Division II Faculty Publications   Social Sciences

January 2011

The Power Curse: The Paradox of Power in World Politics

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Introduction

This is another article about power in politics, in this case international politics.[1] Writing about power in politics recalls the unenviable task of writing about love in human relations: both phenomena are so intrinsic to their respective social environments that they may even define the very environments themselves. Berenskoetter (2007, p. 1) goes as far as to say that world politics itself is "held together by power relations." Such ventures naturally lead to the question, Is there anything more to say? Or more appropriately, Is there anything that someone dares to say? Silence in this case may be the better part of valor. However, closing the book entirely on debates about both love and power would make the world far less interesting, and in the case of power it would also be, from a scholarly and practical standpoint, wrong.

The case against rehashing the analysis of power centers paradoxically on both the pervasiveness of agreement and disagreement. After more than half a century following the inspirational works of Dahl (1957) and Lasswell and Kaplan (1950), scholars are yet to come up

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[1] For comments and advice, I would like to thank a number of individuals: David Baldwin, Michael Cox, Philip Cerny, Douglas Foyle, Gemma Gallarotti. Richard Grossman, Robert Jervis, David Kearn, Joseph Nye, Nicholas Onuf, Lynne Rienner, Peter Rutland, Jack Snyder, and Alexander Wendt. This article is reprinted from sections of *The Power Curse: Influence and Illusion in World Politics* by Giulio M. Gallarotti. Copyright (c) 2010 by Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc. Used with permission by the publisher.

with a more definitive definition of power than Dahl's: of A causing B to do what B would otherwise not do (Barnett and Duval 2005, p. 40). But concomitantly, after all this time those same scholars have been unable to reach agreement on virtually every other aspect of power (Baldwin 2002, pps. 177, 188 and Lukes 2007, p. 83). The purpose of this article is neither to trump the popular definition nor to settle age-old debates, but instead to challenge conventional wisdom by asking: Can the augmentation of power be a bad thing for nations? The analysis in the subsequent pages of this study answers that question in the affirmative. Embracing the idea of a *power curse*, I argue that while the augmentation of power has obvious advantages and benefits, it also possesses inherent qualities that can weaken nations. And in the long run, these inherent weakening effects of power can generate the seeds of its own destruction. To the extent that nations fail to take account of, and correct for, these weakening effects, they are destined to become victims of *power illusion*: i.e., in reality they are weaker and more vulnerable then they believe. In this latter respect, it is unfortunately the case that the effects of the power curse are so ingrained and compelling that there is a strong tendency for such illusion to manifest itself even in the case of highly sensitized and enlightened national leaders. In other words, the power curse is hard to beat.

Understanding the power curse and power illusion is an especially important venture today. Aside from the need to better understand processes of power in international relations for scholarly and intellectual reasons, the world is in an especially tumultuous and sensitive period at present, and this situation promises to be with us in the future. Indeed, while the issue of power is at the very core of interactions among nations, the study of international power is still quite underdeveloped relative to its importance in international politics (Baldwin

2002 and Berenskoetter 2007). Moreover, the traditional visions of power in international politics are poorly suited to understanding the modern world system: there is significant need for a more complex or "polymorphous" theory of power in world politics (Barnett and Duvall 2005, p. 40). The global system is in flux, while the power of nations continues to be the principal instrument for determining our collective fate as a planet. In terms of an historical time line, there has been a greater transformation in the lives of humans in the last 100 years than there has been in the preceding 12,000 (since the rise of farming communities). Indeed, Beck (2005) has noted that the changes in the world have created a far more "hazy power space" than has heretofore been embraced by scholars and decisionmakers. This hazy power space requires new questions about power and its changing role in international politics. Many of these questions will bear upon understanding power sufficiently well to avoid the power curse and its concomitant power illusion. Indeed, national leaders will continue to desire ever greater power, but they should be animated by the main lesson of this article: *be careful what you wish for!*

This article is divided into two sections. The first articulates the theory of the power curse and illuminates the process of power illusion. The second proposes strategies that decisionmakers can employ if they wish to limit the pernicious consequences of the power curse and power illusion.

A Theory of the Power Curse

While the literature on the paradoxes of power has suggested that the quest for power and even primacy can at times produce neutralizing and even counter-productive effects with respect to

enhancing a nation's influence, there is yet to emerge a systematic attempt at building a theory of such processes.[2]

On a general level, the developments that lead nations to weaken themselves in attempting to augment their own power comprise a ***power curse***.[3] This process is both pernicious and pervasive. It inheres in the very processes that are meant to enhance national power. Hence, it is the case that the quest for power often creates the seeds of its own destruction. Nations that are not sensitized to the problems of the power curse, and hence make no compensatory adjustments in their strategies of power augmentation, invariably fall prey to ***power illusion.*** Unfortunately, it is in the nature of the power curse to generate power illusion because processes that cause the power curse naturally drive nations to neglect or undervalue the weakening effects of the power curse. Strategies to avoid power illusion would require leaders to perspicaciously think outside the box and carefully assess the accuracy of perceptions of national power and how they square with the consequences of the actual strategies of national empowerment. In fact, the greater the power, the greater the manifestations of the power curse (i.e., the greater the weakening effects). Thus, the power curse especially victimizes great powers. But it is clearly in

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[2] On the paradoxes of power, see (Maoz 1989, Baldwin 1989, and Yarmolinsky and Foster 1983). While contributions in this scholarship have highlighted the neutralizing effects of power augmentation, scholarship in international politics has long recognized such processes of negative feedback (e.g., stability-instability paradox, balancing, security dilemma).

[3] The term is inspired by the phrase "the resource curse": which describes the immiserizing economic consequences of nations that are overly reliant on a limited number of natural resources for their wealth.

the nature of processes of power augmentation to generate enervating effects for nations of all power classes, hence the power curse afflicts nations all the way down the power line.

The concepts of the power curse and power illusion are based on a more complex and sophisticated concept of power. Indeed, the concept is based on a concern for net rather than nominal power optimization. Conventional views, especially those of Realists, of power have traditionally espoused a vision of *nominal* power optimization where influence is some linear outcome of the accumulation of industrial-military (i.e., hard) power resources.[4] So that each new weapons system, or each new territorial acquisition leads to a commensurate increase of influence over outcomes in the international system. In a Robinson Crusoe world (where there are no reactions to one's initial actions), such might indeed be the case. But power is not such a phenomenon in a complex world where each act to augment power generates reactions and consequences (feedback) that impact on the acts and the actors themselves. Sometimes the consequences promote a self-reinforcing process whereby the act has manifold effects to increase influence: positive feedback (e.g., militarization generates perceptions of invincibility which lead others to be more compliant to demands and threats). But in other cases, such acts generate countervailing effects which may neutralize attempts to increase influence, and even lead to a net loss in influence: negative feedback (e.g., processes creating countervailing actions that neutralize attempts at enhancing national influence). Hence, the process of power optimization is

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[4] Realists have tended to espouse such a view, even though they have indeed acknowledged the existence of countervailing reactions to attempts at primacy or power augmentation. See especially the definitions of power in Waltz (1979, pps. 113,131), Gilpin (1981, p. 13), and Mearsheimer (2001, P. 55).

a *net* rather than a *nominal* phenomenon. The traditional nominal view of power stems from a rather myopic view of power and an insensitivity to the context within which power is exercised. This myopia and insensitivity are the principal factors driving power illusion, and stand in the way of fighting the deleterious effects of the power curse.[5] Those who suffer from power illusion see power as a static, nominal, and a simple phenomenon which is not conditioned by the environment in which it is played out.

The power curse manifests itself in four fundamental ways: adapting to complex systems, overstretch, moral hazard, and a vicious cycle of unilateralism.

Adapting to Complex Systems

Jervis (1997) demonstrates that international politics is a complex system. In such a system, relations among actors are never simple, nor are they intelligible through the use of

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[5] The working of power illusion is not strictly dependent on assumptions about styles of decisionmaking. Power illusion may be a function of rational decisionmaking (e.g., elites engaging in overstretch due to domestic interest group pressure-in this case an adverse outcome would result from what is considered domestic political rationality by elites). But in some cases, it may be brought on by tendencies which cut against rational behavior. For example, elites may engage in counterproductive policies which in fact weaken their nations because they do not acquire the necessary information to adapt to complexity. This is a testament to the pervasiveness and pernicious character of power illusion: it can result from a variety of decision orientations.

explanatory models that fail to take into account the myriad and manifold interconnections that

define interactive structures.[6] Jervis (1997, p. 6) defines a complex system in terms of two

prevailing characteristics, "a) a set of units or elements that are interconnected so that changes in

some elements of their relations produce changes in other parts of their relations, and b) the

entire system exhibits properties and behaviors that are different from those of its parts." Jervis

(1997, p. 74) goes on to note that the presence of complexity creates significant methodological

difficulties in measuring and conceptualizing power.[7] Indeed system effects can turn the intuitive

world that we understand and value on its head, often producing surprising results (i.e., powers

of prediction in such environments often fall short).

A number of fundamental processes characterizing complexity are underscored in the

literature. First, interconnections among actors are complicated in that they involve many factors

(third parties, and both direct and indirect effects that are not always obvious and are difficult to

ascertain) that interact to produce specific outcomes. Because of this complexity, it is difficult to

both fully foresee and even control one's fate. In such conditions, outcomes can be surprising

and counter-intuitive. Often, they can end up being counter-productive or self-defeating. Second,

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[6] The reference to complexity includes both the formal mathematical work done in the area of

chaos as well as the work done by social scientists, biologists, as well as ecologists. This

literature is far too extensive to cite here, but a very impressive compilation of the literature is

cited in Jervis (1997). Jervis' application of complexity theory to international politics draws on

a full array of all these strands of scholarship, hence his work stands as an excellent survey.

[7] Baldwin (2002, pp. 179-181) also attests to difficulties of measurement and conceptualization

when more complex understandings of power relations are sought.

complexity is driven by feedback. Feedback represents reactions to and consequences of actions that affect the actions themselves in a way that may render outcomes that diverge from original expectations. Feedback is absolutely pervasive because for every action there is some resulting reaction somewhere in the system that feeds back on the original action, and alters the impact of that action. When such feedback is pernicious or debilitating to nations, it is referred to as negative feedback. This recalls Dahl's (1957) concept of negative power: where actions on the part of some actors generate negative reactions from other actors. Finally, relationships are often non-linear. This represents discontinuities in the relationships among actors. Often, small initiatives may have an enormous impact well beyond the scale of the initiatives. Conversely, very large initiatives may have very little impact on relations or outcomes in a system.

In a complex system such as the international political system, where relationships and outcomes are complicated, stochastic and rarely linear; there are manifold possibilities for generating consequences that are self-defeating for nations pursuing strategies of power augmentation, (Jervis 1997). For instance, augmentation through excessive strategies based on hard power such as force and threat will alienate target nations, and will incur the censure of third-party nations. This feedback will compromise the influence of perpetrating nations. Over and above the self-punishment that emanates from interdependence, much political capital is eliminated in multilateral institutions that have traditionally empowered perpetrator nations. But even void of force or manifest threats, reliance on building up tangible resources without complementary soft (i.e., goodwill or cooperative) actions, that would make such resources less of a latent threat, may elicit reactions which are self-defeating. Without abating perceptions of latent threat, security dilemma outcomes may elicit countervailing actions on the part of

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competing nations that neutralize those attempts at primacy or enhanced strength on the part of the nation seeking those goals through tangible power resources: e.g., arms race or economic rivalry (Jervis 1968 and Huntington 1993). However, even the supposedly innocuous "carrot" may generate some deleterious and unintended consequences for the donor. While foreign aid has been a mainstay of diplomacy in North-South relations, and transactions between nations have appeared to be mutually beneficial, few donor nations escape the backlashes both among North and South peoples of accusations of neo-imperialism. Moreover, third party actors have always looked at such attempts as bribery, and consequently the standing of donor nations has fallen even among actors not directly involved in the transactions.

Also, in an interdependent world, actions on the part of foreign populations and states have significant impacts on the interests of nations. Each nation faces a plethora of actors (states, transnational actors, individuals) in the world polity that can perpetrate actions either for or against their interests. So in some sense a condition of reciprocity exists in which there are actions and reactions in world politics among these actors. Favorable actions or policies on the part of nations toward other nations or actors may elicit reactions which are equally favorable with respect to their particularistic goals. One may think of the reaction from a hostage population which has been liberated in war. Conversely, unfavorable actions may elicit reactions in kind. One thinks of partisan groups fighting off an occupying force. To some extent this functions somewhat as an interactive network with very loosely specified expectations governing exchange (Gallarotti 1989). Economists have studied such arrangements in the context of loosely specified labor contracts. One of the issues studied has been the effects of such contracts on efficiency. Leibenstein (1966) coined the term x-efficiencies and x-inefficiencies to describe

differing levels of productivity that result from factors other than the structure and application of inputs (i.e., allocative efficiency). Even with similar input allocations, efficiency among firms may still vary greatly because of factors unrelated to the application of inputs (e.g., motivation, incentive schemes, differing managerial styles). As in the firm, these interactional networks may take a variety of forms that impact directly on the influence which nations may realize from their relations with other actors or nations. The use of coercive (i.e., hard) power, for instance, may generate substantial x-inefficiencies (i.e., actions that cut against the interests of the perpetrating nations). When the activation of hard power takes a menacing form, naturally the perpetrating nations can expect deleterious reaction from target nations and populations. There is no clearer manifestation of this than some of the self-defeating elements in George W. Bush's policy to eradicate the threats of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Taking an aggressive and unilateralist approach to increasing the security of Americans by wiping out such threats has generated reactions from target nations that have enhanced those threats all the more (Gallarotti 2010a and 2010b). In this respect, a number of scholars have proposed soft power as a preferable means of fighting terrorism (Lennon 2003).

Problems of complexity which confront nations are likely to grow in proportion with a nation's power. First, more powerful nations possess that many more networks of latent and manifest interactions (i.e., things they are doing or could do around the world) within the international system because of their growing resources (both hard and soft) and a growing presence in the system (see discussion on overstretch below), thus increasing the complexity of their relations, and challenging their capacity to understand and control the manifold consequences of this greater global network of interaction (Kennedy 1987). In short, more

powerful nations have so much more to figure out and manage due to their increasing

engagement within the international system. With this greater complexity facing them, greater

powers are more likely to be victimized by the adverse consequences of this complexity. Second,

the greater the power, the less vigilant nations need to be in understanding and managing this

complexity.[8] Analogously, very rich people simply need not worry about every turn in the

investment environment that may adversely impact on their wealth. Marginal losses in influence

become relatively smaller with growing power, hence stronger nations need not pay as much

attention to such shifts and may mismanage their power relations. This would qualify as a

complexity-specific manifestation of moral hazard. As nations become more powerful, and

hence perceive themselves to be decreasingly vulnerable, they need not be as fastidious and

perspicacious about managing risks. For weaker powers, fewer risks are considered unimportant

because of greater vulnerability.[9] But in a complex world, boundaries are extremely difficult to

ascertain, as complex feedback loops may make what seem to be marginal questions actually

more important questions (Jervis 1997). For example, whether gains and losses in bipolarization

are central or marginal to great powers depends on whether the domino theory is correct or not

(Jervis 1997 and Waltz 1979).[10]

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[8] This recalls Deutsch's (1966, p. 248) idea of pathological learning by the powerful. In short,

powerful actors are sufficiently resilient to the environments around them, such that they do not

have to learn as effectively about (and consequently adapt to) the changes within these

environments vis-à-vis less powerful (and hence more vulnerable) actors.

[9] Moral hazard afflicts nations in more general ways, which are discussed below.

[10] Waltz (1979, p. 171-191) suggests that multipolar and unipolar systems are likely to generate

more moral hazard than a bipolar system.

<u>Overstretch</u>

Over and above the effects of complexity, the augmentation of power generates another deleterious consequence in the form of overstretch. Kennedy (1987), Gilpin (1981), and Snyder's (1991) work on great powers has perhaps best highlighted the problem of overstretch. They underscore the effects of different levels of analysis in promoting this tendency toward overstretch. Snyder (1991) analyzes expansion as a process driven by the domestic political interests that benefit from such expansion. Kennedy (1987, p. xxiii) sees overstretch as a structural pathology of economic growth leading to expansion, but this greater global presence becomes increasingly difficult to support in a world of greater competition when nations are faced with inherent economic decline. Gilpin (1981) underscores the interplay of internal and external factors leading to overexpansion. He posits that great powers will be overextended in maintaining their international position as a result of a tendency to over-invest in the provision of public goods and a concomitant tendency for the costs of maintaining an international presence to rise. This greater burden will continually outpace the capacity of the internal military-economic system, which itself is in decline, to support it. And since growth in power correlates with expansion, there emerges a natural tendency toward overstretch. For all three scholars, the possibilities of overstretch are an occupational hazard of the quest for power. This is the case because expansion or the quest for power are self-feeding processes: the more that is bitten off,

the greater the appetite must become to accommodate an increasing nourishment. This occurs for three reasons.

First, the expanding quest for influence breeds missions creep. A growing presence in the international system is self-reinforcing because the maintenance costs of involvement in foreign affairs grow along with the size of the stake in the system (Kennedy 1987 and Jervis 2003).[11] Empires are the best example of such a process (Snyder 1991). The growth in empires has been traditionally shaped by the need to protect trade routes in the colonial network, which has called for more bases and more soldiers (Bartlett 1969 and Galbraith 1960). Galbraith (1960) underscores the compelling nature of this process in the expansion of British empire in the 19th century: expansion was reinforced by what he refers to as "turbulent frontiers." Jervis (2003) avers that dominant nations are especially prone to develop pockets of negative feedback that adversely affect their standing in the international system because of mission creep: i.e., a growing global presence leads to many points of involvement that generate international hostility towards the dominant nation. Second, nations can experience a process of growing dependence on their expanded domains. Much of this is a normal function of being increasingly endowed with external sources of influence like tribute, colonies, bases, markets, resources, and allies

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[11] The literature on hegemony differs on the motivations for this growing presence. Benevolent strands of the theory posit a more altruistic motivation which produces a commitment to provide the necessary public goods to stabilize an international system or issue area. More coercive strands posit a more particularistic self-interest as motivating a kind of management that brings the lion's share of the gains from a system or issue-area to the hegemon. On these competing visions of hegemonic engagement, see Snidal (1985).

(Kennedy 1987, p. xxiii).[12] But above and beyond this normal dependence, nations may become overly dependent on these external sources of power because of moral hazard: nations can be lax about developing internal resources to achieve self-sufficiency when they have an expanded domain that provides many benefits with minimal internal adjustment costs. Both dependence and over-dependence, for example, plagued both the ancient Roman and Athenian empires. In both cases the domestic economies grew increasingly unable to evolve in ways that were able to meet the costs of supporting a large empire (French 1964).

Finally, both mission creep and growing dependence are driven by domestic political effects that reinforce this expansion. Expansion often creates new interest groups and energizes old interest groups in the domestic political game that benefit from such expansion, and hence use their political influence to promote expansionist policies. Snyder (1991) has argued that such domestic interests become politically dominant in influencing state policies when they can form greater coalitions among themselves and others (through logrolling).[13] Snyder goes on to show the impact of this process in numerous case studies of empire on the part of industrialized states over the past two centuries. Block (1977) demonstrates how the growing internationalism of U.S. foreign policy after World War II was strongly driven by American business interests that

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[12] Kennedy (1987, p. xvi) sees dependence between foreign expansion and wealth as reciprocal: it requires great wealth to acquire a larger international presence, but such a presence is instrumental in sustaining that wealth.

[13] Snyder (1991) portrays a process of policy making in which the energized coalition reinforces (through the state apparatus) a belief in power and security through expansion (i.e., the myth of empire).

benefited from foreign investment and trade. But while Block and Snyder chronicle domestic reinforcement of expansion in pluralistic-democratic systems, domestic factors are nonetheless important in more autocratic systems where the actions and interests of smaller elite groups and autocrats themselves provide the domestic political stimulus for expansionist policies.

One of the most salient manifestations of this process in the context of soft and hard power occurs as a result of popular domestic reactions to such expansion, both in the expansionist nation and in the target nation. Very often the domestic economic and social burdens of such overstretch (through the use of hard power) undermines the domestic popular support (soft power) which is necessary to maintain it.[14] This could have manifold consequences for the policy of expansion. One of the most pernicious is the fact that it could create political shockwaves at home that severely undermine the position of the ruling regime or administration, thus leaving it in turmoil. This may enervate the international influence of that nation for a variety of reasons owing to the fact that the nation is politically incapable of effectively managing its foreign relations in a state of political weakness. In this case, erstwhile enemies may take more liberties against it geo-strategically, nations (whether hostile or friendly) may be less influenced by its demands and requests, and it will be incapable of pursuing compelling opportunities in the international system. But also enervating in this context is a diminishing influence over target populations and other nations. Even when not overtly imperialistic, a growing international presence causes disturbances among the people of target nations. They

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[14] Even with special interest coalitions that benefit from expansion supporting such a policy, when the burdens become excessive for their societies, even their influence will fall short of being able to sustain such policies in the face of mass discontent.

may be x-inefficient in attending to the interest of the expansionist nation, and they may be x-efficient in undermining the foreign presence. Either way, such a posture generates substantial weakening effects for the expansionist nation because it increases the burden of expansion. In terms of third-party nations (not targets of expansion), the expansion itself may compromise their good will and potential support, such that the expansionist nation is left with fewer venues of assistance in maintaining their international presence (i.e., more potential adversaries and fewer allies).

Moral Hazard

Perceptions of limited vulnerability, due to the possession of insurance or significant power over conditions which may affect actors, generally have a tendency to lead those actors either toward complacency about developing alternative means of staving off adverse outcomes or lead them to more reckless behavior. All such behavioral consequences may in effect lead actors to become even more vulnerable than would otherwise be the case in the absence of such insurance or power. Social scientists have commonly referred to such tendencies as moral hazard.[15] The examples in everyday life are numerous: wearing seatbelts and vehicles with four-

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[15] This conceptualization of moral hazard takes a broader view of risk-encouraging behavior than the more restricted use of the term: which is often equated with the risk-encouraging consequences of owning insurance against specific disasters. This conceptualization encompasses characteristics or factors that actually insulate actors from risk in the broadest sense, hence diminishing the incentives against acting recklessly. An actor may be insulated

wheel drive encourage drivers to speed and/or drive less defensively. Similarly, the level of insurance which actors purchase has pronounced effects on generating hazardous behavior. The phenomenon is especially visible in financial markets with the recent sub-prime crisis and subsequent financial meltdown: possibilities to diversify and transfer risk have led to extremely risky lending on the part of banks and other financial intermediaries.

Since reckless behavior and complacency will rise with perceptions of limited vulnerability, it stands that as nations become more powerful they will also more likely become victimized by moral hazard. In this case, well-endowed nations may be delinquent in fully appreciating and developing a full range of resources which could serve them in facing the challenges emanating from the world system. As noted above, a tendency to be complacent in the face of complexity is one manifestation of moral hazard, but the consequences of moral hazard are more extensive and manifold. They embrace numerous modes of reckless and complacent tendencies which enervate or place nations at greater risk. Gilpin (1996, p. 413), for example, observes that with respect to the power structure among national economies, primacy generates moral hazard effects in the form of a tendency toward stasis (i.e., avoiding change). Societies that have enjoyed the fruits of economic primacy have an incentive toward

from risk for reasons other than insurance. For instance, having excessive physical strength might encourage an individual to get into more fights. Or, having an extremely large vehicle with elaborate safety features might encourage an individual to go faster than he or she normally would, or may encourage him or her to drive under more hazardous conditions. In this respect, this broad conceptualization of moral hazard encompasses numerous processes characterized by overconfidence and complacency in the face of risk.

complacency when assessing opportunities for alterations in economic institutions and policies. In this respect, nations that have enjoyed primacy have faced a natural tendency toward economic decline because they are less vigilant than rising powers in instituting changes that would keep them at the head of the power hierarchy (i.e., a fat cat syndrome). Gilpin (1981, p. 154) again, building on a Schumpeterian theory of economic decline (i.e., that the success of capitalism undermines risk-taking among entrepreneurs), applies this logic at a more general political-economic level by citing the domestic effects of primacy. He observes that in a nation which enjoys political-economic primacy, "society becomes conservative, less innovative and less wiling to run risks." In becoming more concerned with preserving the gains that have come with such primacy, society is less animated in pushing leaders to stay ahead of the power curve in terms of innovation and resources. In a similar vein, Mearsheimer (2001, p. 34) locates a tendency toward complacency at the highest levels of power accumulation (hegemony), and this complacency will diminish actions geared toward the accumulation of power (stasis) and primacy.

Vicious Cycle of Unilateralism

Finally, the power curse is compounded by the emergence of a vicious cycle of unilateralism. The consequences of moral hazard with respect to international regimes and organizations may generate an unfortunate consequence for nations pursuing power outside of a collective context. As greater power is accumulated, nations become increasingly self-reliant. The moral hazard effect comes in the fact that greater power leads nations to be less perspicacious about investing in alternative power resources that could be called upon when

unilateral primacy fails to deliver the goods. In this respect, powerful nations are not as dependent as less-powerful nations on international institutions. Self-reliance also may increase the capacity to defend oneself in an anarchic environment (Mearsheimer 2001, pps. 30-33). Nations can attend to their specific needs with extensive freedom. But even where the level of threat is not extreme, pursuing goals outside of the constraints of multilateral commitments minimizes impediments to action and maximizes flexibility. Hence, the greater the power a nation possesses, the more able it is to indulge in independent action. As the tendency toward self-reliance increases with the growth of unilateral power and capabilities, it is likely to introduce a vicious cycle of unilateralism. That is to say, as nations pursue their goals in an increasingly unilateral context that is insensitive to their prior commitments in international regimes and organizations, they may compromise their positions in such institutions and consequently can no longer rely on them as a source of power. Hence, they will have to increasingly rely on their own unilateral power as opportunities to pursue national interests in other venues are closed off. In this case, the old cliché of "using it or losing it" is apropos.

But such intransigent unilateralism may create a self-reinforcing problem for another reason. If the unilateralist nation is a very powerful nation, its unwillingness to cooperate in regimes and organization may increasingly doom possibilities for the emergence or maintenance of such regimes and institutions. This is because existing regimes and institutions have come to rely heavily on the contributions and participation (i.e., finances and political power) of such powerful nations. Without such ongoing support, the very influence of these regimes and institutions may be compromised And even more deleterious for the unilateralist nation is the possibility that beyond "losing them" as sources of power, potential alienation might create

enemies out of what were erstwhile supporters. In this case, attempts at unilateral primacy create a kind of balance of power process with international institutions filling the role of countervailing coalitions. In such a case, the vicious cycle of unilateralism will be compounded not by the fact that these institutions are under-supplied, but because alienation of the rank and file will create a more recalcitrant membership. Consequently, the unilateralist nation will find that these institutions do not function as desirably in its interests, thus giving such a nation greater incentives to indulge in even more unilateral actions, which then compounds the vicious cycle process (Gallarotti 2004 and 2010a).

Losing multilateral support networks in interdependent environments confronts unilateralist nations with perhaps the most debilitating consequence of the vicious cycle itself: the fact that unilateral actions are in fact often inferior to multilateral actions in addressing the principal needs of even the most powerful nations. In an interdependent and globalized environment, as presently exists in the international system, many foreign policy goals and problems cannot be effectively addressed outside of a multilateral framework simply because they are multilateral in nature, and hence require the cooperation of other nations in order to be effectively dealt with. Moreover, powerful nations may prefer the rout of coercing compliance when they require specific actions on the part of other nations. But realistically, no nation (no matter how powerful) could adopt a decision-rule to simply extract compliance from other nations, on whose actions they rely, through coercion on every important matter. In the present international system such tyrannical impunity is unthinkable. Hence, the vicious cycle of unilateralism can produce deleterious consequences indeed for even the most powerful nations.

The fact that great or dominant powers tend to invest heavily in building regimes and international organizations suggests that indeed such levers of influence are important to these nations (Keohane 1984, p. 31). The idea of the vicious cycle does not propose that such institutions will wither, but only that even if they do exist, dominant nations will often find it tempting to act outside of their parameters, and this will have an impact on both the organizations and the unilateralist nations. The fact that such institutions are supported by nations that are endowed with greater independence suggests that they still serve a variety of purposes in the interest of dominant nations: legitimacy, reputation, a hedge against unilateral bottlenecks, market facilitators (Alt, Calvert, Humes 1988; Cox 1980; Gallarotti 1991; Keohane 1984). Moreover, because of the fact that these institutions are largely built and supported by powerful nations, they often serve complementary roles in the interests of the powerful nations themselves (Cox 1980 and Keohane 1984).[16] But as the institutions take on a more multilateral power structure in their governance (i.e., democratic momentum in the evolution of governance), a disjuncture will often occur such that the functions of these institutions may diverge from the interests of the powerful nations that originally built them (Cox 1987). This gives powerful nations incentives to contemplate greater actions outside these institutions.

Policy Implications: Beating the Power Curse in a Dynamic World

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[16] This explains why so many of the functions performed by regimes and organization s are considered "redundant" in that they perform functions that are either also performed by individual nations or could be so performed (Gallarotti 1991).

In light of the ongoing challenges of the power curse and power illusion, as well as the compounding effect of the changes in today's dynamic international system, we need to address an important question, In the face of the power curse and power illusion, what strategies will best serve national leaders intent on maintaining national influence and security? In other words, how can nations beat the power curse? There are five such strategies to consider. Indeed, the difficulties of implementing such strategies underscore why decsionmakers are victimized by the power curse, and ultimately by power illusion, over and over again. While these strategies will be challenging to implement, they are nonetheless essential for beating the power curse and power illusion. [17]

First, theories of power must be continually questioned and power audits continually undertaken with significant sensitivity to the changing face of power in world politics.

Leaders and decisionmakers must be vigilant and committed to the assessment of national power. This should be a dynamic commitment to assessing a nation's power on a constant basis. Resources and strategies that are failing must be scrutinized aggressively, with an open mind to flexibility in the face of failure. Such power audits must be constant, even in the face of favorable outcomes. It is as important to understand why nations successfully augment power as it is to understand why nations lose power. Such tasks will be extremely difficult because they are inconsistent with common tendencies of cognitive psychology. People generally have preconceived and fairly robust theories about what sorts of resources and strategies make a nation strong. People generally do not as a rule spill the apple cart on these pre-existing beliefs

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[17] Historical case studies in the accumulation of power attest to the difficulties of instituting such strategies. See especially Gallarotti (2010a and 2010b).

and theories, even in the face of failure. In this respect people are more paradigmatic than exploratory (i.e., cognitively rigid--Jervis 1976). Theories or paradigms which people use to understand the world are fairly stable. Moreover, it is uncommon for people to do frequent empirical tests of their theories and the facts that support their theories. Hence, the power curse will be especially difficult to confront with respect to this prescription.

Second, leaders should think in terms of net rather than nominal power.

In accumulating power resources, leaders should be especially careful about assessing the costs of acquiring those resources and factoring those costs into their estimates of the nation's overall influence in international relations.[18] Costs of power-augmenting strategies can be conceptualized as both the direct costs of instituting power-augmenting strategies and the consequences (i.e., both direct and indirect feedback) of those strategies. Often, strategies that augment nominal power (e.g., extract a favorable trade concession for another nations) may be costly and/or generate negative consequences. In the final analysis such costs and/or consequences may be so great as to supersede the nominal gains in power, thus leading to a negative net outcome and thus rendering the nation weaker than it was before they extracted the trade concession (e.g., the victim of retaliation in another issue-area). In such cases, strategies that are intended to augment a nation's power may prove completely counterproductive and in

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[18] Karl Deutsch (1966, p. 155) underscored the importance of a "net" conception of power over four decades ago.

the end only make that nation weaker. Hence, leaders and decisionmakers must factor such

consequences and costs into power equations in determining which strategies best serve the

national interest. As with prescription 1, this one will also be difficult given common human

cognitive and psychological tendencies (Jervis 1976). As noted above, humans tend to formulate

rigid strategies and theories in conceptualizing solutions to common problems. Moreover, in

terms of power, people's perceptions are often influenced by tangible assets (e.g., how many

bases or weapons a nation possesses). Hence, they will tend to correlate power with the number

of such assets they possess, but such estimates leave out the consequences of using such

resources and often they also leave out the full costs of acquiring such resources. The reason for

this is simple: tangible resources are easier to count then it is to estimate their net power potential

because full costs and consequences of using the resources are more difficult to assess.

<u>Third, leaders should consider the manifold consequences of power-enhancing strategies.</u>

This prescription pertains principally to the problem of complexity and suggests extensive

perspicacity in estimating the manifold consequences of one's actions. Power is neither exercised

nor accumulated in a vacuum. Power-seeking behavior is always endogenous, and as such

generates manifold consequences that feed back onto the original actions and ultimately alter the

conditions within which these actions unfold. Indeed, the manifold reactions to initial actions

intended to increase a nation's power can even render those actions counter-productive, and

consequently leave a nation weaker than it was before if undertook those power-enhancing

actions. In this case, the deleterious reactions to power-enhancing strategies can create a paradox

of power: strategies intended to create power end up reducing it. A common example of such

deleterious reactions, or negative feedback, is the security dilemma (Jervis 1978). Nation's may

seek to make themselves more secure by increasing their military forces, but such actions make

competing or adversarial nations less secure. The latter nations may then increase their own

military forces in response, hence making the former nations less secure. In the end, actions

intended to make nations more secure in fact prove completely counterproductive and make

those nations in fact less secure. As with the first two prescriptions, this one will also be

challenging given common cognitive tendencies. The cognitive costs of dealing with complexity

are high, which explains why people are more paradigmatic than comprehensive in analyzing the

world around them. This suggests the primacy of bounded rationality based on limited

information and simple models in making decisions (Jervis 1976).

Fourth, leaders should judge power based on outcomes rather than resources.

One of the stark lessons from the historical case studies in power seeking (Gallarotti 2010a and

2010b) is that decisionmakers appear to be especially tolerant of ongoing failures in attaining

their most vital objectives. Much of this owes to the blinding effects of resource moral hazard:

because they are well endowed with significant material resources, setbacks do not generate the

same sense of urgency and panic that might have arisen in the face of more modest stocks. But

this prescription will also be difficult to institute because of informatiol asymmetries. It is far

easier to count tangible resources, especially hard resources, than interpret the precise meaning

of outcomes. A simple analogy to personal savings appears useful. People find it far easier to

assess their potential influence by counting their money than by assessing just how much people

are conforming to their wishes. Indeed, one may have great influence without money, but a large

bank account is far easier to quantify. But even here, problems of moral hazard appear

compelling and pernicious. While large bank accounts may assure some level of influence, they

can also significantly compromise such influence if feelings of invulnerability make people

callous or insensitive to adverse outcomes. For example, the idea of "who needs friends when

you have money" may leave a person with few people he or she can influence significantly in

important ways (i.e., you can't buy loyalty nor can you buy love).

With respect to outcomes, the issue of interpretation also manifests itself. And this

suggests an especially difficult problem for confronting the power curse. Since people deal with

cognitive complexity through paradigmatic thinking, they tend to understand outcomes by

filtering them through pre-existing theories which they use to make sense of the world around

them, i.e., the perception and assessment of outcomes is theory driven (Jervis 1976). But given

that outcomes are filtered through the perceptual screen of such pre-existing theories, it is often

likely that the significance and even nature of the outcomes themselves are misinterpreted, i.e.,

misperceived. It is often the case that such cognitive rigidity distorts incoming information about

occurrences in the world to conform to the pre-existing beliefs and theories themselves. In this

respect , people tend to be more rationalizers than rational (Jervis 1976). Evidence which might

disconfirm such paradigms or pre-existing theories may be distorted in ways that make it less

salient as a source of falsification, or even distorted to the point of being transformed into

perceptions of outcomes that actually confirm such paradigms or theories. There is ample

evidence in historical case studies that such cognitive rigidity distorted perceptions of outcomes

in ways that sustained failing policies, thus weakening respective nations (Gallarotti 2010a and

2010b).

<u>Fifth, leaders should emphasize diversity in power resources and flexibility in their use.</u>

In historical case studies of power seeking among nations there is a strong tendency for decision makers to rely on a limited set of power resources in order to obtain vital foreign policy objectives (Gallarotti 2010a and 2010b). In such cases, there appears an overwhelming lack of flexibility in applying resources to the realization of these objectives. Often this is manifest in an overreliance in the employment of tangible assets (i.e., hard power) and concomitantly in a deficiency in the use of more intangible strategies such as diplomacy and cooperation (i.e., soft power). But at a more general level, case studies on power seeking demonstrate limited diversity and flexibility even within each of the respective contexts of hard and soft power themselves. More specifically, nations employing predominantly hard power resources tend to make use of only a limited number of such resources even when the variety of hard power resources is abundant. Similarly, nations endowed with a large diversity of soft power resources also tend to rely on a restricted menu of such resources.[19]

Conclusion

In sum, the problems of the power curse and power illusion will be difficult to solve, precisely because they manifest common decisionmaking tendencies on the part of humans in dealing with their environments. But there are many such problems which face humans in

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[19] On hard and soft power, see especially Gallarotti (2010b).

general, and national leaders specifically. In that people continue to successfully confront many such natural pitfalls that face them, there is indeed hope that national leaders and decision makers can be equally committed and perspicacious in thinking outside of the cognitive and psychological conundrums and bring their nations to greater strength and prosperity. The attainment of greater national power should in principle always be considered a good thing for the nation in question. But like any other good thing in principle, if it is pursued in excess or obtained in ways that are deleterious to the interests of a nation, then it may end up being more of a detriment than a blessing. Indeed, national leaders, like all of us, need to be careful about what they wish for.

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