

## Original Paper

# A Study on Robert Keohane's Idea of "Power"

Wang Sheng<sup>1</sup> & Pan Ziyang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Politics and Public Management, Xinjiang University, Urumqi, Xinjiang, China

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### Abstract

*Robert Keohane is a leading contemporary international relations scholar. His ideas and doctrines are important parts of neoliberal institutionalism. In his books *Power and Interdependence*, and *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, he has a unique perspective on power, a core concept of international relations, that differs from realism and constructivism. This paper uses documentary analysis to distill and summarize the discussion of power in Robert Keohane's work, which helps to systematically study the neoliberal institutionalist view of power and to make the classic theory show its charm beyond its time.*

### Keywords

*Robert Keohane, Power, Neoliberal Institutionalism*

### 1. Introduction

Robert Keohane is a leading political scientist, international relations scholar, and educator. He also is a leading figure in neoliberal institutionalism. Keohane entered Sumner College where his father taught to study political science in 1957. He obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree and graduated with honors in 1961. After, he studied at Harvard University. When he was at Harvard, he was taught and instructed by Stanley Hoffman, a master of international relations theory, and received his Master of Arts and Doctoral degrees in 1964 and 1966 respectively. He later taught at several prestigious institutions, including Harvard University (1985-1996) and Duke University (1996-2005).

Neoliberal institutionalism is one of the three paradigms of international relations and benefited from a reinterpretation of many of the foundational concepts in the realist paradigm that provides a more explanatory framework for the intense changes in the world's political economy in the 1960s and 1970s. The realist view of power as the essence of international relations. Robert Keohane, an icon of neo-liberal institutionalism, rethought this view in his co-authored book *Power and Interdependence* published in 1979, in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* published in 1984, and in his personal collection of essays *International Institutions and State Power*

published in 1989. In contrast to the realist focus on material power, Keohane added a conceptual approach to power and expands the boundaries on the concept of power to create a clear logical relationship between power, interdependence, international institutions, and national interests. Keohane's ideas of power established the foundations of the neo-liberal institutionalist's view of power and exerted a great influence on international relations.

Good theories can survive time, and the reflection would better help people understand the circumstances they are in. In the 1970s and 1980s, when Keohane presented his interpretation of world politics, the Soviet Union still existed as a powerful state in the international community. Today, forty years later, the Soviet Union no longer exists, and the international political and economic situation has changed dramatically. Ideas that were once expected, such as globalization, multipolarity, democratization, etc. have been gradually resisted in various degrees and even many of the ideas themselves are alienated. The serious divisions and defective responding capacity of the international community when facing the COVID-19 once again raises attention about international cooperation. As Keohane argued in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, international cooperation can sustain and develop when hegemony no longer existed. Therefore, it is beneficial to revisit Keohane's ideas of power to understand international cooperation in the post-epidemic era.

## 2. A Discussion of Robert Keohane's Idea of "Power"

### 2.1 The Nature, Sources, and Hierarchy of Power

Power is often seen as a relationship, the ability of a person to influence the behavior of others in the ways that people have no freedom to choose by their willingness. The crucial power in the traditional realist discourse was military power, and only states with great military power were able to dominate world affairs. However, a series of international events in the 1970s changed the single attribute on the source of power and made it more complex.

Keohane viewed power as the ability of an actor to induce other actors to do things that they would not otherwise do and could also be seen as the ability to exercise control over outcomes. But Keohane adopted a theoretical assumption that differs from realism. He proposed asymmetric interdependence as the source of power and argued that actors could be seen as having stronger resources of power when they are less dependent compared to other actors. However, the hypothesis does not ignore the differences and similarities between the source of power and power itself. The hypothesis also divides the method to measure power into two categories. One is based on resources and potential, and the other is based on influence on outcomes. Therefore, he emphasized the importance of the uncertainty of the transformation process and argued that "There is rarely a one-to-one relationship between power measured by any type of resources and power measured by effects on outcomes."

Keohane, in an original move, linked liberal interdependence with realist power politics. To understand *power and interdependence*, he introduced the concepts of sensitivity and vulnerability. In short,

“sensitivity describes the speed and depth with which a country perceives external change, and vulnerability reflects a country’s ability and difficulty to make policy adjustments and changes” and “Sensitivity involves degrees of responsiveness within a policy framework—how quickly do changes in one country bring costly changes in another, and how great are the costly effects?” Sensitivity is measured not only by the scale of cross-border interactions but also by the cost of changes in interactions to society and government. The cost of sensitivity is “sensitivity means liability to costly effects imposed from outside before policies are altered to try to change the situation.” It is important to note that interdependence of sensitivity’s premise is a fixed policy framework, “a policy framework that should be based on the domestic policy arrangements of countries and related international institutional arrangements based on existing interdependencies.” And sensitivity interdependence is not limited to economic aspects but also encompasses social or political aspects.

“Vulnerability can be defined as an actor’s liability to suffer costs imposed by external events even after policies have been altered.” It is important to note that “policy changes” refer to adverse changes in the country caused by changes in other countries, and the policy framework is changed to respond to them to reduce the country’s losses. The “cost of policy adjustment” refers to the cost of responding to such adverse changes. Interdependence of vulnerability is measured as “the cost over time of adjusting to effectively adapt to the changed environment.” In addition, vulnerability can be applied to the analysis of both socio-political and political-economic relations.

Sensitivity and vulnerability are Keohane’s micro-explanations on the sources of power, and they have three main differences. First, “Interdependence sensitivity reflects the price to be paid for maintaining interdependence, while vulnerability emphasises the price to be paid for breaking it.” Second, the former is within the policy framework and the latter emphasizes the spillover effects of policy, which means that sensitivity does not bring about a change in policy, while vulnerability implies a change in policy. At the same time, there is a temporal succession between the two, with sensitivity emerging before vulnerability. “Since it is usually difficult to change policies quickly, immediate effects of external changes generally reflect sensitivity dependence.” As sensitivities cause damage to national interests, the responding costs incurred to mitigate or eliminate such adverse effects are vulnerabilities. Third, “Clearly, it indicates that sensitivity interdependence will be less important than vulnerability interdependence in providing power resources to actors.” Vulnerability interdependence is more strategically important than sensitivity interdependence, or it can be argued that vulnerability plays a more fundamental role in the analytical framework of asymmetric interdependence as a source of power. In some cases, even though actors enjoy the power advantages of sensitive interdependence, they are at a disadvantage in vulnerability interdependence, and the difference between the two will affect the outcome of the application of asymmetric interdependence as a power tool.

Keohane further constructed a composite interdependence model based on interdependence, which is different from realism. The basic features of composite interdependence lie in the rejection of three important assumptions of realism, namely that interstate links are no longer the only links between

societies; that the hierarchy of the international relations agenda cannot be easily divided; and that the prevalence of composite interdependence will inhibit the use of force by states. Three basic features of composite interdependence imply differences in the neoliberal institutionalist and realist perceptions of power. The first is the difference in the importance they attach to the power of different actors. Realism assumes that the state is the most important actor, and interstate links are therefore the most meaningful links in international relations. Moreover, it is often to downplay the non-state actors such as transnational organizations and transnational links between non-governmental elites. The assumption of realism implies that the state is important because it holds the most important power, and tacitly assumes that even in complex international societies, the power of the state far exceeds that of other actors in most areas, which, while not implying an absolute negation of the power of other actors, is at least a choice of indifference at the heart of the paradigm.

From the end of the Cold War until today, the active borders of non-state actors are continuously expanding, and the importation of influence into new areas has meant a reconstitution of power between different actors. The emphasis of composite interdependence on the multiple channels of contact between the different actors of the international community reflects more scientifically the reality of international relations. The timing of the new epidemic outbreak was exceptional, as the brief post-Cold War detente between the major powers of the East and the West had terminated completely. It is replaced by a new form of competition, and world politics was at a delicate point, the direction of it is unpredictable. While this is very much in line with the logic of realist power struggles, it also demonstrates, to a certain extent, that when international cooperation becomes a much-needed public good, inter-state contact as the only important channel of communication does not guarantee that the needs of the international community are met. Even when there are national actors that are not sufficient to serve the full function of governance, transnational organizations take on part of the task of communicating to the international community the assistance needed to respond to new coronaviruses, acting as coordinators in the process of connecting the national and international communities. For example, the COVAX regime led by the World Health Organization was established to improve the underproduction and uneven distribution of vaccines on a global scale. The changing power of non-state actors should receive more attention to reflect the real picture of world politics as closely as possible.

Next, the issue of hierarchy in the international relations agenda implies the hierarchy between different kinds of power. Keohane revisited a particular but crucial resource of power, namely military power. In doing so, he not only refuted the realist assumption of force as an effective policy instrument but also against the realist hierarchy of the international relations agenda. Although he continued part of the realist view of military power, euphemistically expressing its distinctive character. When actors face conflicts, the advantages of military interdependence are hardly offset by the advantages of interdependence in other spheres, and military power can still be a crucial presence in exercising decisive influence. However, military matters are not considered to be highly political, while issues of

economic and social matters are necessarily classified as less political than military matters.

In addition to military power, Keohane was particularly concerned with information power. He argued that with the information revolution, the cost of processing and transmitting information would fall dramatically. He argued against the idea that the small states will diminish the power of major power countries and increase their own power because of the information revolution. He also cited four reasons for this: the barriers to market entry and economies of scale associated with information, the huge investments required for the collection and production of new information, the startup advantage, and the greater benefits that military powers will enjoy. In addressing the question of how information generates power, Keohane still substituted the analytical framework of interdependence, suggesting that trust is a key resource when measuring information power, and asymmetric trust is a central source of power.

In short, in Robert Keohane's system of power, the concept of power still follows the classical definition and interdependence is the source of power. It is important to note that the source of power is different from the resource of power, which can be a material existence, such as military power relying on the number of nuclear weapons, the number of soldiers, etc., while the source is the transformation of the resource, and power is derived from the comparison of differences in sensitivity and vulnerability between interdependent actors, whose outcomes control is stronger than the "statistics" of resources. On this basis, the categories of power are in fact divided into two categories: interdependence of sensitivity and interdependence of vulnerability. The hierarchy of power then becomes an issue to be understood dynamically, it contrasts with realism's static hierarchy of power, making neoliberal institutionalism more explanatory of policy than realism.

## 2.2 Power and the National Interest

In addition to the development and even reconstruction of sources, hierarchies and categories of power, the neo-liberal institutionalist understanding of power fills some theoretical gaps left unanswered by realism. The first is what is the relationship between rights and the interests of the state? Hans Morgenthau, a representative of classical realism, postulated the following main points about the relationship between power and national interest: (1) International politics is defined as a struggle for power between states in pursuit of their interests and sees national interest as a compromise following domestic political competition, views power as a supporting element in the pursuit of national interest. (2) The most fundamental national interest is the survival and security of the state, also is the most basic goal served by the struggle for state power. (3) There are three main manifestations of the state's struggle for power, namely the status quo policy, imperialism, and prestige policy. Offensive and defensive realism have diverged in their views on whether the state's fundamental task is to pursue power without limits. Overall, realism as a theoretical cluster does not give a coherent answer to the question of whether power is an integral part of the national interest.

Keohane, on the other hand, clearly outlined the interests of the state as wealth and power, as he wrote in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, "Reflections on wealth

and power as goals of state action lead us to the conclusion that the two concepts are complementary,” and argues that “power is a necessary condition for the endowment of the state and vice versa.” Keohane juxtaposed the juxtaposition of wealth and power, which are jointly subsumed in the national interest, and wealth and power are complementary, which allows for mutual transformation. Keohane argued that there is still an inherent coherence between the political economy of the world today and that of the 17th century, citing four propositions made by Jacob Wiener, (1) wealth is the basic means of acquiring power; (2) power is the basic and valuable means of acquiring and maintaining wealth; (3) both wealth and power are the ultimate ends of state action; (4) one may be sacrificed for the other under particular circumstance in the short term, but in the long term, wealth and power are in harmony. What is unique about Keohane is using the concepts of wealth investment and consumption to describe power, which leads to the permanent question in foreign policy of how to balance the state’s investment and consumption of power.

Next, the duality of Keohane’s idea of the “national interest” implies that the power of the state is also dualistic. On the one hand, the state is egoistic and therefore its interests are exclusive and cannot be shared. “States are egoists, rational actors acting on the basis of their own conceptions of self-interest,” and state power is likewise egoistic and often manifests itself through its preoccupation with the service of the state. On the other hand, because Keohane believes that there is a common interest between states, the interests of the state are also altruistic that leads to the fact that state power should also be altruistic. In neoliberal institutionalism, the altruism of power is reflected in transnational and inter-governmental relations in the context of complex interdependence, where economic and social interactions between countries imply a flow of wealth and power and ultimately establishes a stable network in which different organizations, such as business groups, which gain more benefits.

### *2.3 A Critique of the Hegemonic Stability Thesis*

Hegemony is a particular form of power. Robert Keohane argues that hegemony is a single dominant force. Any state entity that exists in the sense of international law has a certain amount of power, but hegemony is clearly not universally possessed by all state actors. In 1973, Charles Kindleberger linked hegemony to the stability of the international order and formally put forward the theory of hegemonic stability. He argued that the existence of a hegemonic state can maintain the international order and ensure the stability of the international system. The influence of the United Kingdom and the United States on the international system when they were hegemonic powers was a typical historical example used by proponents of the hegemonic stability theory to support their views. Robert Keohane’s critique of the hegemonic stability thesis is not based on a critique of hegemony, but rather on a critique of the hegemonic model and more precisely the basic power model.

Robert Keohane argues that there are three models of hegemony: the basic power model, the power-action model and the Marxist model. First, the basic power model, also known as the “unrefined hegemonic stabilising power,” “refers to the need for a country to have free access to key raw materials, control major sources of capital, maintain a large import market, and have comparative advantage in

the production of high value-added goods.” The theory assumes that the greater the hegemon’s control over the world’s political economy, the greater the cooperation between countries, and vice versa. But this crude model of hegemony, which focuses only on having an advantage in the control of material resources, views the hegemon as a necessary and sufficient condition for cooperation in the international system. On the one hand, it ignores the domestic factor, on the other, where the hegemon is dependent not only on the preponderance of power but also on the will to become hegemonic. For example, during the international strife of World War I and World War II, Britain lacked sufficient resources to maintain free trade, while the United States had powerful economic resources but lacked the will to lead the world’s political economy. Second, a distilled hegemonic stability theory, which is the power in action model, argues that power does not automatically produce leadership and that “hegemony is defined as a state in which ‘a state is strong enough to maintain the ground rules governing relations between states and it is willing to do so.’” Although the theory is more focused on domestic characteristics than the basic power model, domestic attitudes, political structures, and decision-making processes are all important. The country with superior resources will inevitably become the hegemon unless it is unwilling to lead the world, but it is still impossible to answer what factors lead to the country’s unwillingness to take on the responsibility of leading the world. Third, the Marxist model, “Marxists often use the concept of hegemony, implicitly defined simply as a dominant position, as a way of analysing the political phenomenon of the capitalist world. For Marxists as well as mercantilists, wealth and power complement each other; they depend on each other.” Typical figure of this, Wallerstein, who replaces the analysis of class with a state-centric analysis that recognizes the important role of hegemony and military power. Wallerstein argued that three hegemonic states emerged in the capitalist world system, the Netherlands in the mid-17th century, Britain in the mid-19th century and the United State in the mid-20th century.

*After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* opens with a critique of the basic power model or “unrefined hegemonic stabilising power”, which argues that the hegemonic powers have created international institutions that will collapse once the hegemon’s power declines, and it is unable to provide the public goods to maintain the stability of the international system. In contrast, Keohane’s major doctrinal contribution lies in arguing that post-hegemonic international cooperation is possible and well-documented. First, because international regimes are difficult to establish and the cost of maintaining them is much less than the cost of reestablishing them. “Because international regimes have the effect of reducing transaction costs, providing transactional information, changing actor preferences, and reducing uncertainty, the international regimes that a hegemonic state establishes may still continue to exist after its decline, and cooperative relations between states can be sustained.” Second, there is a “time lag” between the decline of hegemony and the collapse of institutions. “The decline of hegemony does not necessarily imply a corresponding decline of the established regimes created under the leadership of the hegemonic state; the inertia of their maintenance allows them to remain independent in their ability to ensure cooperation and peace in a

post-hegemonic world.” Thus, Keohane’s neoliberal institutionalism is also known as the ‘supply’ doctrine of international institutions.

Robert Keohane’s perceptions and reflections on hegemony are an important part of his thought on power. If hegemony is the central variable that sustains international cooperation, then hegemony and international cooperation give each other legitimacy to exist, constitute an unbreakable logical loop and are self-referential. It can be argued that *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* provides the doctrinal underpinning for world politics to break the limits of hegemony and to achieve international cooperation through multiple channels.

#### 2.4 Power and International Regimes

International regimes were first proposed by John Ruge in the 1970s, meaning the implicitly explicit principles, norms, rules and decision-making procedures that emerge from a given field of international relations to which the expectations of a range of actors converge. Comparing world politics to imperfect markets, Keohane argued that international regimes could overcome their shortcomings and thus replace hegemony to achieve cooperation.

In Robert Keohane’s idea of power, the relationship between power and international regimes focuses on three aspects. First, the common good has the potential to enable the creation of international regimes, and the common good reflects the shared pursuits of state actors. States tend to behave in their national interests, and through the brief analysis of Keohane’s view of national interests in the foregoing, it can be assumed that there is a common pursuit whereby multiple states seek a simultaneous increase in power, such as those benefiting from global trade and payment facilitation, which can be seen as a simultaneous increase in power for all members. The second is that changes in power can explain changes in international regimes. There are five explanatory frameworks for international institutional change: the economic process explanatory model, the overall power structure explanatory model, the problem structure explanatory model, the international organization explanatory model and the integrated explanatory model. The core of this theory is that the competition between states provides the basic driving force for institutional change. The specific path of action lies in the fact that the structure of the international system (the distribution of power between states), which is regarded as the overall power structure, determines the nature of international regimes, and that changes in the overall power structure provide the driving force for changes in the rules of international regimes. Following the logic of the general power structure explanatory model, it is possible to deduce the plausibility of the hegemonic stability theory, and the stability of the world financial system, which was governed by British power in the 19th century, and the Bretton Woods system, which was led by the United States after the Second World War, is often used as a representative example to demonstrate that power influences international regimes. Keohane argues that the limitations of the overall power structure explanatory model are (1) a lack of simplicity, (2) an inability to provide a good basis for prediction, (3) a reluctance to distinguish between problem areas, and (4) an ignorance of the complexity of multi-channel linkages between countries. Finally, in some cases international regimes



are even avenues for power to operate. In the process of shaping the norms of international regimes, actors can make arrangements that serve national interests. In particular, “the principles of a regime define the goals that its members aspire to pursue.” With the globalization of non-traditional security issues such as ecological crises, mass infectious diseases and cyber security threats, the ability of major powers to respond to the risks of globalization can be greatly reduced if they only rely on a single traditional power and do not seek international cooperation and create a response agenda from multiple levels and directions. International regimes enable the participation of as many actors as possible in global governance. International regimes are one of the non-traditional power resources of the great powers, relying on political negotiations to transform power. Moreover, international regimes need a certain degree of legitimacy and authority to fulfil their functions of determining legal responsibilities, reduce transaction costs and provide information. In addition, states’ cede initiatively some of its power to international regimes by negotiation and make the international regimes become a source of legitimacy and authority.

### 3. A Review of Robert Keohane’s Ideas on Power

The neo-liberal institutionalist paradigm constructed by Robert Keohane, while downplaying realist power politics, does not deny the important role of power for state actors. Instead of focusing too much on material power, as classical realist scholars did, Keohane divides the types of power into two categories: the number of resources held and the control of outcomes, and places emphasis on the transformative process by which power produces substantive effects, a dynamic theory of power that is more scientific and possesses greater explanatory power than the static realist theory of power. Instead of a long, independent analysis of power, Keohane combines it with discourses of interdependence, international cooperation, and international regimes. Not all the criticisms to which Keohane’s thought on power has been subjected are direct; many of the criticisms of concepts central to the neoliberal institutionalist paradigm can be derived from the doctrinal challenges to Robert Keohane’s thought on power and constitute an insidious and indirect critique.

Take *Power and Interdependence* as an example, the masterpiece of interdependence theory, which provides a solid theoretical foundation for the theory of “international regimes” in *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy* and they lay the cornerstone of neoliberal institutionalist theory together. However, interdependence itself has certain explanatory limitations. Increasing interdependence does not necessarily lead automatically to a harmony of interests, but rather more cross-border interaction may lead to suspicion and antagonism between the interests of both parties. Although this problem has been recognized and a “composite interdependence” combining power politics and interdependence has been proposed, it applies more to the sphere of economic and ecological interdependence, and disputes in the higher political sphere inevitably. For example, as the strategic rivalry between the United States and China in the political sphere extends to trade wars and decoupling in the economic sphere, and as the two countries could have cooperated in non-traditional

security areas, such as health care but ended up in bitter confrontation. All three features of compound interdependence fail, in other words, world politics seems to have reverted to the power politics assumed by realism. In particular, under the law of imbalance in the power growth of the great powers, the gap between the comprehensive power of China and the United States continues to narrow. At a time when the United States, despite the sensitivity and vulnerability of both China and the United States, is suppressing and sanctioning Chinese high-tech companies such as ZTE, Huawei and Jitterbug. China is adjusting its economic policy under heavy pressure, moving towards a combination of internal economic circulation and international circulation. The tug-of-war between the two sides in the field of power politics and the neglect of compound interdependence, which not only reflect the limitations of the theoretical practice of composite interdependence in the context of Sino-American strategic competition, but also represent another validation of the realist idea of power.

Next, the idea of hegemony is not dispensed with in Keohane's power ideology, but rather packaged. Although Keohane's doctrine of the "provision" of international regimes, which argues for the possibility of international cooperation after hegemony, reflects to a certain extent the democratic nature of international society. However, there is a certain theoretical bias in Keohane's theory. First, his starting point is how to continue to defend United States hegemonic interests and reduce the costs of United States hegemony through the existing international regimes established by the United States in the face of the decline of United States hegemony, rather than actually establishing a set of international regimes that reflect international democracy and justice. Second, the class nature of international regimes has been ignored or even rationalized. In the post-Cold War international regime, for example, although the voice of emerging countries such as China has increased in important international organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank, it has not fundamentally changed the "centre-periphery" or "centre-semi-periphery-periphery" structure. The imbalance in the distribution of power has a significant impact on the inherent inequality of the international system, although Keohane's idea of power downplays power politics and at the same time the role of hegemony, it is still a hierarchical idea of power, and the status of the actors involved in the regime is strongly influenced by this.

Last, there are significant theoretical limitations to Keohane's idea of power. On the one hand, it downplays the important role of state power in international regimes. Even though the element of state power is downplayed in the theoretical derivation process, in the practice of international relations, state power is still indispensable for the proper functioning of international regimes once they are formed, as international society still conforms to the realist assumption of anarchy. On the other hand, Keohane does not delve into the timeliness of the common pursuit. The fact that international regimes are formed based on a common pursuit between states, which must remain generally stable over a long period and not change fundamentally in nature, means that only certain issues, which are often transnational in nature and difficult for a single state to solve on its own, can meet this requirement, and that such issues are also practically solvable, rather than being some kind of over-advanced utopianism.

They are also practical and not some kind of utopianism. Thus, once the common quest is concretized, there may be more counter examples to Keohane's theory of the international regimes of decentralization.

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