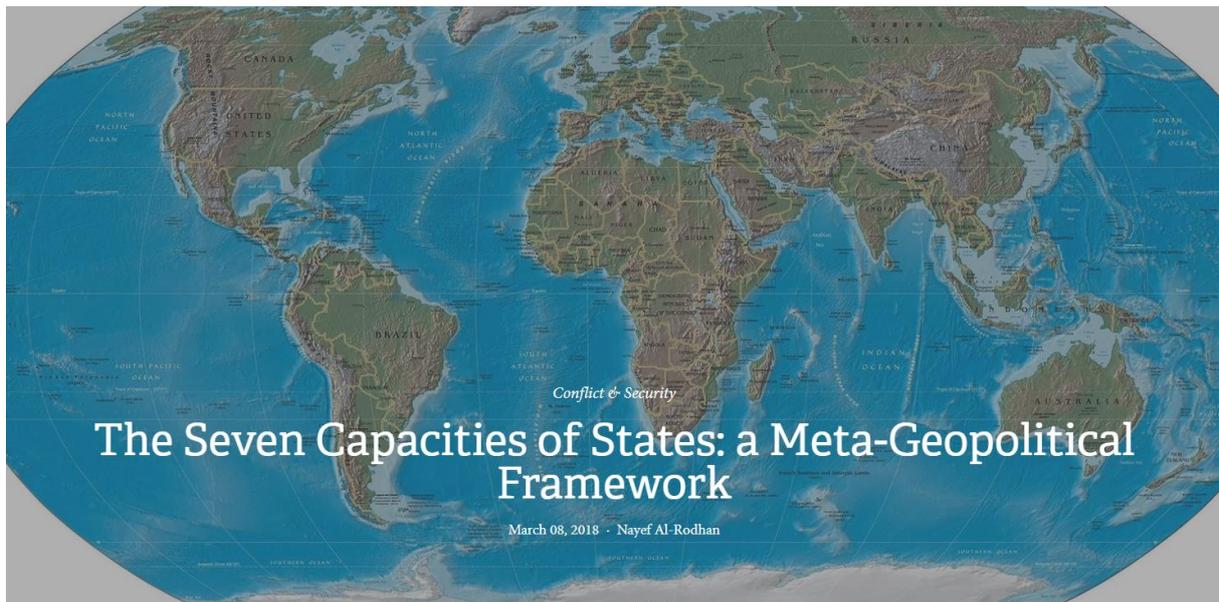


# Georgetown Journal of International Affairs



[Conflict & Security](#)

## [The Seven Capacities of States: a Meta-Geopolitical Framework](#)

[Nayef Al-Rodhan](#)

March 08, 2018

Power remains one of the key concepts of international politics. Yet, while references to power are ubiquitous, defining power and its components is more complicated. The capacity of a state in international politics has long been assessed in terms of its military prowess and physical resources. Very frequently, geopolitics has focused on a few specific conceptions of power without providing a comprehensive framework for analyzing all the elements that contribute to states' stability and position in the international system. Two specific considerations demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive, integrated account of interstate relations. The first is the rise of global threats that act with little respect for political borders; terrorism and climate change, for example, supersede political demarcation altogether. The second consideration is that, in the face of these mounting global threats and despite ongoing globalization across many sectors, the central role that states continue to play in the world order remains unchanged.

Taken together, these two observations prompt the development of what I have previously referred to as [Neo-Statecraft](#), of which *Meta*-geopolitics forms a key component. Distinct from traditional geopolitical analysis, [Meta-geopolitics](#) provides a more nuanced treatment of the determinants of state power in terms of seven crucial capacities that make up national power. The breakdown of these capabilities is as follows: 1. social and health issues, 2. domestic politics, 3. economics, 4. the environment, 5. science and human potential, 6. military and security issues, and 7. international diplomacy.

## **Social and Health Issues**

Demographic factors, such as trends in population and age, inform a state's ability to function and act in myriad ways. In resource-poor circumstances, population growth threatens instability as scarcity and pressure for job growth become increasingly salient. Many wealthier countries, on the other hand, have begun to face the challenges of declining birth rates and increased longevity. This, in turn, generates difficulties given that taxation of workers forms a central component of domestic economies' revenue generation. Increased life expectancy only adds to these worries as social measures designed to protect the aging and elderly become underfunded and overstressed in the absence of this tax revenue. Such consequences have the potential to foment tension between age groups and social classes.

Inequality as a more general phenomenon has increasingly become a central issue that threatens social cohesion and, recently, has proven to lead to political instability and a rise of aggressive populism. The theoretical background to this problem has a long history, including various forms of Marxism and competing conceptions of distributive justice. As international inequalities continue to rise, as well as domestic inequalities within hegemonies like the United States, increased fragility of social cohesion should be expected. Conversely, states that manage to limit disparity and utilize existing imbalances in more productive ways will enjoy greater legitimacy and stability.

## **Domestic Politics**

As I have argued at length in [Stability of States](#), states' stability is largely influenced by the stability of the political systems to which they subscribe. The legitimacy of a political system is often more fragile than many believe and, when mishandled, can quickly be squandered. This, in turn, results in looming instability when a citizenry no longer has faith in its political leadership. Such resistance is often justified as opportunists primarily concerned with their own agendas will frequently fill power vacuums following rapid turnovers of power. Political instability can quickly become self-perpetuating, regardless of the talents or intents of those seeking power.

A loss of confidence in political institutions undermines stability both directly and indirectly, as perceived inadequacy of the government provides opportunities for fault-finding from all sides. Gridlock between the Obama administration and a deeply obstructionist Congress is a prime illustration of a populace losing confidence in government overall. The 2016 U.S. elections, in which a substantial portion of the electorate appears to have voted against their government out of protest, provides another.

## **Economics**

A state's economic circumstances speak volumes about its stability for several interrelated reasons. Perhaps most importantly, a state in economic turmoil is in danger of losing its independence as it will likely have to rely upon outside assistance to avoid collapse or at least permanent loss of its standing in the international order. Such assistance, however, rarely comes without conditions, as International Monetary Fund loans to various Latin American countries in the latter half of the 20th century demonstrated. In short, when a state is unable to manage its own economic affairs, create the necessary physical infrastructure for economic development, and interact sustainably in global

markets, the terms of assistance that it will be offered often ultimately benefit those offering the assistance more than those receiving it.

## **Environment**

Even today, many would deny the importance of environmental considerations. To take only one example, for all China's recent, impressive economic and infrastructural gains, the livability of its largest cities remains poor because of severe air pollution. So acute is this problem that China recently announced a special [environmental police, specially tasked with monitoring and ensuring law-enforcement on environmental issues.](#)

More critically, states that are most vulnerable to the effects of climate change will face threats to their stability that are in many ways unprecedented. The low-lying nation of [Bangladesh](#) is often pointed to as an example. Conservative predictions about rising sea levels within the next century warn that millions of the country's inhabitants will be threatened with displacement. All states will be affected, given that climate change will generate worldwide refugee crises accompanied by complex socio-economic and geopolitical challenges. In this regard, it is noteworthy that states recognized as good environmental stewards will wield significant soft power, as discussed below.

## **Science and Human Potential**

The capacity for high-level research and development, as well as a well-educated, highly-skilled workforce, remains a prime contributor to state power and stability. This is true not only for the obvious reason that such attributes contribute to a domestic economy, but also because such human resources are highly fungible, meaning that the workforce of such a state can be more readily retrained to adapt to new technologies and circumstances. Innovation is a strong predictor of state stability, as demonstrated by the [example of Switzerland](#), which tops global innovation rankings.

## **Military and Security Issues**

Military resources and the capacity of a state to protect its sovereignty and physical borders remain salient foundations of state power. While cyber and non-territorial threats have complicated the spectrum of security risks, military arsenals remain pivotal. In other words, it is difficult to escape the [endurance of geopolitics](#). For instance, new military technologies, such as [hypersonic systems](#), or [artificial intelligence](#)-based systems, are developed at a fast rate, signaling the potentiality of a renewed arms race. This is irrefutable evidence that states cannot avoid geopolitical frictions and military competition. Of course, the competition over such advanced weaponry only engages a handful of resourceful countries, and those that have been typically global players. But the critical importance of military issues does not bypass any nation, and conventional weapons are seeing a boost in sales globally. In early 2017, it was reported that the [global arms trade](#) was at its highest point since the end of the Cold War – an indication of the scale of armed conflict in many regions of the world.

Military resources are, however, not sufficient in and of themselves to guarantee either the long-term prosperity of a country or the legitimacy of its government. As I have stated elsewhere, strong security and a highly securitized – or even militarized – state cannot ultimately survive profound calls for change from within. Without minimizing the incremental role of military capabilities, ideas, aspirations and human dignity are critical in political affairs. A [“natural selection of ideas”](#) will

ultimately lead to social and political transformation, even in highly authoritarian contexts, as the example of the anti-communist revolutions of 1989 reminds us.

### **International Diplomacy**

A state's soft power – its capacity to persuade other states by virtue of the appeal of its values and its strategic demeanor – is increasingly important in geopolitics. This is largely a result of globalization, but also a consequence of increasing reluctance to employ military force. Diplomacy as a profession is rendered more complex by these systemic changes. Unlike the era of 19th century *realpolitik*, in the 21st century, diplomacy goes beyond the striking of political deals, and requires a wider set of aptitudes in a complex environment in which states, corporations, and representatives of ethnic or indigenous groups can have seats at the negotiating table. Effective diplomacy today also needs to take into account cultural relations and ensure that cultural sensibilities are respected.

Above all, diplomacy requires a holistic understanding of world history and a deeper appreciation of the many commonalities that bind us together. I described this previously as “[the ocean model of civilization](#)”, whereby the contribution of each cultural domain and civilization is recognized and respected. Antagonistic views about distinct civilizations (e.g. European/Western civilization, Arab-Islamic civilization etc.) summarily gloss over the enormous contributions that each civilization has made in the development and advancement of others. The ocean encompasses the complexity of our human history: there is *one* human civilization, to which many cultural domains contribute, adding depth like rivers to an ocean. Diplomacy needs to ensure that every effort is made to fight skewed views of history and attempts to dehumanize others. Only by integrating a more accurate view about the worth and contributions of other cultures can diplomacy help overcome the notion of incompatible cultures. This will be increasingly necessary in international diplomacy, not only as a humanistic and accurate historical objective, but also as a pragmatic goal. Ultimately, persistent divisions hurt the weak and strong alike, and [breed insecurity](#).

Another important requirement for diplomacy is to strive to be impartial and promote justice at every level – one way of doing so would be by eliminating the anachronisms that [still plague the UN](#), including, most notably, its reflection of a post-war power structure that no longer reflects the global reality.

The perception that a state respects international law and is a cooperative entity in the international domain, particularly as evidenced by its membership and behavior within international institutions, will be of increasing importance. The inverse also holds true, namely that, while economic and other arguments might be offered for withdrawal from various forms of international partnerships, no state should be willing to risk isolation in the context of 21st century geopolitics given the depth of global interdependence. While the nature and extent of “interdependence” in the international continues to be a matter of debate, robust international law represents one form of such interdependence that benefits all states.

### **Measuring power: Meta-Geopolitics**

These seven capacities of states, when taken together, provide a broad measure of state stability. They can be analyzed to predict the likely longevity of a particular state, and point to troubling trends within states that undermine their stability. A more comprehensive understanding of power in the

21st century, the [Meta-geopolitics](#) paradigm also offers a basis from which policy recommendations can be derived, as weakness in any one of the above-described capacities also often presents an opportunity for reform.

Faring well across the seven capacities is critical for sustainable state power. While partial setbacks in one capacity can be overcome, persistent frailties in one or more of these capacities over a prolonged period of time will result in wider systemic shocks and ultimately threaten the overall stability of the country and its standing in international politics. A country that overspends on ambitious military interventions but then underfunds critical areas of public policy is bound to suffer inevitable negative repercussions, even if they take several years or even decades to manifest. The reverse is also true: a country that spends lavishly – as is the tendency of many populist leaders – on strategic domestic sectors and creates an artificial growth based on subsidies will remain vulnerable to geopolitical challenges and unprepared to address unexpected crises. The breakdown of national power into these seven state capacities reveals the complexity of statecraft and that only a holistic approach to governance can ensure sustainable national power.

*[Professor Nayef Al-Rodhan](#) is an Honorary Fellow at St Antony's College, University of Oxford, and Senior Fellow and Head of the Geopolitics and Global Futures Programme at the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. He is the author of *Neo-statecraft and Meta-geopolitics. Reconciliation of Power, Interests and Justice in the 21st century* (Zurich & Berlin: LIT, 2009). Tweet @ <https://twitter.com/SustainHistory>*

Nayef Al-Rodhan