



Global Power Shifts

The Building Blocks of National Power and Geopolitical Influence

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The Building Blocks of National Power and Geopolitical Influence

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Briefly

No single definition of national power or influence is universally accepted, but among the most widely recognised is political scientist [Robert Dahl's](#) definition of 'power as a relation among people,' namely: 'A has power over B to the extent that he can get B to do something that B would not otherwise do.' A country that can get another country to act differently than it otherwise would is more powerful.

One can imagine how various countries may simultaneously be more powerful than another one in a particular geographic area, an international organisation (such as when holding the rotating chair of a regional organisation), an economic sector or other venue or for a particular period of time. As such, Dahl's definition requires a view toward general circumstances and, as Dahl himself [recognised](#), a 'standard against which to compare the operational alternatives we actually employ' rather than a clear guide for measurement. Most problematically, Dahl's definition requires a counterfactual: what B would not otherwise do.

Despite these measurement issues, national power is an essential factor to consider when analysing the present and future geopolitical environment, acting as the 'currency of great-power politics', in the words of [John J Mearsheimer](#). Without quantitative measurements, assessments of power dynamics would simply rely on mental models and heuristic judgements—which are still measurements of a kind but risk reliance on unstated assumptions and potentially incongruous logic. Instead, we measure power and influence—albeit imperfectly—through composite indices that combine macro-level data across several factors, often weighted to reflect their perceived importance. While these measures do not capture expressions of power, they can capture general trends and magnitudes in a country's *capacity* to exert power, thereby helping to better understand how geopolitics may shift in the future. The most important limitation is our inability to model leadership action and intent, how well a particular hand of cards is played or how well a leader can call the bluff of another. Individual actors will continue to shape our world in unpredictable ways. Although we cannot forecast individual leaders' actions in the future (will Chinese President Xi Jinping invade Taiwan?), the ability to forecast long-term structural trends continues to evolve, even as core uncertainties remain.

A useful way to measure national power is to combine measures of its core "elements" or "instruments": the tools a state can use to get another state to do what it would otherwise not do, and to resist similar coercion from that other state. The military, broadly speaking, is one such instrument. Diplomacy and economic measures are others. And there are underlying factors which boost state capacity, such as demographics and technology.

Instruments of power

Military might is perhaps most thought of when discussing national power. While it is difficult to prove the counterfactual of what 'B would otherwise not do,' military conquests—for example, the US capture and subsequent execution of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein by the Iraqi government—can provide clear-cut examples.

What makes a military powerful is, in part, its capabilities: the equipment and personnel it possesses and what they can do. While exceptions exist, this can often be measured in very general terms with military spending. Another oft-

measured item, given the qualitatively different tool it provides militaries, is the count of nuclear weapons they possess. Although using these measures alone will miss much—in particular, it misses [operational art](#) or how well a military employs its forces given its training, leadership, doctrine and experience—for a *global* measure across long time horizons, they offer high comparability and a *general* understanding of military capability, divorced from specific circumstances.

A key determinant of military spending is, in most cases, the size of a country's economy, typically measured by gross domestic product (GDP). The US, for example, spends less on its military as a percentage of GDP than Algeria does. Still, the US military is far more capable and its budget is much larger, since the US economy is over 100 times larger at market exchange rates.

For national power, economic sophistication matters as well, which is often measured using GDP per capita as a proxy. Political scientist [Michael Beckley](#) terms its multiplication with GDP—resulting in GDP times GDP per capita—as a measure of 'net resources' that discounts large economies such as India, where a large share of economic activity involves subsistence rather than engagement in international markets. Relatedly, trade offers another, more direct measure of engagement in international markets, creating economic interdependence that can be “weaponised” through sanctions, tariffs and other forms of coercion. Foreign aid can create similar dependencies, though only for the aid recipient.

As with military spending, broad measures such as GDP, GDP per capita, trade and foreign aid will not capture specific capabilities or vulnerabilities, for example, when a country engages in relatively little trade but that trade involves a critical, rare component of a supply chain. However, they offer a generalised understanding of economic heft for geopolitical purposes.

Powering economies and militaries alike are its people, who can be greatly enabled by technological advancements such as artificial intelligence and automation. And while demographic mass matters, what matters just as much is how healthy, well-educated, and well-off a country's population is. Put simply, poorly educated, ill and impoverished people can contribute little to a nation's power; their primary focus is on day-to-day survival and their contribution to projecting power is limited.

While adversity often breeds ingenuity, well-off populations, as measured by GDP per capita, are [consistently more productive](#) than less well-off ones. Increased productivity leads to higher growth, which leads to a larger and more sophisticated economy, and the virtuous cycle continues, even if economic growth rates often moderate as countries enter high-income status. New technologies can allow economies to break through this growth saturation, at least for a time, [especially](#) when workers have the skills to leverage them.

Technology, of course, matters for more than just economic growth. It can offer militaries an edge on the battlefield, allow firms and governments to shape international norms and practices, and generally allow small countries to compete with large ones in specific industries (e.g., semiconductors) and instances. While difficult to condense as a single measure, gross fixed capital formation in information and communication technology (ICT)—the basis of the International Futures model's forecast of ICT stock—comes close, as it provides a broad basis for understanding not tied to any single technology.

Each of these factors—military, economic, demographic and technological—underpins a country's ability to engage in effective diplomacy. As American national security expert [Amos Jordan](#) observes, 'diplomacy is rarely used in isolation; it often serves as a precursor or a complement to other foreign policy tools.'

Composite measures

Recognising that national power and influence can cut across instruments and issue areas, we often combine variables that each measure a specific instrument or aspect of power into a single composite index. For this analysis, we use the Global Power Index (GPI), the Diplomacy, Military, Economy (DiME) Index and the Formal Bilateral Influence Capacity (FBIC) Index.

The Pardee Institute calculates the [GPI](#), a composite measure of relative national power, providing annual country-year values for 188 countries from 1816 through 2100. The GPI expands on traditional power metrics, such as the Correlates of War (COW) project's Composite Indicator of National Capability ([CINC](#)), by capturing foundational sources of power such as economic mass and military spending, as well as advanced dimensions of power such as nuclear weapons capacity, technological capacity, and international interactions such as diplomatic and alliance networks. These factors are combined in a weighted index calibrated through expert elicitation. A key advantage of the GPI is its inclusion of many "stock" variables (e.g., the working-age population living above the poverty line), which make clear that national power must be built over time and, absent government collapse or other extreme catastrophe, rarely rises or declines abruptly.

In pursuit of a more parsimonious measure, the Pardee Institute also developed the [DiME Index](#), which combines, using an unweighted average, countries' shares of global embassies, military spending, nuclear weapons, trade and GDP times GDP per capita (i.e., "net resources"). With fewer inputs than the GPI and even weighting, the forecast behaviour of the DiME Index can be easier to interpret. Its primarily flow-based input measures make it more susceptible to abrupt changes, particularly in GDP growth, making it more useful for short- to medium-term analysis. Compared with the GPI, it provides an alternative perspective for assessing national power.

Unlike the GPI and DiME Index, which capture the absolute material-based capabilities of states at the country level, the [FBIC Index](#) quantifies the bilateral relational power—i.e., the capacity for influence—between specific country pairs (dyads). Developed and maintained by the Pardee Institute, the FBIC Index is built on the premise that interstate influence is driven by two intersecting dynamics: the absolute volume of interactions between two states and the relative dependence of one state on the other. By examining these relational dynamics across economic, political and security dimensions, the FBIC Index evaluates which side of a dyad can most credibly leverage its relationship to compel decisions that a dependent state might not have otherwise made—albeit at the macro level.

Although not deterministic, national power and influence shape the landscape on which actors engage, where the weak occasionally defeat the strong in war and established powers can choose not to feel threatened by rising powers, though most often the opposite is the case. As such, trends in national power and capacity for influence can tell us about the shape of the international order.

Chart 1: Summary description of GPI, DiME and FBIC in IFs

GPI	DiME	FBIC
A comprehensive, multi-indicator metric designed to assess a country's total pool of raw systemic power. It merges traditional hard power metrics with advanced variables, including gross domestic product (GDP), technological innovation, military expenditures, and institutional governance capacity	Narrows the focus to the specific, practical levers of national statecraft. It groups capabilities into three functional pillars: Diplomatic networks (embassies, treaty participation), Military might (personnel, equipment, nuclear capabilities), and Economic base (market size, financial resources).	Shifts away from aggregate national assets to map the relational web of international politics. It operates on the principle that power is meaningless without looking at specific relationships. It tracks interactions across country-pairs (dyads) using two dimensions: Bandwidth (the thickness of trade ties, military alliances, and diplomatic exchanges) and Dependence (how reliant Country B is on Country A for security or economic survival)

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Dr Jakkie Cilliers is the founder and former executive director of the ISS. He currently serves as chair of the ISS Board of Trustees, head of the African Futures and Innovation (AFI) programme at the Institute's Pretoria office, and an extraordinary professor at the University of Pretoria. His 2017 best-seller [Fate of the Nation](#) addresses South Africa's future from political, economic and social perspectives. His four most recent books, [Africa First! Igniting a Growth Revolution](#) (March 2020), [The Future of Africa: Challenges and Opportunities](#) (April 2021), [Africa Tomorrow: Pathways to Prosperity](#) (June 2022) and [Africa's Road to Prosperity: 10 Things to Know](#) (July 2026) offer rigorous analyses of the continent as a whole. From August to December 2025, Cilliers was a Richard von Weizsäcker Fellow at the Robert Bosch Academy in Berlin, during which he worked on *Africa's Road to Prosperity*.

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