes and mechanisms* that link the efforts of actors to organize collective action with the distribution of influence in global politics. Within all of these approaches, we find a variety of mechanisms and processes by which actors engage in, seek to achieve, or orient joint action. It is this focus on mechanisms that provides grounds for a substantive conversation between orthodox and heterodox approaches to power politics (cf. Tilly 1995; Kurki 2008).

Collective mobilization lies at the root of *all* politics. Returning to our definition, to study *global power politics* means to study collective mobilization under two specific conditions. First, it involves collective action oriented toward expanding influence at the expense of rivals. Second, we are interested in collective mobilization involving the relations, transactions, practices, and decisions of actors that claim, or exercise, authority over a political community. This includes power politics beyond relations among nation-states, such as those involving transnational violence-wielding movements, international organizations, and sub-state actors. But it excludes, *in and of themselves*, the analysis of power politics within, say, businesses or bureaucracies.[10] While

10 Which is not to say that all of these domains don't share mechanisms and processes.

such boundaries on the domain of global power politics will often prove porous—and allow for significant debates about "what counts" as "global" politics—this provides some measure to distinguish between the study of power relations, per se, and the study of global power politics.

Collective mobilization already lies at the core of orthodox and heterodox approaches to power politics in security studies. Recent debates within realism about the balance of power also showcase how much of power politics depends upon effective collective action. Schweller (2006, 36–48), for example, argues that variation in collective mobilization capacity *within* states stems from differences in "the extractive and mobilization capacity of politico-military institutions, the influence of domestic societal actors and interest groups, the degree of state autonomy from society, and the level of elite or societal cohesion" (Taliaferro, Lobell, and Ripsman 2009, 4). The logic of securitization calls attention to how collective action is provoked by speech acts, the construction of an "existential threat" and an institutional apparatus designed to promulgate and reinforce the saliency of the putative threat, and so forth (Buzan et al. 1998; Balzacq 2005; McDonald 2008). For its part, scholarship on the role of identity and norms in security studies focuses on how they inhibit, or facilitate, joint action within and among states—as well as other actors in global politics (see, e.g., Wendt 1992; Katzenstein 1996; Duffield 1999; Williams and Neumann 2000; Finnemore 2004; Adamson 2005; Hansen 2011). Indeed, numerous studies show that actors in global politics deploy norms and meanings to influence the behavior of others, and often in ways that serve power-political ends (Hurd 1999; Krebs and Jackson 2007; Goddard 2008/2009; Greenhill 2013; Goddard and Krebs 2015).

In other words, scholars from diverse traditions already place collective mobilization at the center of power politics. We aim to make this shared object of study explicit: when we study power politics, we analyze efforts to collectively mobilize in the pursuit of influence or to interfere with the ability of targets to pursue joint action. More specifically, the study of global power politics should entail identifying *recurrent mechanisms* at work in processes of collective mobilization.

Consider three seemingly disparate approaches to security studies: a neorealist balance-of-power theory; a "constructivist" theory of persuasion; and a "critical" securitization theory. From a paradigmatic perspective, these theories are putatively separated by incommensurable foundational concepts. Yet all of these theories identify dynamics of collective mobilization as the crux of power politics. Balancing involves two actors pooling resources to rectify a perceived security deficit. Rhetorical coercion and persuasion involve specific ways that actors frame issues in order to get others to converge on a preferred course of action. Securitization involves a process in which the construction of a referent object as an existential threat induces individuals and social groups to orient their behavior toward specific ends.

A focus on mechanisms provides grounds for a substantive conversation between orthodox and heterodox approaches to power politics that share a research program of power politics. In the aforementioned examples, securitization, rhetorical coercion, and persuasion involve mechanisms and processes that may work to enable or prevent balancing. But beneath such disparate mechanisms lie a limited number of *logics* of power-political maneuvers. In very broad terms, all collective mobilization associated with power politics involves some combination of two overarching logics: *integration* and *fragmentation*.

Logics of integration involve efforts to maintain and expand joint action. They may involve activating or creating common identities and norms around relevant actors and social sites (cf. Klotz 1999; Neumann 1999; Jackson 2003; Joachim 2003), building infrastructure that facilitates monitoring and coordination among them (cf. Weber 1997, 2000), or creating incentive structures for them to engage in, join, or continue existing mobilization (McLauchlin 2015). Relevant processes may stem from intentional efforts of agents aimed at joint action. Or mobilization may bootstrap on a variety of intersecting mechanisms and processes that, in and of themselves, need not result from deliberate attempts to consolidate or trigger collective action (in general, see Tilly 1978, 2005; McAdam et al. 2001; Mische 2003).[11]

Logics of fragmentation involve efforts to disrupt or prevent joint action. They usually involve similar mechanisms and processes, but are oriented toward breaking apart or inhibiting the joint action of others. Indeed, sometimes power-political maneuvers necessarily involve *both* logics, such as when actors secure mobilization along ethnic lines via efforts that fragment cross-ethnic interactions and joint action. Other times, they fall more cleanly into one of the two categories.[12]

11 The term "social site" demarcates any organization, entity, or other social location implicated in relevant relations. On the distinction between actor-centric and other processes, see Jackson and Nexon (1999).

12 This helps get at the distinction sometimes drawn between "power over" and "power to" (See Berenskoetter [2007, 4] and Avant [2016]). Collective mobilization may involve positive-sum gains in influence

For example, what we often call "external balancing" constitutes an integrative form of power-political collective mobilization. Actors aim to mobilize resources across state boundaries in order to correct a security deficit—to "pool resources." (Nexon 2009a, 343). "Internal balancing," too, can involve several mechanisms associated with integration. A state might seek to convert its economic activity into military might. It might deploy ideological instruments to mobilize its population around a "national interest." Indeed, focusing on mechanisms and logics encourages us to unpack other processes of mobilization at work in global power politics.

Consider the mechanism of *binding*—one that appears in both realist and liberal approaches to institutions and power politics. To understand how some form of binding works, we could analyze how actors use diplomatic instruments to integrate their own military mobilization with that of another state—via concrete acts such as permanent alliances or joint military exercises—to ensure that any military mobilization must occur jointly, and thus disrupt the ability of any state to act autonomously.[13] Similarly, actors may use economic instruments to bind other countries to their preferred economic policies (cf. Germann 2014). Likewise, "yoking" is a process that mobilizes together different identities into a coherent corporate actor. The Cold War, for example, involved not only alliances, but yoking together the United States and Europe into the "West" (Jackson 2003).

Building a research program around the study of mechanisms and processes implies not only a redefined substantive focus of study, but a serious methodological reorientation of security studies. By adopting a process-centered approach, we suggest that security studies should be concerned not with the production of universal and invariant laws or with the creation of a "grand theory" of world politics, but rather with the identification of recurrent processes, the mechanisms through which they operate, and how they configure to produce specific outcomes (Bennett 2013).

We further wager that these dynamics of collective mobilization potentially operate regardless of the specific actors that practice power politics—states, transnational actors, or whatever. They appear regardless of the particular *instruments*—forms of power—that are deployed. And finally, we propose that the mechanisms of collective mobilization replicate under a variety of structural contexts—not just anarchy—in which power-political maneuvers take place.[14]

Actors in Global Politics

Accusations of "state centrism" remain a touchstone for critics of realism. Indeed, contemporary realists often assume that power politics—or, at least, the power politics that really "matter"—is the province of states. States enjoy an unrivaled capacity to practice *realpolitik*. They represent the only political communities capable of mustering and deploying the resources necessary to survive under anarchy. And, of course, not all states are created equal. From a realist perspective, power politics is by definition great power politics, as it is these actors' pursuit of security that determines the overarching dynamics of the international system.

Criticisms range from demanding reform to a complete rejection of realist theoretical infrastructure. The less dramatic include claims that realists unduly neglect the role of non-state actors, particularly violence-wielding ones. Even non-violent transnational and sub-state actors may profoundly impact security: from the security of individuals and social groups to how and when states pursue military force. These claims bleed over into more profound critiques, including that transnational movements and international institutions "shape and shove" how states pursue security in ways not captured by the states-under-anarchy framework. Some argue that we should view these kinds of actors as autonomous agents in international security. The most profound criticisms, however, hold that realists get the relevant "units" and "structures" of international security completely wrong.[15] For example, some feminists argue that gender structures world politics and that state-centrists thus miss the most important dimensions of security. Likewise, many Marxists focus on class analysis, modes of production, and the like (e.g., Sjoberg 2009, Tickner 2014).

We contend that the study of the dynamics of power politics should embrace a healthy, but not unlimited, agnosticism about which actors matter in global power politics. We have already demarcated a global power politics research program as studying the collective mobilization of those that claim, or exercise, authority over

for participants, but in competitive arenas it necessarily reduces the *relative* influence of others. Of course, *within* mobilization, relative power is also usually not simply positive-sum.

13 The process itself, of course, amounts to an example of collective mobilization. As noted elsewhere, most efforts at interfering with the collective-mobilization capacity of others entail joint action of one kind or another.

14 These kinds of considerations distinguish our proposed research program from Barkin's (2010) "realist constructivism." What we have in mind, for example, applies realist sensibilities far more broadly than as "theories of foreign policy."

15 For an overview of these criticisms, see Nexon (2009, Chapter 2).

a political community. But these actors need not be states. Any social group in which a limited number of actors exercise authority over relevant cross-boundary transactions—whether sovereign states, multinational firms, transnational social movements, or militias—qualifies as a corporate actor (Nexon 2009a, 45–46). Thus, for the study of the dynamics of global power politics:

- The emergence and persistence of actors in global power politics itself depends on successful collective mobilization—and this remains true for states, social movements, terrorist groups, and the like;
- The relative significance of states with respect to alternative social sites inheres in how much success they enjoy in maintaining, sustaining, and initiating collective mobilization;
- The actors relevant to global security will often prove empirically variable—a function of relative success in achieving joint action within and around social boundaries; and
- Some of the most fundamental dynamics of power politics operate in and around the constitution of actors themselves.

At some level, realists correctly argue that states constitute some of the most significant actors of, and sites for, global power politics. States number among those actors largely responsible for expanding control, as well as undercutting the influence of others, in the context of struggles among political communities. At the same time, the realist argument rests on under-examined assumptions about the modern state's capacity for collective mobilization. From at least the nineteenth century onward, states have enjoyed unrivaled abilities when it comes to mobilizing effective military instruments, such as training and equipping large standing armies. States dominate economic mobilization, providing the infrastructure necessary for economic growth in the industrial and post-industrial age, the power to protect property, and the ability to extract economic resources from their population to engage in power politics. States dominate the symbolic universe of power politics as well. States claim political legitimacy: the right to act in the name of a people in the pursuit of security. Whether they claim that right in the name of dynastic ties, a nation, or democracy, they exert tremendous gravitational pull over the symbolic levers of power politics. It is this potent mix of military, economic, and symbolic mobilization that gives states the pride of place in global power politics (Nexon 2009b, chaps. 2 and 9; Buzan and Lawson 2013).

This may all seem fairly straightforward. Yet disaggregating state power into processes of collective mobilization pushes a power-politics research program beyond realism in a number of ways. It rejects realist claims that the "state" is a generalizable historical unit. Realists have long assumed that the "state" is a fair representation of all political communities, that we can productively treat medieval monarchs, dynasts, and colonial empires as analogous to "states." In making this assumption, realists have created an ahistorical theory of power politics that travels, at best, uncomfortably across time and space (Phillips and Sharman 2015). In contrast, we suggest that these political actors may engage in contextually variable modes and methods of collective mobilization. For example, the "nation-state" has proven itself extraordinarily effective at mobilizing its domestic population at home. But when compared to its imperial counterparts, it seems less able to project power into the periphery, to govern the conquered, or to claim universal legitimacy (MacDonald 2013, 2014). By abandoning the assumption that all units are "states," a focus on collective mobilization makes it possible to bring some historical sensitivity into our theories, while still generalizing about the processes of power politics.

Moreover, although states (broadly defined) may prove dominant in their ability to mobilize resources, this in no way suggests that they are the only actors who engage in global power politics. If the focus of power politics is on collective mobilization, there is no need to assume that states—and only great powers at that—constitute the sole players in this game. Indeed, arguably power politics are at their most interesting when grave asymmetries in power exist. Actors excluded from the system, the powerless, have much to gain from expanding at the expense of the dominant. The study of global power politics also includes how once-fragmented transnational movements, such as al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, deploy religious resources to mobilize across state lines and mount attacks against international order. Transnational corporations have proven capable of undercutting states' ability to extract resources from within their own boundaries (e.g., Cerny 1995; Adamson 2005). At the same time, it leads us to downplay the power politics of and around international institutions, supranational communities, and other sites that make up contemporary complex governance in world politics.

Power in Global Power Politics

Just as when it comes to identifying relevant actors, the study of the dynamics of power politics must remain open to a variety of ways of conceptualizing power (see

Guzzini 1993; Berenskoetter 2007) as well as the importance of non-military and non-economic interests. We seek to incorporate the heterodox emphasis on "deep" power analysis—such as the study of modalities of power and productive power—by treating it as structuring relations, social fields, and discursive configurations (Barnett and Duvall 2005; Barkin 2010, 132; Neumann and Sending 2010). At the same time, we think a research program on power politics need not offer a conclusive and unified ontology of the nature of power: we seek to theorize power politics, not power itself. Different perspectives on power provide a basis for debate.

An emphasis on *instruments of power* suggests a more conventional orientation. One of the major transposable "units of analysis" for the study of the dynamics of global power politics involves instruments: the *forms* of power at work in the deployment, practices, and relations of global power politics. We propose a number of first-cut categories of power-political instruments: *military*, *economic*, *diplomatic*, *cultural*, and *symbolic*.[16]

- Military instruments often directly deploy, or threaten to directly deploy, the means of warfare against a target. But military instruments can also include arms sales, defense pacts, access agreements, or any other mode of influence rooted in military capital.
- Economic instruments make use of financial assistance, trade relations, economic sanctions, and the like. They seek to coerce, cajole, reward, reduce, or increase economic dependency, or otherwise utilize economic capital to gain influence.
- Diplomatic instruments involve leveraging the stock of social and political capital—including that embodied in specific individuals—accumulated through cross-boundary interactions. Adler-Nissen (2008, 670) refers to this as "diplomatic capital" and associates it with state representatives, but we use the term in the more generic sense of social ties established by actors representing any corporate actor, movement, or institution salient to international power politics (see Lee 2013).
- Cultural instruments make use of assets that confer status or signal membership in a status group. For states, cultural capital can involve anything from being associated with genres of music—such as hip-hop and rock—to controlling access to important religious and historic sites—such as Mecca and Medina, the Great Pyramids, or the Great Wall. Such instruments involve many of the mechanisms and processes associated with the original formulation of "soft power" (Nye 1990) but may take on a more coercive cast, such as threats to cut off access to holy sites.
- Symbolic instruments center around representational politics and include propaganda, persuasion, and other elements of meaning. These instruments often work by impacting the meaning—and thus the value—of objective and social assets. In this sense, a state might "accumulate" symbolic capital by successfully framing its policies and institutions as comporting with the ideological preferences of another actor (cf. Zhang 2004).

These may combine in a variety of different ways. Of particular importance, power-political maneuvers often involve deploying one or more instruments *against* other instruments. For example, much of what passes under the rubric of "soft balancing" involves deploying non-military instruments to undermine—or check—military instruments (Pape 2005; Paul 2005). We intend these categories as highly provisional. They showcase, however, how a research program on the dynamics of power politics allows us to incorporate insights about different forms of power, and the social bases of that power, into traditional accounts of *realpolitik*.

Structure and Global Power Politics

Variation in global structures creates both opportunities and obstacles for collective mobilization: By encouraging some forms of collective action and inhibiting others, it sets the parameters of power politics. We define structures as relative stabilities in patterns of interaction.[17] Structures have *form*, that is to say, they differ in how they arrange and position actors in the international system. According to Ikenberry (2011), for example, the international system can range from being relatively "flat" or oligarchic—dominated by a select group of great powers, like the Concert of Europe—to being managed by a single hegemon or empire.

Structures contain *content* as well. We might cash that content out in terms of the "role-structures" of Wendt's (1999) constructivism; intersubjective norms that constitute, proscribe, and prescribe terms of action and agency; discourse and narratives that give action its

16 We loosely adapt these from Bourdieu-inspired international relations theory. Scholars working in that idiom will recognize them as modified forms of "capital." Compare the lists of power resources found in, say, Carr (1946) and Morgenthau (1948).

17 See Goddard and Nexon (2005) for an extensive discussion of this claim, and how it applies even to structural-realist understandings of anarchy.

meaning; or meanings that help constitute social fields. Structures also manifest in *positional* terms. How actors are situated relative to one another—including which roles they occupy—shapes who can deploy the rules and resources of power politics (see Nexon 2009b, chap. 2).

Contemporary realism famously identifies anarchy—the lack of a common authority to make and enforce disputes—and the distribution of material capabilities as the *root cause* of global power politics: without a central authority, states must compete for relative influence in the international system, or else risk sacrificing their security and survival (Waltz 1986). Many liberals accept this connection between anarchy and power politics, but argue that changes in structure accentuate, limit, or even eliminate *realpolitik* (Jackson and Nexon 2009). Some realists, for their part, argue that American dominance, for example, makes balancing futile: with no hope of matching America's command of the commons, states seek community, not competition, with the hegemon (Wohlforth 1999).

Research on global power politics, we contend, should depart from the realist focus on anarchy. Much of global politics takes place under conditions of super- and subordination (cf. Donnelly 2009). Hierarchies centered around great powers likely explain the findings of the "democratic peace" literature (Barkawi and Laffey 1999; McDonald 2015). Ample scholarship demonstrates that norms, identities, modes of production, trade relationships, institutional affiliations, and other factors have positional and relational consequences in world politics (e.g., Mitzen 2005; Hafner-Burton and Montgomery 2006; Matin 2007; Towns 2009; Neumann and Pouliot 2011; Oatley et al. 2013). And we agree that anarchy focuses on an idealized Westphalian moment, and obscures the effects of myriad structures—race, class, gender, regional, postcolonial—on world politics (Grovogui 1996; Barkawi 2005; Agathangelou and Ling 2009; Acharya 2014).

At the same time, these structural changes in no way eliminate global power politics. Rather, they mutate and transform them (Keohane and Nye 1989). Structural variation produces different *pathways* for collective mobilization: because structures provide both the resources for and constraints on collective mobilization, they shape actors' relative capabilities, strategies, and choices, and thus the dynamics of global power politics.

Variation in the formal properties of structures creates different opportunities for collective mobilization (Simmel 1971). Recent work on transnational movements highlights how the structure of relations positions actors and shapes joint actions (Carpenter 2007, 2011; Carpenter et al. 2014). Montgomery (2005) argues that the organization of illicit nuclear networks creates opportunities and constraints for how interested parties might effectively intervene to disrupt it. Exploration of the formal properties of structure helps account for power in the global political economy (Oatley et al. 2013) and power-political contestation within the American overseas basing network (Cooley and Nexon 2013). Similarly, work on the distinctive dynamics of power politics of empires ties them to their rimless hub-and-spoke structure (Nexon and Wright 2007; Barkey 2008; MacDonald 2014).

Indeed, variation in an actor's structural position affects the possibilities for collective mobilization. Some actors are better positioned than others to deploy the military, economic, and symbolic capital that inheres in structures to increase their influence in world politics. Brokers, for example, bridge "structural holes" within networks: they are positioned as vital nodes in networks, creating links between actors that would otherwise remain unconnected. This position gives brokers material and cultural resources to mobilize collective action across different coalitions (Goddard 2009; Carpenter 2011). Actors connected to a variety of different international organizations likewise enjoy "exit" options, and should, therefore, prove less likely to be constrained by one set of institutional rules and norms.

Finally, variation in content changes possible pathways of collective mobilization: a structure's symbolic and cultural content renders some forms of collective action possible, and eliminates the salience of others. While Waltz stripped cultural content from international structure, heterodox approaches rightfully argue that there are patterned systems of meaning in the international system; this symbolic and cultural content can enable, constrain, and constitute power politics. Practice-turn-theorists treat structure as patterns of exchange of various kinds of capital within and across fields (Adler-Nissen 2008, 668; See also Pouliot 2006; Go 2008, 2012; Neumann and Pouliot 2011). Still others might think of position through the lens of discursive configurations. In her study of the Concert of Europe, Mitzen (2013) shows how Austria and Britain deployed the rhetoric of "Europe," both to mobilize the Concert powers and to contain Russian expansion into the Ottoman Empire. Power politics may have moved from the battlefield to the Congress, but it remained a fierce struggle for influence on the continent.

Of course, some dynamics of global power politics play out under conditions of anarchy. Still, much of global power politics does not. Moreover, even anarchical relationships vary with respect to form and content,

as well as how they relate to adjacent structural contexts and processes. But none of this implies the irrelevance of *realpolitik* or of mechanisms and processes identified in realist theory. Rather, viewing global politics as composed of multiple opportunity structures for collective mobilization allows scholars to pay attention to how structural variation shapes power-political competition—in particular, the workings and prevalence of mechanisms, instruments, and logics of power politics.

The Dynamics of Power Politics in Theory and Practice

What does it mean, then, to study power politics as collective mobilization, to focus on the mechanisms of power politics while remaining agnostic about the actors, instruments, and structures of *realpolitik*? As a concrete illustration, consider Putin's activities in Russia's near abroad. For structural realists, Putin's actions herald a return to power politics as usual, and provide clear evidence that states will continue to balance power under conditions of anarchy. In some realist accounts, Russia's reaction amounts to a straightforward response to NATO expansion and the potential loss of influence (e.g., Mearsheimer 2015). In the face of increasing insecurity, Russia rejects a variety of constraining institutions. Moscow instead turns towards the ultimate instrument of power politics, the mobilization of military might. The underlying purpose of this mobilization? Balancing. That is, increasing Russia's own power to stave off US hegemony.

We agree with realists that Russia's actions should not be dismissed as mere "spoiler" behavior: the last vestiges of brutish power politics in the liberal world order (e.g., Ikenberry 2014). But the "Russia is balancing" causal story obscures more than it illuminates. Putin's actions infuriate Western opponents precisely because they are seen as threatening a liberal institutional order. To treat this as simply conventional balancing under anarchy, then, misses the rich institutional context of power politics—most notably *counter-order* efforts involving a range of military and non-military instruments (Cooley 2015; see also Cooley 2012). Russia's strategy, as we discuss below, relies on specific tactics aimed at undermining the American alliance system and shoring up its patron-client relations (Cooley and Nexon 2015; Valeriano and Mannes 2015). And to call Russia's strategy one of "balancing" seems not so much incorrect, but misplaced. Russia's own military capabilities cannot ultimately match those of the United States and NATO; we see little in the way of a Cold War–era alliance forming to counter Western might.

From a dynamics-of-power-politics perspective, the question is not whether or not Russia is "balancing,"[18] but what *mechanisms* of power politics are operating in the Russian case; what *instruments* are being deployed and why; and how *structure* shapes the interaction and outcomes of these mechanisms. We might, for example, begin not with "balancing" but with Crawford's (2008, 2011) notion of "wedge strategies" to explain Russia's actions. Wedge strategies, at a minimum, involve efforts to preclude joint action among two or more actors. They appear in myriad circumstances. In interstate balancing, per Crawford, they aim to fragment a potential overwhelming coalition (Nexon 2009a, 346–47). In imperial rule, they aim to preclude and limit resistance against the metropole (Barkey 1991, 2008; Nexon and Wright 2007). When actors—states or otherwise—strive for universal domination, they aim to forestall or shatter counterbalancing (Hui 2004, 2005; Wohlforth et al. 2007). They can provide ways of mitigating alliance dilemmas by preventing collusion among states with incentives to entrap a great power (Cha 2010). In international institutions, diplomats may avail themselves of them to secure desired policy outcomes. Indeed, many different kinds of actors—states, transnational movements, multinational corporations, epistemic communities, and so forth—in global politics may use wedge strategies to conserve or expand their influence.

Arguably Russia's *realpolitik* focuses far more on wedging—a fragmenting mechanism—than the integrative logic of balancing. Russia cannot possibly match its opponents' might, but it can undercut their unity. Vice President Joseph Biden lamented that Russia's tactics could succeed: "As it tries to rattle the cage, the Kremlin is working hard to buy off and co-opt European political forces, funding both right-wing and left-wing anti-systemic parties throughout Europe. President Putin sees such political forces as useful tools to be manipulated, to create cracks in the European body politic which he can then exploit" (Baker and Erlanger 2015).

For all of the focus on Russia's mobilization of its military, moreover, much of its efforts at wedging rely on economic and symbolic instruments of power. Wedging operates via a number of different combinations of power resources. It can rely on the threat or use of force, or the promise of economic costs and benefits. At times, it involves normative and identity-based appeals that fragment their targets (Goddard 2008/2009). Observers regularly point to Russia's reliance

18 Which some realist writings take as a threshold for significant power political activity. See the debate about soft balancing referenced elsewhere.

on energy as a means of coercion. But Putin also increasingly relies on ideological appeals, economic aid to political parties of various ideological stripes, threats of force, *and* cyber capabilities in an effort to weaken the European Union and NATO, and hence undercut support for continuing sanctions and military resistance to Russia's claims (Maness and Valeriano 2015; Pomerantsev 2014).

Context obviously affects both the activation of mechanisms and how they translate into outcomes. It shapes more than the orientation of these efforts—whether they amount to, for instance, divide-and-balance, divide-and-rule, or divide-and-conquer gambits. They also condition the effectiveness of wedge strategies in terms of the formal arrangement of social relations and the way it positions relevant actors. Russia's wedging efforts, for example, generally prove more successful in places where Moscow enjoys access to networks of collaborators—sometimes co-ethnics or co-ideologues with whom Putin's efforts resonate—and they stand ready and able to mobilize on Russia's behalf.

All of this is power politics. But it heralds not a return to some highly stylized understanding of the Cold War as seen through structural-realist theory. It involves, rather, long-standing dynamics of power politics playing out in a world where efforts at collective mobilization cut across state boundaries, rely on myriad instruments of power, and operate in the shadow of a fragmenting but still powerful US-led institutional order. With the exception of the last, however, we've seen this all before. We find many of these conditions and processes across time and space, including during the Cold War. The Spanish Habsburgs supported ultra-Catholics in France; Calvinists in the Swiss Confederation, France, and the Low Countries constituted a potent networks of transnational mobilization against both "state" and "non-state" actors; and the East India Company manipulated fractures and extended control within the disintegrating Mughal Empire (e.g., Nexon 2009b; MacDonald 2014; Phillips and Sharman 2015), (cf. Westad 2007; Saunders 2013). And calling them atavistic—as some sort of *return* to *realpolitik*—obcures the degree that all of the relevant players—including the United States, European powers, and the European Union—were engaging in power politics, of one form or another, all along.

Conclusions

We focused throughout this paper on how a dynamics of power politics research program, centered around dynamics of collective mobilization, provides orthodox and heterodox approaches with common ground in security studies. It abandons unnecessary *ex ante* commitments to state centrism, the priority of military and economic capabilities, and the relevance of anarchy as an ordering principle.

These mechanisms and processes, we argue, are transposable. Dynamics of integration and fragmentation potentially operate *regardless* of the specific actors—states, transnational actors, or whatever—involved, the particular instruments—forms of power—at stake, and the structural context in which the relevant power-political maneuvers take place. As noted at the outset, specific studies of power politics might engage in more conventional forms of analysis that start with actors and their attributes—such as their preferences and interests. But the level of abstraction that travels *across* different theoretical traditions involves the mechanisms of collective mobilization and power politics.

At the same time, attention to mechanisms demands scholars pay attention to historical and structural variation as well. Traditional approaches to power politics create a false dilemma, one that demands we choose between developing transposable accounts of structural dispositions in global politics and attention to their historical and spatial variation. Theorizing around mechanisms demands that we consider the *conditions under which* causal and constitutive processes operate: the particulars of the actors involved, the instruments at stake, and the structural context of power-political maneuvers all play a critical role in the study of the dynamics of power politics. They help explain which power-political maneuvers come into play, their effectiveness, and other aspects of their dynamics. In crucial respects, they explain how processes, mechanisms, and logics translate into specific outcomes.

Ultimately, we need to find common points of intersection among various realist and heterodox approaches. This will ensure that power politics remains central to the study of global security. The present cacophony certainly scores as "pluralist," but few would describe it as "engaged." Treating power politics as an object of analysis subject to multiple theoretical perspectives—and focusing those theoretical perspectives on the causes, processes, conditions of possibility, and mechanisms of collective mobilization—provides a way forward. It creates a basis for more precise forms of agreement and disagreement: one in which divergent theoretical frameworks remain in play, but not at the expense of middle-range argument. This seems to us appropriate for a period many call "post-paradigmatic" but still rich with epistemological and ontological debate (Jackson and Nexon 2013).

Indeed, despite the decline in major power wars and the use of force, despite the growth of international institutions, despite the supposed increased importance of economic and symbolic instruments, the struggle for power constitutes an immutable feature of international relations. In essence, we agree with the founders of the field of security studies: to ignore the dynamics of power politics is to miss an essential feature of international security, let alone global politics.

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