

APPENDIX B

Conceptual and Operational Rules for Major Powers

As suggested in chapter 2, major powers are usually defined, explicitly or implicitly, in terms of one or a combination of three dimensions: (1) power capabilities; (2) spacial aspect (geographic scope of interests or projected power); and (3) status (an acknowledgment of major power status, which should also indicate the nation's willingness to act as a major power). Each dimension was approached with some methodological difficulties in the previous literature. This appendix points to main methodological obstacles associated with each requirement, some weaknesses in their previous empirical applications, and possible ways to overcome them. Afterward, the appendix proceeds with past classifications of major powers for the last two centuries, comparing them to the one used in this book.

Three Common Requirements for Major Powers

Power Dimension

Most early writings used capabilities as a single criterion for defining major powers. Almost all historians define power in terms of military strength. For instance, A. J. P. Taylor wrote that the "test of a Great Power is then the test of strength for war" (1954, xxiv). Quincy Wright and other early international relations scholars shared this view with diplomatic historians: "The acquisition of the status of a 'great power' has depended primarily upon military prestige, military potential, and military achievement" (Wright 1942, 1:268). Later international relations scholars, however, tended to define power in terms of overall human, military, economic, and political capacity (Morgenthau 1948; Organski 1958), although some traditional scholars still emphasize the military aspect (e.g., Aron 1966).

Whether it is used as a single criterion or as one of several charac-

teristics, power potential is almost universally acknowledged as a necessary defining requirement for major powers. The next question that follows, then, is how powerful a state needs to be in order to qualify as a major power. For some, it needs to be at least as powerful as any other single power. Such an understanding has intuitive appeal for many traditional scholars. The prominent French historian Jean B. Duroselle expressed this sentiment in a simple and straightforward way: “a great power is one which is capable of preserving its own independence against any other single power” (1959, 204). A similar argument requires that a major power needs to be as powerful as the coalition of other powers. In his famous essay, Ranke postulated, “If one could establish as a definition of a great power that it must be able to maintain itself against all others, even when they are united, then Frederick had raised Prussia to that position” ([1833] 1973, 86).¹ Finally, it is common to specify that a major power “must be capable of fighting a major war” (Modelski 1972, 149).

This last requirement is circular since wars are defined as major wars precisely *because* major powers fight them. Even the previous requirement for a major power to be at least equal to one or a combination of other powers has some problems. First, we rarely find all major powers roughly equal in their capabilities, even if we allow for a larger margin of power difference, which then challenges the validity of the first requirement illustrated by the Duroselle quote. Second, the alternative requirement laid out by Ranke and his followers is also problematic. If a state is capable of standing up against a combination of all or several major powers, then this state has to be vastly preponderant. Such a definition implies a world of rough inequality, a very different picture of major powers than Duroselle’s world of rough equality. But if at least one power is preponderant over all other states, then it is not clear what qualifies any of these other states to also be considered as major powers. To avoid this problem, it is important to differentiate between major powers and the top layer of “global contenders” that are vastly superior in their power and are analogous to the contemporary notion of superpowers.

In short, it is widely acknowledged that the power dimension is a necessary and most important defining criterion. But there are two areas of unresolved conceptual issues: first, there is a disagreement over whether it should be a single criterion; second, the stipulations about the difference between major powers and other states in terms of the power dimension tend to be logically incoherent. This second problem, however, can be easily solved by way of distinguishing between different types of major powers.

Spatial Dimension

The spatial dimension is an important criterion for distinguishing major powers from regional powers. Despite its significance, this dimension has been widely neglected in many previous analyses. Part of the reason lies in the intellectual heritage from an influential diplomatic historiography that traditionally focused primarily on the European scene (e.g., Gooch 1936–38; Taylor 1954; Gulick 1955).

Still, there have been several attempts to specify an extraregional character of major powers. Some scholars argue that a state is regarded as a major power if the geographic scope of its actual *influence* is systemwide, that is, it coincides with the entire scope of the international system. The extraregional influence has been attributed as a *sine qua non* of major powers only since the turn of the century. Arnold Toynbee's chronicle of early-twentieth-century world events notes that a "Great Power may be defined as a political force exerting an effect coextensive with the widest range of the society in which it operates. The Great Powers of 1914 were 'world-powers' because Western society had recently become world-wide" (1925, 4). Others define a major power if it has the *capability* to engage in extraregional affairs. Yet another way to capture the spatial dimension is to propose that a state should have extraregional *interests*, though often extraregional capabilities and interests are both required (e.g., Gochman and Maoz 1984, 605 n.19; Stoll 1989, 136).

All three—*influence*, *interests*, and *projected capabilities*—are valid criteria. Nonetheless, if any or all approaches to extraregionality were consistently applied, there would be far fewer major powers than commonly found in the literature. Austria-Hungary and Japan, for instance, rarely aspired, if ever, beyond their home regions of Europe and Asia, respectively. The spatial dimension seems to be an important aspect for only those few that have global reach, which along with their enormous power potential, make them good candidates for global contenders.

Status Dimension

This third criterion assumes some sort of contemporary recognition of great power status. Only a few writers stipulate that this status should be recognized formally.

The status of Great Power is sometimes confused with the conditions of being powerful. The *office*, as it is known, did in fact

evolve from the role played by the great military states in earlier periods . . . But the Great Power system institutionalizes the position of the powerful state in a web of rights and obligations. (Modelski 1972, 141; emphasis added)

The criterion of formal recognition seems too restrictive; besides, it confines an empirical analysis only to the period since the Congress of Vienna (1814) when the first formal recognition of great power status was made. Indeed, Modelski also allows for “informal rights and obligations” (see also Levy 1983), but then the question of what comprises them is highly speculative. It is possible, for instance, to require that others expect a state to act as a major power. Again, the “expectation of others” is a speculative and unreliable criterion.

Finally, the last option is to turn to the state itself and its willingness to act as a major power (Domke 1989; Levy 1983). While this is a valid requirement, it is difficult to establish it *ex ante*. Governments are rarely, if ever, explicit in formulating their willingness to act as major powers. For this reason, scholars specify this requirement in terms of indirect clues such as behavior. “To be a great power is to act like a great power” (Domke 1989, 161). The problem here is that it takes an *ex post* observation to establish whether a state is a major power, yet a definitional criterion always needs to be postulated *ex ante*.

So far, status is the most difficult criterion to apply empirically. It is left to subjective observation, in addition to some degree of *ex post* reasoning, to establish whether a state has the status of major power, self-elected or acknowledged by others. This is undoubtedly less than an optimal option, but nevertheless the only available one.

Previous Attempts at Major Power Classifications

There were several attempts in the political science literature to identify major powers in modern history. Singer and Small’s list is most widely used, and it differs marginally from lists developed by other international relations scholars (see table B1).

Major areas of disagreement seem to be related to the position of Germany in the immediate aftermath of World War I and since World War II, and that of the Soviet Union during the civil war period (1917–22). There are also different interpretations of the exact beginnings of the American, Japanese, and Chinese great power status. Unlike other listed authors, Waltz considers the United States and the

Soviet Union as the only major powers of the Cold War period. It is difficult to accept the idea that the position of these two states in the Cold War system was analogous to that of, say, Austria-Hungary at the turn of the twentieth century. Hence, it is essential to distinguish between those states that have a wider extraregional reach in their interest and the preponderant power potential to uphold it, such as those labeled as nuclear superpowers, from the traditional set of major powers. In this respect, there were far fewer attempts to identify such global contenders, with Organski and Kugler's list (1980) becoming one of the standards (see table B2).

The differences between the two lists of global contenders result from different operational rules. Organski and Kugler (1980, 44–45) considered the three strongest nations in the system as “contenders” using a gross national product (GNP) as a capability indicator. On the other hand, Geller and Singer (1998, 177) used the Correlates of War

TABLE B1. The Lists of Major Powers, 1895–Current

	Singer and Small (1972)	Modelski (1972)	Waltz (1979) ^b	Levy (1983)
United Kingdom	1895–	1895–	1895–1945	1895–
France	1895–1940, 1945–	1895– ^a	1895–1945	1895–
Germany/West Germany	1895–1918, 1925–45	1895–1945 ^a	1895–1945	1895–
Austria–Hungary	1895–1918	1895–1918	1895–1918	1895–1918
Italy	1895–1943	1895–1943	1895–1945	1895–1943
Russia/USSR	1895–1917, 1922–	1895– ^a	1895–	1895–
China	1950–	1945–	—	1949–
Japan	1895–1945	1900–1945	1895–1945	1905–45
United States	1899–	1900–	1895–	1898–

^aModelski points out that the status is uncertain for Germany for 1918–25, for Russia for 1917–33, and for France for 1940–45 (Modelski 1972, 144).

^bThis is an extrapolation from Waltz's table of great powers (1979, 162) as he used benchmark years, such as 1910, 1935, and 1945, for identifying major powers.

TABLE B2. The Lists of Global Contenders, 1895–Current

	Organski and Kugler (1980) ^a	Geller and Singer (1998) ^a
United Kingdom	1895–1945	1895–1949
France	—	1895–1934
Germany	1895–1945	1895–1945
Russia/USSR	1895–	1895–
China	—	1950–
Japan	1950–	—
United States	1945–	1900–

^aBoth sources list global contenders for the period up to 1975.

(COW) National Capability data set to identify “great powers” as those major powers that had a 10 percent or higher share of the capability pool for all major powers.

Both decision rules for identifying global contenders have strengths, but they can also be interpreted as arbitrary since they are based on subjectively determined thresholds. Rather than using these operational rules, this book adopts an approach (see chap. 2) that provides a historical survey of major powers regarding all three dimensions in order to determine those with predominant status over other powers. It is interesting that, while the list of major powers developed from the historical survey in chapter 2 (see table 2.5) is almost identical to the standard COW list (Singer and Small 1972), the differences are apparent for global contenders. Whereas my historical analysis indicates that the United States did not play an active role as a global contender until 1945, Geller and Singer (1998) include it for the period following 1900. Also, their year of termination for France as a global contender is 1934, while my historical survey shows that it did not cease to act as a global power until 1940. Besides these few differences, it is safe to say that my analysis, based on a historical survey guided by clear conceptual criteria rather than on intercoder agreement, generally validates the standard COW list of major powers widely used in other conflict studies.