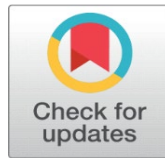


# AN OUTLOOK ON POWER VACUUMS IN THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM

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## ABSTRACT

When a great power's control over a region wanes, other states often compete to occupy the political space and assert their influence in that area. Building on this conventional wisdom, policymakers have long warned against the dangers of creating power vacuums—such as through reducing international commitments—and have advised against it whenever possible. Concerns about power vacuums have been a prominent feature in high-level U.S. strategic discussions for years. Notably, in 1972, President Nixon from the USA told Mao Zedong, “in international relations there are no good choices. One thing is sure – we can leave no vacuums.” Recently, the debate over the implications of power vacuums has resurfaced, especially as discussions intensify about the U.S. strategy in response to a rising China. Proponents of continued global engagement argue that significant retrenchment would create a power vacuum likely to be filled by adversaries, thereby jeopardizing national security.

**Keywords:** Nation, State, Power, Authority, Political Science, Power Vacuum, Government, Democracy

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The debate over grand strategy hinges on differing views about how great powers respond to the creation of power vacuums in international politics. Those who think that power vacuums are likely to be filled by other states seeking to expand their influence advocate for a more active U.S. strategy. Conversely, those who are less concerned about the consequences of such vacuums generally support reducing U.S. commitments abroad. Despite the frequent mention of power vacuums in policy discussions, there has been a notable lack of rigorous social scientific analysis on this topic within the field of international relations. Consequently, the literature has not provided the detailed analysis needed to advance the debate between advocates of restraint and their critics. In fact, there has been insufficient effort to develop a thorough conceptual understanding of power vacuums that would facilitate a serious scholarly discussion.

This study aims to address these gaps by offering a systematic evaluation of the role of power vacuums in great power politics. It will explore fundamental questions, such as: What constitutes a power vacuum? Why do great powers choose to assert control in some power vacuums but not others? What factors influence their strategy in these situations? Specifically, when do they opt for direct military intervention to establish control, and when do they prefer to exert indirect influence by supporting certain political actors with military and economic aid? By establishing a clear understanding of what power vacuums are and creating and testing a theory on how great powers react to their emergence, this study provides a robust conceptual, theoretical, and empirical basis for policy debates regarding power vacuums. It clarifies the conditions under which power vacuums indeed prompt military interventions by external powers aiming to assert control, as suggested by the pessimistic 'black hole' perspective. Conversely, it reveals instances when great powers challenge this conventional view by choosing to extend their influence through indirect methods or opting not to engage with a power vacuum at all.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOREGROUND

The notion of power vacuums as perilous black holes originates from the early days of modern international relations theory, particularly the work of theorists like Arnold Wolfers and Hans Morgenthau. Their views on power vacuums set them apart from other theoretical approaches in the field. Wolfers, for example, predicted that according to the pure power model of realism, expansion would inevitably occur wherever a power vacuum existed. He argued that if real-world conditions deviated from this model, such as differentiating between satiated and unsatiated states, it would no longer be accurate to say that power vacuums cannot persist for long. Early realists suggested that geostrategy is shaped by the assumption that power deters and weakness attracts, meaning states react to the distribution of power by expanding where there is no counterbalancing force.

Many contemporary scholars across various theoretical perspectives continue to adopt this pessimistic view of power vacuums. Richard Rosecrance, for instance, warns against narrowly defining national interests to avoid creating power vacuums, which historically have led to increased state involvement and war. Nuno Monteiro, analyzing the post-Soviet unipolar era, notes that the power vacuum left by the Soviet Union has had complex consequences for U.S. foreign policy. Others argue that the absence of power vacuums can foster peaceful great power relations, suggesting that contemporary U.S.-China relations are less likely to involve arms racing due to the lack of a significant power vacuum in East Asia. Despite the frequent discussions of power vacuums in international politics, the literature remains underdeveloped.

The predominant prediction does not always align with historical evidence. For example, while the U.S. and Soviet Union competed vigorously to fill the vacuum left by Nazi Germany's defeat, neither pursued a similar strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa during decolonization, nor did they compete in the Indian Ocean region after Britain's colonial withdrawal. Additionally, the literature fails to address the variety of strategies states use to compete for influence over power vacuums. For instance, following World War II, the U.S. chose to deploy troops in certain areas to establish direct control, whereas in the Middle East, the U.S. opted for indirect influence through aid rather than military intervention.

Moreover, discussions often lack a detailed causal explanation of why states are driven to compete for power vacuums and what motivates them to bear significant

costs in doing so. Current theories do not provide a comprehensive social scientific framework, as they lack both a clear hypothesis and causal logic. Finally, the literature's failure to develop a precise conceptualization of power vacuums hampers meaningful social scientific analysis. Without a well-defined concept, it is challenging to conduct systematic research or engage in informed policy debates. As Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen emphasize, well-defined concepts are crucial for scientific claims about causal relationships. Without such conceptual clarity, discussions on power vacuums will continue to lack robust theoretical foundations.

### **3. POLITICAL VACUUMS IN POST-COLD WAR**

This work provides a straightforward explanation for a major U.S. action at the end of the unipolar era: NATO's expansion eastward. As the Soviet Union fell, U.S. officials faced a significant power vacuum in Eastern Europe, a region no longer under the control of a major power. Instead of viewing this as a chance to increase U.S. power, the supporting evidence suggests that U.S. leaders saw the vacuum primarily as a potential threat. They worried that a resurgent Russia might fill the vacuum and pose a renewed threat to U.S. interests in Europe. Consequently, facing an uncertain future, they decided that preventive measures were necessary, including partially filling the Eastern European power vacuum themselves. The theory also explains the approach the U.S. took to address this vacuum. With the Soviet collapse leaving functioning states in Eastern Europe, the U.S. chose an indirect method to establish authority. By offering security guarantees, the U.S. aimed to encourage these states to align with Washington's influence. Looking ahead, this project also addresses how the end of the unipolar era might unfold. Power vacuums are expected to play a significant role in shaping future international politics. For example, China faces a large power vacuum in Asia, which has remained unfilled since the Soviet Union's collapse.

As China's power grows and challenges that of the U.S., it is likely to seek to fill this vacuum to prevent further U.S. influence. Given that the region is governed by functioning states, China's approach will likely focus on indirect methods rather than military intervention, as seen with the Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, as the U.S. considers its grand strategy in response to a rising China, the potential creation of power vacuums becomes a key concern. If the U.S. needs to shift resources to counter China in East Asia, it might inadvertently create power vacuums elsewhere that could be exploited by adversaries. My theory suggests that these concerns are valid, losing U.S. control over certain areas would indeed create power vacuums, but also offers a more detailed understanding of how these vacuums would influence global politics. For instance, China is unlikely to target power vacuums of minor strategic importance or use military force to fill crucial vacuums, provided the U.S. does not undermine local authority structures through its own retrenchment.

### **4. THE ASPECT OF WAR**

Some power vacuums arise not from a deliberate withdrawal of imperial power but from the defeat and collapse of a great power in a major conflict. Particularly notable are the power vacuums created by the defeat of Germany and Japan in World War II (see chapters 4 and 5), which were among the most significant as they greatly influenced the dynamics of great power politics for years. For instance, my detailed analysis supports John Lewis Gaddis' assertion that the Cold War clearly

begins as a product of the way that World War II ended. The Russians and the Americans, who had been peripheral powers up to this point, are drawn into the power vacuum. The Cold War largely results from that. By emphasizing the creation of power vacuums as a major outcome of great power wars, this study addresses a key gap in international relations literature: the lack of focus on war as an explanatory factor. Arthur Stein and Bruce Russett point out that despite various studies on war, its role as an independent variable has been largely overlooked by international politics scholars. Although recent research has started to address this gap, many scholars remain more concerned with the causes of war than its consequences. Furthermore, the theoretical framework presented here contributes to the growing body of research on international hierarchy. This framework builds on the idea that while the international system is anarchic, lacking a single overarching political authority, this does not mean that all relationships within the system are also anarchic. In practice, great powers and other actors often engage in hierarchical relationships of dominance and subordination.

Current research has explored foundational questions about the nature of international hierarchy, the conditions for its emergence, how great powers establish authority, the forms hierarchies can take, and their potential dissolution. However, the geopolitical consequences of the erosion of hierarchy remain underexplored. Recent scholarship highlights the importance of hierarchical relationships in international politics and the shortcomings of theories that ignore them. While hierarchical relationships limit outside powers' influence, their collapse creates opportunities for other actors to compete for influence, sometimes leading to intense interstate rivalry. Additionally, drawing from political science, economics, and philosophy, my discussion of power vacuums offers a new perspective on authority in national and international politics. We intend to argue that authority relationships should be viewed as a control hierarchy with various levels of authority. Within states, this hierarchy is typically organized with a top-level authority (the national government) commanding lower-level entities (such as regional governments), which in turn oversee even lower levels (like municipal authorities).

## 5. PRESENCE OF AUTHORITY

Authority depends on both coercive power and legitimacy. Political thinkers have long recognized that authority fundamentally relies on the ability to exert significant coercive power. Niccolò Machiavelli, for example, emphasizes the importance of material strength for establishing authority in *The Prince*, stating that "good laws and good arms" are essential for the foundation of any state. He argues that effective laws cannot exist without strong military power, and vice versa. Similarly, Hans Morgenthau notes that the absolute monarch of the sixteenth century held supreme authority not through theoretical or legal means, but through practical political power, surpassing both religious and feudal authorities. However, to truly establish authority over others, an organization must not only have coercive capabilities but also a level of legitimacy. This means being able to evoke what Max Weber describes as the "will to comply," where subordinates willingly follow the ruler's commands. In other words, effective control requires inspiring "quasi-voluntary compliance," where subjects generally adhere to orders out of their own volition, with noncompliance met by potential sanctions. While having coercive power helps generate obedience, it is not sufficient on its own.

Even those who see the ruler's orders as unjust may comply if there is a credible threat of punishment. Yet, relying solely on coercion is not sustainable over the long

term. A ruler must have a significant number of subjects who follow commands willingly to maintain control effectively. No ruler can continually monitor and enforce compliance through deterrence alone. Thus, a ruler with genuine legitimacy, where subjects follow commands voluntarily and do not require constant surveillance, will be more effective and stable over time. It is important to note that while coercive power and legitimacy are the core components of authority, the concept of legitimacy used here is minimal and does not necessarily involve the subjects' moral acceptance of the ruler's right to govern. A system of rule is more stable if subjects view it as morally just, but compliance can also stem from other motivations, such as vested interests.

For example, if subjects have invested in maintaining a stable social order, they are likely to support its preservation to protect their investments. In addition to coercive power and legitimacy, other factors can play a significant role in reinforcing authority. One crucial factor is external recognition or 'horizontal' legitimacy. Recognition by other actors provides benefits for both the material and normative aspects of authority. For instance, central state authorities gain access to international cooperation opportunities and membership in global organizations, which are often required for military or economic treaties and can provide vital resources from entities like the International Monetary Fund. Such recognition can enhance both the material and normative pillars of authority, strengthening its ability to inspire voluntary compliance. Consequently, organizations often struggle to establish and maintain authority if they do not achieve external recognition.

## 6. IN CONCLUSION

Authority relations have been a consistent feature of political interactions, but their organization has evolved significantly over time. During the High Medieval period in Europe, political entities operated within a complex network of overlapping and incompatible authority structures. The Peace of Westphalia in 1648, often considered the beginning of the modern state system, began to bring order to this tangled web by establishing states as the highest authority within defined territories. This did not immediately create a structured system of territorial control hierarchies but set the stage for such a system to develop. In the modern nation-state context, authority can be modeled as a vertical hierarchy where higher levels of authority issue orders to lower levels, which in turn have authority over even lower levels. This structure resembles Russian dolls: as you remove the largest doll, smaller dolls are revealed, each nested within the others. Similarly, the collapse of authority at one level, such as the national level, might uncover stable authority at lower levels. Traditionally, scholars have focused on domestic authority relations, seeing the state as the ultimate authority. However, recent studies in international politics have recognized that authority can also exist between states.

Although the international system lacks a single overarching authority, not all relations between states are anarchic. Great powers, defined as states with significant resources compared to others, sometimes assert authority over smaller states or political entities outside their own borders. Despite changes in which states are considered great powers due to wars or economic shifts, those recognized as great powers typically maintain their dominant role for extended periods, shaping international politics. Being a great power involves possessing substantial material capabilities, but historically, these powers have often sought to extend their authority beyond their own territories. Great powers have generally exerted their authority in one of two main ways. The first is through formal empires, where they



directly control and incorporate other territories as colonies or dependencies. The second is through informal empires or spheres of influence, where a great power exerts authority indirectly through subordinate national authorities that retain nominal independence.

In these cases, the minor power agrees to the great power's authority because it sees benefits such as increased security or economic advantages, while the great power views the costs of providing these benefits as outweighed by the strategic advantages gained. In the contemporary political landscape, the national level is no longer the highest level of authority. States sometimes assert authority over each other, necessitating the inclusion of an international level in models of political authority. This international level represents the highest tier where great powers can claim or exercise authority, either directly or through subordinate authorities. Additionally, there are various political levels between the national and international tiers, such as regional levels where regional powers may exercise authority over national authorities while being subject to international authority.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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