

Book Review: Power in the Changing Global Order

by Blog Admin

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Drawing on the work of leading international relations scholars, philosophers and sociologists, this book goes considers the neglected social dimensions of power. These are developed and explored through a detailed examination of the changing international role, status, and capacities of the United States, Russia, and China since the end of the Cold War. James Moran finds that the neat conceptual framework Martin A. Smith lucidly describes is thought provoking and useful in analysing international relations today.



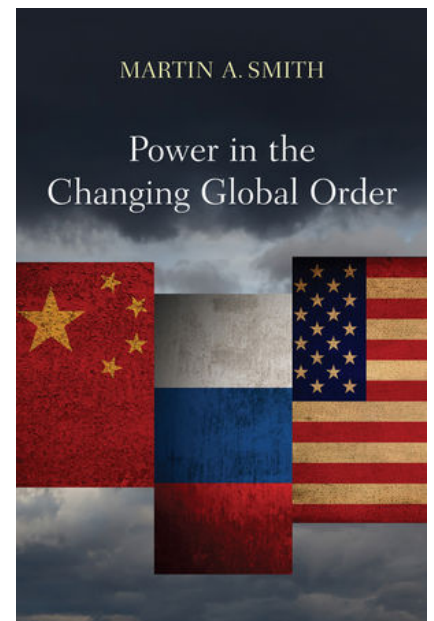
Power in the Changing Global Order. Martin A. Smith. Polity. May 2012.

With growing international angst over China's economic rise and the potential for a concomitant decline of American power, Martin A. Smith's analysis of the social dimension of power is timely. Smith's central thesis – that power is derived from an international social transaction, rather than simply through military might – may seem surprising, given he is a lecturer at the Royal Military Academy in Sandhurst. But through a concise, clearly written account of recent American, Chinese and Russian foreign policy, the author makes his case convincingly.

Smith is keen to point out early on that 'power' is a word often used in books on international relations, but rarely defined. He therefore goes to great lengths to clarify his conceptual framework, before undertaking his analysis. By drawing on the work of figures such as Bertrand Russell and Joseph Nye, Smith is able to argue that the power is the ability to produce intended effects within a social "network" of nations. He points out (citing the Iraq War as a particularly powerful example) that mere military and economic ability cannot guarantee the production of *intended* effects.

Indeed, the presidency of George W. Bush provides the basis for Smith's most engaging chapter. With major combat operations having only recently finished in Iraq, the definitive history the war has yet to be written. However, by using well-selected sources (major policy speeches from Bush administration officials and a host of off-the-record interviews), Smith attempts to peer through the fog of recent history. His argument is that by not rallying an international coalition for war, and effectively ignoring the United Nations, the Bush administration degraded American legitimacy in the world. This was compounded by the US's reluctance to fully involve NATO in the war in Afghanistan until relatively late in the campaign. Legitimacy has to be conferred upon an actor, Smith points out – it is part of the "social network" within which international power operates. It cannot be merely asserted through material means.

Smith implies that if the US had attempted regime change in a way that maintained American legitimacy abroad, it may well have been more successful in its objective of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Smith says that if the aim of both the Afghanistan and Iraq war to spread democracy, this is a "soft power end" – by which he means essentially an objective involving values rather than material resources. By pursuing this objective through military action, the Bush administration was "seeking soft power ends by hard power means". However, Smith's contention that if the US had pursued a more "legitimate" path it may have achieved its objectives more successfully is where his thesis is most exposed. Certainly the disastrous aftermath of the Iraq War can't have been intended by any of its US planners. However, whether regime change could have been achieved – much less achieved more effectively – had France or Germany



or Russia been more involved in the war is not convincingly shown. That the US ignored the importance of international legitimacy seems a reasonable argument. That not doing so would have more effectively removed Hussein from power is perhaps less clear.

As well as giving an account of the Obama administration's attempts to restore American legitimacy abroad, the text also deals with the rise of China and the fate of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The author argues that China has not effectively engaged with the international social system. He cites how Chinese officials, when forging economic deals with developing countries for instance, only communicate at an elite level rather involving the country's population. These deals – between elites and largely unreported – are part of the reason China has very little “soft power”, relative to its economic power. For the most part gazing inwards, Smith says China currently is not a serious rival to the US in terms of international legitimacy.

In his analysis of Russia, Smith says Putin has successfully steered the country away from being an international “spoiler” under Yelstin – blocking international cooperation over Kosovo, for example – to a more responsible position. He cites Russia's abstention over the imposition of a no-fly zone during Libya's revolution. By presenting itself as a “reviving” Great Power rather than a superpower, and by not needlessly asserting itself by blocking US objectives, the country has gained some legitimacy in the eyes of the US. This perhaps explains the relatively cordial relationship between the Obama administration and Russia, as well as the US's arguably muted response to human rights violations in that country. The sections on China and Russia are less centred on individual events – the US section understandably emphasises the Iraq War – but they are well constructed and insightful. Through Smith's cool-headed analysis, one feels more enlightened about Russian and Chinese foreign policy without getting bogged down in detail of their domestic political structures.

This is a well-written, concise and largely convincing account of power as a social institution in modern international relations. Though the central thesis leaves us with nagging questions, the neat conceptual framework Smith lucidly describes is thought provoking and useful in analyzing international relations today. For anyone fascinated by the rise of China, the quiet revival of Russia or the changing course of American foreign policy in the last decade, this is a highly interesting work.

James Moran is a former researcher at the Gulf Centre For Strategic Studies. Having worked previously at PoliticsHome.co.uk, James now writes about politics for the Huffington Post. [Read more reviews by James.](#)

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