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POWER IN THE CONDITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL ANARCHY

Abstract

The aim of this analysis is to discuss the concepts of "power" and "great power" and to situate them within the conditions of international anarchy. The article refers to the assumptions of realist theories of international relations in the context of the role of great powers in the system and in the historical foundations of power. Power determines a state's position within the balance of power but also shapes relations within the system of anarchy. The power of individual political entities thus generates real interconnections in a world of polycentric international rivalry. However, the balance of power, even when reinforced by universally recognised and respected norms, remains synonymous with anarchy, as no entity holds a monopoly on violence.

Consequently, international order exists primarily due to a specific configuration of power relations among the major powers. This one is built on real potential. The neorealist tradition in IR stipulates that national power derives primarily from material capacities and resources – geography (territory), population, national resources, industrial capacity, military capacity, quality of government and diplomacy, as well as national character and the national morale.

The neoliberal approach adds to the material resources of power, the potential of influence through international institutions and factors of "soft power". In our understanding of the major components of the national power, we follow the realist and neorealist traditions. In this context, however, the significance of the geographical factor (and geopolitics), as a component building the international status of political entities was critically analysed.

Key words: anarchy, great power, power, balance of power, history of international relations

1. Introduction

The literature on international relations highlights numerous factors and interdependencies that shape relations between states. Scholars associated with the realist schools emphasise the "anarchic" nature of the international system.[1] However, in this context, "anarchic" nature does not imply "chaotic or driven by disorder"[2] but merely the opposition of hierarchy.[3] Anarchy differs from chaos because, even in a world of polycentric international rivalry, the system retains at least some fundamental relationships – economic, cultural and social.

Anarchy in the international environment is thus perceived as a system in which its actors and participants – particularly states, but also international organisations, multinational corporations, and others – operate within a framework of polyarchy, meaning a system lacking a clear state arbiter (hegemon) or any other monopolistic authority capable of resolving disputes and administering justice. Under conditions of anarchy, the importance of violence increases and the primary attribute of survival remains the strength/power of a given entity – from a realist perspective, primarily military power.[4] Power determines a state's position within the balance of power but also shapes relations within the system of anarchy. However, the balance of power,

1 H. Bull, *The Anarchical Society. A Study of Order in World Politics*, London 1985, pp. 3–52, K.J. Holstii, *The State. War and the State of War*, Cambridge 1996, p.7.

2 J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York 2001, p. 30.

3 B. Buzan, R. Little, *Systemy międzynarodowe w historii świata*, Warszawa 2011, p. 551.

4 From the perspective of defensive realism, it serves to deter potential aggressors, while from the perspective of offensive realism, it aims to build a hegemonic position.

even when reinforced by universally recognised and respected norms, remains synonymous with anarchy, as no entity holds a monopoly on violence. Consequently, international order exists primarily due to a specific configuration of power relations among the major powers.

The aim of this analysis is to examine the concept of "power" and the related term "great power" and to situate them within the conditions of international anarchy, which, according to the authors, is structured by specific configurations of power relations. This discussion is particularly relevant in the context of the election of the U.S. president who explicitly adheres to political realism and, consequently, to the potential use of force in pursuit of national interests. Donald Trump further integrates this approach with rhetoric centred on expansionism, nostalgia for the U.S. hegemony, and a desire to restore the American power and, ultimately, global primacy. In this regard, his stance aligns to some extent with ideological constructs shaping Vladimir Putin's ideology. A key question in this analysis is whether there exists a universal set of factors that determine power and how power influences a state's position within the balance of power.

In this context, particular attention will be given to the significance of the geographical factor (along with geopolitics) as a component shaping the international status of political entities. While geography undeniably plays a crucial role in establishing a state's status and position within the balance of power, it is only one element – one that, arguably, is often overemphasised.

2. Power and great power status in the conditions of international anarchy

The analysis of international anarchy provides an understanding of the nature of political relations and the causes of violence, while people and their relationships give it a specific character.[5] Anarchy is a dynamically changing system of power exchange in which the balance of power plays a crucial role. This balance determines the degree to which each power adapts to the demands of competition, deciding the fall of some and the survival of others.

[5] A. Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, Cambridge 1999, pp. 308–309.

The balance of power arises from the interaction of forces generated by the participating social entities, those associated with them, and the natural forces external to the system but influencing its participants. Great powers create global and regional security systems within which they are compelled to coexist. The balance of power is the real structure of such systems, defining the conditions, possibilities, and rules of competition. A position of each power within this structure is determined by the resources it controls in relation to those possessed by its competitors. Thus, the balance of power is a structure shaped by the mutual influence of territorial entities, each of which pursues its own vision of global order and seeks to establish it.

The fundamental characteristic of this system is its inherent imbalance, manifested in the varying strengths of its constituent actors, their weakening or growth, the attainment of dominance and its eventual loss. However, such imbalances typically drive gradual changes over long periods, spanning generations. The pace of these changes varies. They can span hundreds of years and are always linked to the transformative capacities of the social actors generating forces and thus maintaining their specific arrangement in the space of polyarchy.

The balance of power among sovereign powers takes shape and operates within an environment but ultimately rests on its participants. It is neither an order nor requires justification or any normative foundation. Its existence depends solely on the presence of entities with political status, distinct territories, and the capacity to engage in mutual relations.

The unique position of political entities is not a matter of chance but a result of necessity. Over vast spaces and long timeframes, the dominant role inevitably falls to the balance of power grouping entities capable of utilising all available resources, including moral ones, as these enable actions involving truly ultimate means – the mass mobilisation of human life as a tool for conflict. This is the essence of selection. It favours human unions that not only accumulate ever-greater resources but also develop the ability to use them in a coordinated manner to exert influence on their environment.

Within the balance of power, stronger actors make weaker ones dependent. States with limited potential must, therefore, align themselves with great powers, relying on their protection while simultaneously serving them with their resources. In this way,

the space of international relations creates a structure the generated power of which determines the position of each participant.

Even when individual states share the same ideological values and similar political norms, their strategic interests develop independently. They may form alliances, yet these alliances are never permanent; they last only as long as there is a convergence of interests and objectives among the involved parties. States as basic units of the international order exhibit fundamental variations, not only in their potentials of power and influence and international behavior, but also in their internal conditions, interests and capacities, strategies and opportunities[6].

The stability of the system depends on the determination of states (primarily great powers) to pursue their interests. When a human collective deems, in a manner unacceptable to others, that its development requires additional resources or that the system in which it operates restricts its growth, it seeks to challenge the existing balance of power, leading to a conflict. This was the case with the outbreak of both World War I and World War II, as well as with the ongoing U.S.-China rivalry.

The determination of great powers to achieve their objectives is largely influenced by religious and ideological visions. However, religion or ideology often serves merely as an attempt to morally justify the competition for resources. While all political entities participate in international rivalry, only those states with sufficient potential – namely, great powers – have the capability to bring about real systemic change within the framework of international anarchy.

Leopold von Ranke, who was the first to define the concept of a "great power," argued that such a designation applies to states that, within the world-historical process of national competition for territory, power, and dominance, have demonstrated the ability to defend their interests in confrontation – most often military – with multiple states of comparable potential.[7] Great power status is thus inherently linked to concepts such as authority and influence, both of which are fundamental to discussions concerning a state's status and hierarchy in international relations.

[6] A Melville, A. Akhremenko, M. Mironyuk, *What Russia Can Teach Us about Power and Influence in World Politics,* "Russian Politics" 2019, vol. 4, p. 141.

[7] L. von. Ranke, *Die großen Mächte,* Leipzig 1915, pp. 62.

The search for an objective, universally accepted set of criteria that determine great power status is as fascinating as it is unsolvable. The simplest approach to resolving this dilemma may be the assumption that "being a great power means acting like a great power".[8]

However, a more meaningful perspective considers not only objective structural and resource-based factors but also elements of identity, the capacity to exert significant and long-term influence on dynamic processes within the international system, the ability to effectively respond to extraordinary situations, and the capacity to leverage apolitical factors in shaping global politics. Therefore, great powers are those states that possess real power.

Defining *power* – and its elements received relatively considerable attention (e.g., Hans Morgenthau,[9] Robert Gilpin,[10] John J. Mearsheimer,[11] Raymond Aron,[12] Nicolas J. Spykman,[13] or in a slightly different context, Joseph S. Nye[14]). It can be argued that power is one of the most extensively explored concepts in academic discourse. However, there is notable inconsistency in its usage, as it is employed to describe various phenomena – power as potential, power as capability, and power as force. To a large extent, this inconsistency is a semantic issue. Much of the scholarly effort has focused on identifying the components of power, often in the search for measurable and non-measurable parameters that would allow for its precise estimation or calculation.[15] This endeavour, however, appears to be a formidable challenge. Charles Doran aptly pointed out that "if the essence of international politics is power, then the essence of power is relativity".[16]

8 W.K. Domke, *Power, Political Capacity and Security in the Global System*, [in:] *Power in World Politics*, eds R.J. Stoll, M.D. Ward, L.: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1989, p. 161.
9 *Politics Among Nations: the Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York 1948.
10 *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge 1981.
11 *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics,* New York 2001.
12 *Pokój i wojna między narodami (teoria)*, Warszawa 1995.
13 *The Geography of the Peace*, New York 1944.
14 *Soft Power. Jak osiągąć sukces w polityce światowej*, Warszawa 2007.
15 See D. Kondrakiewicz, *Metody pomiaru siły państwa w stosunkach międzynarodowych,* [in:] *Poziomy analizy stosunków międzynarodowych*, vol. II, eds E. Haliżak, M. Pietraś, Warszawa 2013, pp. 13–22.
16 R. Aron*, Pokój i wojna między narodami (teoria*), Warszawa 1995, pp. 76.

The attempt to quantify power using numerical comparisons ultimately proves inconclusive and explains little. If such quantification was definitive, wars would not have had a *raison d'être*, as their outcomes would already have been known before hostilities even began.[17] Conversely, no prudent leader would undertake actions against another political entity without thoroughly assessing its strength.[18]

When analysing state power, it is crucial to recognise its complexity and multi-layered nature. Raymond Aron defined power as "the ability of a political entity to impose its will on other political entities in the international arena".[19] J.G. Stoessinger viewed power in international relations as "a state's ability to use its material and immaterial resources in a way that influences the behaviour of other states".[20] Alan J.P. Taylor described power as a state's resilience in the face of war.[21] Joseph S. Nye, Jr. conceptualised power as "the ability to influence others to achieve desired outcomes".[22] Ryszard Skarzyński defined power as "a set of forces in action, capable of creating or transforming a specific segment of reality".[23] This "set of forces" is concentrated and directed by a specific (political) centre of authority.

To understand power, one must grasp its limits (relative growth constraints), its challenges (legitimacy and adaptation to its role within the system), and its susceptibility to surprises (disruptions and unexpected shifts), which in turn make it vulnerable to shocks and uncertainty.[24] Power is neither a fixed nor an unlimited value. Without the consistent (historical) accumulation of resources by elites – whether

17 Cited after: M. Sułek, *Paradygmat cyklu siły Charles'a F. Dorana a pozimnowojenny ład międzynarodowy*, [in:] *Porządek międzynarodowy u progu XXI wieku,* ed. R. Kuźniar, Warszawa 2005, p. 573.

18 At this point, it is worth recalling the work of Sun Zi, *Sztuka wojenna*, Kraków 2003, pp. 17–28.

19 R. Aron, op. cit., p. 69.

20 Cited in: M. Sułek, *Modelowanie i pomiar potęgi państw w stosunkach międzynarodowych*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 2003, no. 3–4, p. 70.

21 A. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe: 1848–1918*, Oxford 1954, p. 24.

22 J.S. Nye jr., *SoftPower. Jak osiągnąć sukces w polityce światowej?*, transl. by J. Zaborowski, introd. by R. Kuźniar, Kraków 2007, pp. 34–45.

23 R. Skarzyński, *Anarchia i Policentryzm. Elementy teorii stosunków międzynarodowych,* Białystok 2006, p. 340.

24 Charles F. Doran, *Economics, Philosophy of History, and the "Single Dynamic" of Power Cycle Theory: Expectations, Competition, and Statecraft*, "International Political Science Review" 2003, vol. 24, no. 1, pp. 13–49.

as a function of continuous threat or a quasi-religious belief in their predestination to uphold a particular faith, ideology, or social order – a state risks becoming nothing more than an ephemeral (short-lived) power.

The path to building long-term power also requires a factor that is seemingly apolitical yet, at times, proves decisive – pure fortune or simple luck. This stroke of fate, such as the emergence of exceptional leaders or the absence of strong leadership among major competitors, can shield a state at moments when it is not yet capable of assuming the historical role of a great power but is being outpaced in terms of resources by other states. Fortune may also provide the crucial time needed for a state to reach the threshold level of potential necessary for further power consolidation. Russia has repeatedly benefited from such strokes of fortune on its path to hegemony, encountering declining great powers along the way – Poland-Lithuania, Sweden, the Ottoman Empire, Persia, and earlier, the Tatar Khanates.

Likewise, Napoleonic France can be considered a declining power, as Napoleon's wars marked not only the final chapter of France's superpower status but also, in the case of the Russian campaign, a belated endeavour – delayed not merely by weeks of the spring-summer campaign. By 1812, France's military potential was only a shadow of what it had been a few years earlier, and not even the colossal size of the *Grande Armée* could compensate for this decline. A similar situation unfolded with Nazi Germany's aggression, where the desperate decision to open a second front made military victory in Russia (the Soviet Union) virtually impossible. However, as history later demonstrated, this campaign, much like those of Napoleon and Charles XII before it, ultimately provided Russia with an opportunity to ascend to the ranks of the world's superpowers.[25]

The concept of "power," as discussed earlier, is often equated with the term "great power." This association appears justified, as the two notions are closely related in meaning. A "great power" can be seen as an explicit manifestation and physical embodiment of the broader phenomenon of "power." The term "great power"

[25] It is important to note that Russia entered the sphere of high European politics relatively late. Even at the end of the 17th century, Tsar Peter I, who travelled across the continent, was regarded as the exotic ruler of an equally exotic state. However, within the span of just a few decades, Russia gained international recognition, then secured great power status, and by 1815, at the Congress of Vienna, Tsar Alexander I was able to dominate European politics as the leader of a superpower.

was at first used in official documents during the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Traditionally, great powers are defined as states that, by virtue of their potential, exert a decisive influence on shaping international relations. These are also states capable of challenging any other state (offensive power) as well as neutralising or countering challenges posed by other states (defensive power). After 1945, the term "superpower" entered common usage, followed by "hyperpower" in the late 1990s.[26]

To some extent, this terminology has been misapplied. The United States and the Soviet Union were "great powers," and their superpower status emerged primarily from the unique structure of international relations, in which two political centres established an overwhelmingly dominant military advantage over all other political entities. Currently, the definition of "great power" should be expanded to encompass the non-political roles of various international actors – roles that may be a function of power potential but also extend beyond traditional parameters. It is evident that in international politics, great powers – those strongest actors on the global stage – play a decisive role, as only the most powerful states possess the necessary resources to execute their political strategies.

The objective of great power is to shape the global system's structure according to its own needs and expectations, which often conflict with those of other states. It is only natural that as a great power expands its sphere of influence, it will inevitably encounter resistance from another great power or a coalition seeking to curb its expansion. Thus, the limits of any great power's strength are defined by the power of its competitors or adversaries, and the ultimate test of their capabilities appears to be war.

War is a political phenomenon that fully reveals the extent of a state's power, exposing both its strengths and weaknesses. It shows whether the state has sufficient forces and whether it can effectively use them to achieve its objectives. Every state possesses relative power, the true scope of which becomes apparent only in comparison with other powers.[27] Great powers must possess elements that contribute to relative power

[26] In the 1990s, the hyperpower of the United States. The term is attributed to Hubert Védrine, who served as France's Minister of Foreign Affairs in the government of Lionel Jospin.

[27] Paul Kennedy highlights the relative nature of power in the international system, stating that "in the international system, wealth and power are always relative quantities" (*Mocarstwa świata. Narodziny, rozkwit, upadek, Przemiany gospodarcze i konflikty zbrojne w latach 1500–2000,* Warszawa 1994, p. 14).

and exhibit what may be called "explosive power" – the ability to rapidly mobilise maximum strength in the shortest possible time. A great power maintains an advantage over its rivals, allowing it to act assertively, as it possesses both the capability and the motivation to do so.[28]

In an anarchic international system, a state's survival is not guaranteed by balance but by dominance. A great power must strive to maintain a margin of superiority over other great powers, as the capabilities of its rivals cannot be fully predicted – not in the present and certainly not a decade or two into the future. Power enables a state to fulfil its most fundamental task: survival.

There are no precisely established and universally defined characteristics of what constitutes a "great power." These characteristics were usually treated as empirical and evident to experts.[29] However, such an approach carries a considerable degree of subjectivity. As a result, efforts have been made to identify certain common criteria that determine the status of "power" ("great power").[30] Power is often confused with its indicators or the intentions guiding its development. Each long-term power relies on a complex and evolving configuration of factors that favour the accumulation of resources and the mobilisation of means across time and space.[31]

While attempts can be made to assess these factors, it should be noted that even the comparison of seemingly measurable values does not always provide an accurate assessment of the actual potential of the actors involved. A good exemplification of this is the size of an army, a quantifiable metric that does not answer fundamental questions regarding its training, armament, organisation, morale, or discipline, all of which determine its actual effectiveness.

The challenge of establishing universal components of power lies in their evolution over time and space, changes in their nature, and their varying utility to a state's

28 See: J. Mearsheimer, op. cit., p. 37.

29 Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York 1979, p. 131.

30 Lists of factors determining the power of a state were compiled by, among others: Hans Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations,* New York 1949; John G. Stoessinger, *The Might of Nations: World Politics in Our Time*, New York 1962; Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*, New York 1942; R. Aron, op. cit.; Kenneth, N. Waltz, op. cit.

31 R. Skarzyński, op. cit., p. 346.

potential. Many of these factors may simultaneously strengthen and weaken power (for instance, the benefits of possessing vast territory can be offset by the challenges of defending extended borders and the dispersion of forces). Despite these limitations, a categorisation of the most universal components of power can be proposed, consisting of six fundamental elements:

1. Geography – The size of the territory, access to natural resources, climate, and geostrategic position.
2. Demography – Population size, social structure, education level, and the degree of national integration and identity.
3. Economy – Industrialisation, the technological development of the industrial sector, economic flexibility, the state's financial condition, the scale of foreign trade, and GDP levels and growth.
4. State governance – The legitimacy, efficiency, and competence of government, the strength and attractiveness of the state's ideology and leadership, and the degree of social acceptance of the current government.
5. Military power – The technological and military preparedness of the armed forces, the competence of the command structure, organisation, morale, and the readiness to engage in armed conflicts and make sacrifices. Also included is the ability to form alliances, including credibility and international perception, flexibility, willingness to forge alliances, and the state's cultural and ideological appeal.
6. Historical consistency of power-building by the elites – Every responsible state strives to enhance its power, as this ensures security and survival. Given the uncertainty surrounding what constitutes sufficient potential for today, let alone for the future, great powers believe that the best way to secure their survival is to achieve hegemony, thereby outpacing competitors in terms of potential and eliminating the likelihood of future challenges from other great powers. Only a poorly governed state would abandon the opportunity to become a hegemon under the false assumption that it already possesses enough power to survive.[32] This final characteristic implies the presence of an appropriate level of will among state leaders and key elite groups, grounded in shared visions of the state's role and the global order within the broader macro-political community. It also requires sufficient resource potential that can be mobilised in the face of resistance from one or more international entities acting as great powers.

[32] J. Mearsheimer, op. cit., p. 35.

All the aforementioned elements should be understood as relative rather than absolute factors, as their actual value materialises only in comparison with the analogous strengths (or weaknesses) of an opponent. It should also be noted that none of these elements – either individually or even collectively – guarantees immediate success in international politics, due to both their relative nature and the influence of random factors (e.g., the military genius of an enemy commander). However, in the long run, these factors almost inevitably lead to domination over other political entities. Conversely, the absence or weakness of even one of these elements significantly reduces a state's historical chances of securing a lasting position among the great powers.

The power of individual great powers depends on the total sum of their resources, but only under the condition of their effective and coordinated deployment in a historical perspective. Frequently, one strength is derived from another. A large population is meaningless without an efficient state organisation; vast territory without a strong military can become an easy target for neighbours; and even the largest army, if lacking competent leadership, organisation, and morale, will be nothing more than an amorphous mass of soldiers.

The analysis of political powers across time and space reveals specific patterns that allow for their classification into three primary groups. Thus, we can distinguish enduring (long-term) powers – endowed with a threshold level of great power potential (favourable geostrategic location, territory, population size) and capable of expanding it in a historical perspective (China, Russia, England, USA, Germany, France); opportunistic powers, the potential of which is not a function of accumulated strength but rather results from periodically emerging circumstances such as trade, resources, military organisation, or effective leadership (United Provinces, Portugal, Spain, Turkey, Japan); and ephemeral (short-lived) powers, which, due to the military genius of their leaders, were granted fleeting moments of glory by fate (Denmark, Sweden, Mongols). History also reveals hampered powers, which, despite possessing great power potential, were unable to effectively utilise it for various reasons (Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth).

3. Power, geography, and geopolitics

Currently, political discourse is witnessing a renaissance of the realist view of international relations, which emphasises competition, conflict, and the maximisation

of power by individual national entities – both in internal and international contexts. An example of such a state is the United States following Donald Trump's return to the White House, as well as Russia, which is perceived as a militarily oriented great power. Both entities have global aspirations, and their great power status manifests itself through actions aimed at achieving specific objectives, including increasing state power and international standing, influencing other actors in international relations, maintaining their sphere of influence, and enhancing international prestige.

Unlike the United States, which possesses numerous attributes of power, Russia is primarily perceived as a great power through the lens of its military strength and geography – particularly its vast territorial expanse. Characterisation of Russia typically begins with a description of its territory, which currently covers over 17 million square kilometres and was even larger in the past. This vast landmass serves as the foundation of Russia's great power status but also presents dilemmas regarding its internal development and the direction of its foreign policy. It also raises broader questions about the significance of geography in determining state power.

A significant issue that arises when overemphasising the geographical factor is the tendency toward determinism. In its extreme form, this perspective can lead to the conclusion that human actions have no influence on international realities, as geography dictates the course of events. Such an approach is certainly unfounded and lacks rational justification. Instead, it carries an ideological dimension, which is particularly evident in geopolitics.

Contemporary geopolitical visions attempt to describe the transformations occurring in international relations, but they also serve as a response to a sense of helplessness in the face of radical shifts in the status of individual states and, in some cases, as an expression of nostalgia for the lost greatness of certain powers. Geopolitics examines the development of power within spatial contexts, yet it does not view space as a neutral foundation upon which relations between social communities unfold. The space is more of a battlefield on which the weak must inevitably give way to the strong. By excessively elevating the importance of geographical factors, such as resources, location, and strategic points, geopolitical thought often marginalises or entirely disregards other elements that contribute to state power. It fails to recognise that both the factors shaping power and the balance of power within a given space are subject to change over time and are not necessarily determined by geography.

Moreover, it seems to overlook the issue of time itself – even if certain geopolitical concepts are justified in a given period when viewed from a *longue durée* perspective, they may ultimately prove to be little more than fleeting episodes.

The claim that certain conditions of the geographical environment must inevitably produce certain political consequences is, at some level, a trivial statement. However, upon closer examination, it proves to be a significant overstatement. Geographical conditions undoubtedly create circumstances that may either favour or hinder particular political actions. It is difficult to imagine any serious political analysis that does not take geographical factors into account. Undeniably, the cost of constructing and maintaining roads in the climate of Siberia is significantly higher than on the plains of Central Europe; governing Russia's vast territories necessitates a strong central authority and an oversized bureaucracy; and the lack of access to open seas limits the development of certain states.

Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely, with the caveat that they do not necessarily determine whether a given state will become a great power or what kind of policies it will pursue. History provides many examples of empires whose beginnings were very modest and whose geographical limitations could be considered decisive (Rome, Macedonia, the Mongol Empire). An excessive emphasis on geographical determinism can, in turn, give rise to the temptation of crafting a historiosophy centred on the notion of a "geographical fate." That kind of approach is anti-scientific and ahistorical. The fall of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth in the 18th century did not result from its geographical location but from internal decay within the state. Specific geographical conditions potentially create situations that are favourable (or unfavourable) to particular social responses. However, they do not determine which reactions must occur, let alone imply that such reactions are predetermined.

Geographical determinism fails to account for the "soft" factors of the international system, such as interconnections, culture, dependencies, diplomacy, innovation, and political system evolution. Participants in international relations are not only states but also various other social actors.

Geopolitical analyses often neglect the role of individuals in shaping the international system, as well as the influence of technology, capital concentration, international institutions and organisations. It disregards ideological, political, and religious

connections, as well as the growing role of multinational corporations in shaping international relations. This omission is particularly problematic given that corporations frequently define not only economic but also political objectives, which states then follow. This phenomenon has been observable at least since the 16th and 17th centuries when the political objectives of states such as the Netherlands and England began to be shaped in part by trading companies.[33] Thus, the contradictions arising in international relations are not necessarily generated by governments or territorial political communities. Geography, therefore, does not have to be the central axis of these relations.

Geopoliticians believe they have full knowledge of the mechanisms governing international systems, but it seems they know about them only as much as they have written themselves. One might also get the impression that they are not particularly interested in the actual political and social processes. In fact, geopolitical fantasies are primarily embraced by groups struggling to adapt to the evolving role and position of states in the new international reality or by those seeking to justify violence and expansion. After all, geopolitics initially emerged as an ideological foundation for the strategic concepts of great powers – it was meant to legitimise their dominant position and sanction their political goals. To this day, it continues to serve political interests by attempting to reinforce the notion that the strong will always defeat the weak. However, in the long run, it is not the strongest who prevail but those who best adapt to competition.

Geography is an environment that undeniably plays a significant role in the development and competition of human societies. However, the key factor is the system that imposes specific behaviours. It establishes the mechanisms of competition and ensures that everything revolves around the transformation of resources into energy. Access to resources is only partially determined by geographical location. Geographical constraints, however, are modifiable – both through the characteristics of the system in which a given community operates and through a society's organisational and technological capabilities. The history of warfare is filled with examples of overcoming the so-called "regime of geography" through organisational

[33] The first trading companies include the Muscovy Company, established in London in 1553, as well as the Dutch East India Company and the British East India Company, both founded in the early 17th century.

and technological superiority. Space was no barrier to the conquests of Alexander the Great, Rome, and the Mongols. By the 16th and 17th centuries, it became evident that geography and resource distribution were no longer obstacles limiting the global development of states. This realisation led to the rapid expansion of naval fleets, the rise of colonialism, international trade, and, ultimately, the emergence of global powers. The key to success in this process was organisation and technology.

4. Conclusion

The system of international anarchy is based on continuous competition, the struggle for resources, and the efforts of great powers to achieve dominance, which enables control over these resources. This competition arises both from human nature, in which the desire to accumulate wealth is an inherent trait – and from an objective necessity, as access to resources ensures survival and participation in further resource competition. Resources vary in type and their significance changes over time. In the past, key resources included hunting grounds, pastures, and arable land. The struggles of the Roman Republic can largely be reduced to conflicts over land. The initial driver of the Mongol expansion was access to pasturelands.

As technological development progressed, metals, and later fuels, became increasingly significant. In modern times, competition has begun to centre around the control of rare earth metals. Access to resources was crucial for the survival and development of human communities, making the struggle for resource protection – or the acquisition of others' resources – a fundamental objective in competition. Technological advancement meant that the struggle for resources, along with the protection of trade routes through which they were transported, took on a global character. In this competition, states that lacked natural resources but possessed superior technological and organisational capabilities proved particularly aggressive and effective. This type of advantage formed the foundation of military successes for Assyria, Macedonia, and Rome, as well as for modern England, France, and the United States. Technology allowed states to mitigate demographic weaknesses and geographical limitations to a certain extent. Innovation increased efficiency in converting resources into energy. This ability enabled European states – despite their relatively limited natural resources – to conquer and control nearly the entire world in the 19th century. It was also innovation that allowed the United States to emerge victorious in the Cold War.

Today, innovation – understood as the development of IA and dominance in the space race – is one of Trump's strategies for restoring the U.S. global primacy. Great powers that neglected innovation and resisted continuous modernisation condemned themselves to failure. This phenomenon is well illustrated by China's political decline from the 15th to the 19th centuries, Japan's stagnation between the 17th and 19th centuries, and the Soviet Union's collapse in the 1980s. Anarchy defines the specifics of competition between states – the key role of resources (and their accumulation) in competition and the process of converting resources into energy used internally for the survival of a grouping of people and externally for competition with other groupings.

Paul Kennedy described this process in his work *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*,[34] where he demonstrated that great powers were those that most effectively accumulated resources and converted them into energy. However, Kennedy did not explain how the system of states functions. He focused too much on economic resources. He also ignored the problem of visions of universal order that triggered in people the will to fight for domination. Though true dominance was ultimately unattainable, it led to costly rivalries and self-destruction.

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[34] P. Kennedy, op. cit.

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SUMMARY

Power in the Conditions of International Anarchy

In the literature on international relations, there are many comments on the specificity of the primary conditions and dependencies that shape relations between states. Researchers associated with the realist schools draw attention to the "anarchic nature" of the international system whereas "anarchic" does not mean "chaotic or fragmented by disorder". Anarchy in the international environment is generally perceived as a system in which its actors and participants – particularly states, but also international organisations, multinational corporations, and others – operate within a context of polyarchy, that is, a system lacking a clear state arbiter (hegemon) or any other monopolistic authority capable of resolving disputes and administering justice. In conditions of anarchy, the importance of violence increases and the basic attribute of survival remains the strength/power of a given entity, which also determines its position in the system of international relations.

This problem seems particularly important in the international system rapidly transformed by the powers – mainly the USA, China and Russia – and thus also in the global and regional balance of power, in which cooperation, interdependence, free trade and, above all, international law are replaced by hard power factors, belonging to the catalogue exposed in the realist tradition: geography (territory), population, national resources, industrial potential, military potential, quality of governance and diplomacy. Realism in international relations is also the belief that great powers have the right to have their own spheres of influence, within which no one should challenge their power.

In political discourse, competition, conflict and maximisation of power by individual national entities are emphasised – both in the domestic political and international dimension. On the basis of historical examples and conditions, we try to recognise – taking realist and neorealist theories as a point of reference – the tendencies that will construct the global balance of power in the post-liberal era and decide on the power/superpower status of political entities. A specific geographical determinism, i.e. excessive emphasis on the importance of the geographical factor as a component of building the power of a state, is also an important element of the realist tradition. At this point, the authors disagree with such an interpretation, assuming that technology is currently able to overcome the problems and limitations related to geography.

The structure of the article is as follows. After the introduction, in the first part we discuss theoretical and methodological problems of conceptualising the concepts of power and great power in the conditions of international anarchy. In the next part, we critically refer to one of the basic components of power in the realist tradition: geography (and related geopolitics). The analysis was made from the perspective of the realist theory.

The aim of this analysis is to explore the concepts of “power” and “great power” and to situate them within the framework of international anarchy. Power is undoubtedly a combination of forces that establish a state’s status in the international environment, which, under the conditions of international anarchy, translates into its position within the balance of power. The power of individual political entities thus generates real interconnections in a world of polycentric international rivalry. If the global order shaped between 1989 and 1991 has come to an end, it is necessary to consider what the coming years will bring – whether international relations will experience increased polarisation and deeper amorphisation or move toward a new form of concentration in which global primacy will either return to a single superpower or will be shared among at least two or three great powers, no longer solely the United States.