Title	Rethinking Hierarchical Understandings in International Relations
Author(s)	Yamasaki, Michi
Citation	国際公共政策研究. 2009, 13(2), p. 169-181
Version Type	VoR
URL	https://hdl.handle.net/11094/4683
rights	
Note	

Rethinking Hierarchical Understandings in International Relations*

Michi YAMASAKI**

Abstract

Phrases such as "great power," "middle power," or "small power" have been frequently found in various and numerous contexts in academia, politics, and media. These expressions are based on assumptions of hierarchical classifications of nations in international society. However, the definitions of these phrases remain vague and diverse. Lack of shared definitions in each context could cause significant misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Researchers have to be aware and careful of hierarchical assumptions and methods of classification because each classification method has advantages and disadvantages. This article examines the essence of hierarchical understandings and clarifies reasons why these phrases remain unclear.

Keywords: Hierarchical Understanding, Great Power, Middle Power, Small Power.

Common phrases such as "super power," "great power," "middle power," or "small power" have been frequently found in various and numerous contexts since the fifteenth century.[1] Despite the vague nature of these phrases it can be found in titles of academic publications including: *Tragedy of Great Power Politics; Brazil in the International System: The Rise of Middle Power; Small States in World Markets*.[2] Policy practitioners also apply these words to describe their countries' positions and policies. Example of the prevalent use of these phrases include, the Canadian Prime Minister Stephan Harper advocated Canada's role as a "middle power" and the importance of co-operation with other "middle powers" in September 2007.[3] In addition, the Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda called Japan and China "major powers" in his speech presented in China in December 2007.[4] Finally, the United States President George W. Bush stated that "we will preserve the peace by building good relations among the great powers" in a speech in 2002.[5] These expressions are based on assumptions of hierarchical classifications of nations in the international society. Because these phrases themselves seem simple, they are often taken for granted and users do not always confirm their definitions in every context.

In spite of the continual usages of these phrases on various occasions, definitions still remain vague and diverse. There are several definitions and methods of classifying countries and without awareness of the definitions and ways of categorizations there could be significant misunderstandings and disagreements. This article examines the essence of hierarchical understandings and clarifies reasons why these phrases remain unclear.

The article has two main sections. The first section is the review of three categories: great power, middle power, and small power.[6] The later section summarizes and analyzes existing hierarchical understandings of international society.

1. Hierarchical Understanding of International Society

The phases "super power," "great power," "middle power," or "small power" have been employed for a long time in various contexts. These terms can be found in the titles of books, basic concepts in analytical frameworks and also in political speeches and documents. Even employing the same phrases, their meanings are varied depending on context and use. Rethinking international hierarchical understanding has to start with a review of the various usages of these phrases.

---

1) Martin Wight et al., *Power Politics* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2002), 41.

2) John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001); Wayne A. Selcher, *Brazil in the International System: The Rise of Middle Power* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1981); Jacques Rapport, *Small States and Territories* (New York: Arro Press, 1971); Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1985)

3) This speech is available from Office of the Prime Minister of Canada. http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?id=1830 (accessed on November 20, 2008)

4) Provisional Translation is available from Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. In this provisional translation, the phrase "major power" was applied to the original Japanese word which could mean both "great power" and "major power." http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/china/speech0712.html (accessed on November 20, 2008)

5) This speech is available from the web site of the White House, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/06/20020601-3.html (accessed on November 20, 2008)

6) Although great powers and super powers are distinguished in some literature such as studies focusing on polarity, this article will apply the term great power in a broad sense, including that of the super power category. Detailed differentiation is explained in this section.

1. Great Powers

In the history of international relations studies (IR), great powers have been thought to be the main players in world politics. Theoretical studies, particularly studies on polarity, have a tendency to focus on great powers because "[c] oncern with international politics as a system requires con-centration on the states that make the most difference."[7] Many theoretical studies in IR attempt to explain influential actors and the politics among them. For instance, the "balance of power" suggest-ed by H.J. Morgenthau is a framework for understanding the political balance and international or-der kept by great powers. According to his work, lesser countries are merely tools for exchange in order to maintain stability.[8] Furthermore, polarity debates assume that only a limited number of countries maintain world order. Scholars who insist on the peace of a bipolar world, such as Ken-neth Waltz and John J. Mearsheimer, do not concern with middle and small powers.[9] There are no vital small states' roles in the logic of hegemonic stability.

Within the category of great powers, there are various sub-groups of countries. Theoretical works on international relations have diverse definitions of "great countries," on which they mainly focus. The term "great powers" can mean hegemony, bipolar super powers during the Cold War and the permanent members of the Security Council in the United Nations. In a broader sense, all the coun-tries that are "less affected in conducting their own international policies than others, and affect others' international policies more than others" can be assumed as great powers.[10] Researchers es-pecially those who concerned with polarity debates, attempt to draw a clear line between great powers and super powers. For example, Barry Buzan and Kenneth Waltz distinguished super pow-ers from great powers by the range of the specific countries' capabilities. In their argument, super powers are assumed to be all- round players in international politics; on the other hand, great pow-ers need not necessarily have significant capabilities in all sectors.[11]

2. Middle Powers

The term "middle power" has been frequently used both in political and academic contexts. How-ever, there is no consensus on the definition of a middle power. The idea is a relative concept, which means neither it is a great/super power nor a small power. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to have a clear-cut definition of middle power without a clear definition of great/super power and small power.

The idea of "middle power" was first introduced to international politics during the peace confer-ence in Paris after the First World War. The British Government suggested selecting additional ro-tational members to join the Council of the League of Nations from each of the intermediate coun-tries, which were introduced as "middle power," and "minor states." In this context, Spain, Brazil,

---

7) Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGrew-Hill, Inc., 1979), 73.
8) Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* 4th. ed. (New York: Alfred.A.Knopf, 1969), 187.
9) Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics;* Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics.*
10) Yoshinobu Yamamamoto, *Kokusaiteki Sougoizon (The International Interdependence)* (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press, 1989), 113.
11) Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 69.

Belgium, China, and Persia were considered as examples of middle powers.[12] At the San Francisco Conference after the Second World War, self-professed middle powers such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand claimed the roles and rights of middle powers which were assumed to be more powerful and influential participants than smaller countries in the United Nations.

In academia, the idea of middle power received fair attention after the Second World War although it has been discussed since the nineteenth century. The meaning of "middle" is varied in many studies and contexts.[13] The term middle powers could mean intermediate countries in terms of national power: "those which by reason of their size, their material resources, their willingness and ability to accept responsibly, their influence and stability are close to being great powers."[14] As the expansion of secondly powerful countries next to great powers, regional powers are also often called middle powers. In addition, the word middle was also employed to group of countries in the intermediate level of various aspects, such as development, wealth, and industrialization. For example, Australian External Affairs Minister in 1964, Sir Garfield Barwick described Australia's characteristics as middle power as follows:

> [Australia as a middle power] has common interests with both the advanced and the underdeveloped countries; it stands in point of realized wealth between the haves and the have-nots. It is at one time a granary and a highly industrialized country.[15]

The idea of middle power expanded to behavioral characteristics partly diverged from the meanings of middle. The term was connected to active involvement in peace-keeping operations, intergovernmental support, multilateral cooperation, and mediating activities between north-south and west-east divisions during the Cold War. Many scholars hypothesized that these were behaviors derived from a country's middle strength, development or international positions.[16]

3. Small Powers

Similar to great and middle power, small power is also a broad concept in IR studies. A widely accepted definition has not yet been established. The term "small power" could include countries with relatively small populations, territories or economies in comparison to other countries. The countries that are not great powers are many and diversified. The variety of possible states in the small power category resulted in little academic work which attempt to systematically examine the general characteristics of small powers' diplomacy.[17]

Most research had minimal agreement that failed states, weak states, least developed countries (LDCs) are typically considered as small states in many cases.[18] The United Nations Office of the

---

12) Carsten Holbraad, *Middle Powers in International Politics* (New York: St. Martines Press, 1984), 48.

13) For more detailed review of the literature discussing the idea and definition of middle power, see Andrew F Cooper, Richard A. Higott and Kim Richard Nossal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993), 17-19; Adam Chapnick, "The Middle Power," *Canadian Foreign Policy* 7 (1999): 73-82.

14) Cranford Pratt, ed., *Middle Power Internationalism: The North-South Dimension* (Montreal: McGill-Queen University, 1990), 72-72.

15) Jonathan H. Ping, *Middle Power Statecraft: Indonesia, Malaysia and the Asia-Pacific* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2005), 40.

16) For example, Robert Cox, "Middlepowermanship, Japan, and Future World Order," *International Journal* 44 (1989): 823-862; John Holmes, *Canada: A Middle Aged Power* (Ottawa: McClelland and Stewart, 1967); Andrew F. Cooper, *Niche Diplomacy: Middle Powers after the Cold War* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997).

17) Jeanne A. K. Hay, ed., *Small States in World Politics* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publisher Inc., 2003), 5.

18) Hay, ed., *Small States in World Politics,* 2.

High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (UN-OHRLLS) describe the LDCs as follows:

> [T] he poorest and weakest segment of the international community. Extreme poverty, the structural weaknesses of their economies and the lack of capacities related to growth, often compounded by structural handicaps, hamper efforts of these countries to improve the quality of life of their people. These countries are also characterized by their acute susceptibility to external economic shocks, natural and man-made disasters and communicable diseases.[19]

UN-OHRLLS currently lists 49 LDCs states, such as Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Ethiopia and Bangladesh comparing them in terms of their three-year average of their gross national income per capita, their individual Human Assets Index, and their composite Economic Vulnerability Index.[20]

The annual index of failed states issued by the policy journal *Foreign Policy* listed 60 countries as failed states, including Somalia, Sudan, Zimbabwe and Chad.[21] According to the "*Failed States Index 2008,*" failed or failing states have the following attributes:

> One of the most common is the loss of physical control of its territory or a monopoly on the legitimate use of force. Other attributes of state failure include the erosion of legitimate authority to make collective decisions, an inability to provide reasonable public services, and the inability to interact with other states as a full member of the international community.[22]

In addition to these states, micro states are frequently considered as small powers. Countries with small population, small territory, or small economy are often assumed as micro or small state even if they are well developed and industrialized. In the definition presented by the UN in 1969, countries with populations of less than one million are assumed to be micro states. This definition is widely accepted although the categorization of micro states is still a contested topic in IR.[23] According to the *United Nations Statistics Yearbook* issued in 2008, 50 countries such as Cyprus, Qatar, and Iceland are examples of micro states with small populations.

Several distinctive reasons underlying academic and political attention to small countries demonstrate the general characteristics of small powers. Firstly, because some small states are newly decolonized or became independent countries which require support to manage domestic issues and develop economically, studies on such small countries reveal current situations and needs. For example, the motivation behind research projects and publications by international organizations such as UNDP, World Bank or the Joint Commonwealth Secretariat/World Bank Task Force were that

---

19) The United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked developing Countries and Small Island Developing States. (UN-OHRLLS) http://www.unohrlls.org/en/ldc/related/62/ (accessed on November 5, 2008)

20) The UN-OHRLLS's web site. http://www.unohrlls.org/en/ldc/related/62/ (accessed on November 5, 2008)

21) *Foreign Policy* conducted a four-step research method on 177 countries for the index. Firstly, it rated 12 social, economic, political and military indicators. Secondly, it assessed the capabilities of five essential state institutions. Thirdly, it identified idiosyncratic factors and surprises. Lastly, it analyzed the risk of conflict of each country. For detailed information, see http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?page=1&story_id=4350 (accessed on November 5, 2008)

22) *Foreign Policy* web site, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?page=1&story_id=4350 (accessed on November 2, 2008)

23) Sheila Hardon ed., *Small is Dangerous: Micro States in a Macro World* (London: Frances Pinter Publishers, 1985), 9; UNITAR, "Status and Problems of Very Small Territories" (Mieno: UNITAR, 1969)

such projects "help inform continuing analysis and debate as small states themselves and multilateral and other institutions that provide external support and influence their development address the challenges they face." [24)]

Secondly, some small countries are receiving financial or humanitarian aid. Economic vulnerability is considered a general characteristic of small states.[25)] Smaller countries with smaller economies are more likely to face higher risks to their economy by external economics and incidents.[26)] Thus, in case of economic crises, natural disasters, or conflicts in neighboring areas, small countries are more likely to require external assistance. Some research projects are conducted to examine receivers of international aid in order to recognize the impacts of the support and develop more effective responses. For example, *Assessing Aid* issued by the World Bank studied small countries and stated that sound economic policy from the local government is an essential condition for efficient financial aid.[27)]

Thirdly, some small states have potential to destabilize neighboring areas or even the world. There is a notion that "nation-building has become an unavoidable burden, that its practitioners need to do a better job of applying the lessons from prior missions." [28)] In addition, Sheila Harden indicates that small counties or other countries' conflicts over small countries could contribute to local or regional concerns.[29)] The threats of local and regional conflicts help motivate governments and organizations to arrange research institutes on small states including failed or failing states.

The existing images of hierarchical classification in international society can be summarized in Figure 1 below. Less than 20 countries in total out of 192 United Nations member states are great powers by a narrow definition. Currently, 49 states are thought to be least developed countries according to UN-OHRLLS.[30)] Based on the research conducted by *Foreign Policy*, 60 countries are assumed to be failed and failing states. Based on the data issued by UN Statistics and UNITAR, 50 countries are micro states with one million or less populations. Of course some of the countries of each category overlap. Thus, about 20-30 countries could be classified as middle powers.

---

24) David Peretz et al. ed., "Small States in the Global Economy" (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2001), 1.

25) H. Armstrong et al, "A Comparison of the Economic Performance of Different Micro-sates, and between Micro-states and Lager Countries," *World Development* 26 (1998): 640; Lino Briguglio, "Small Island Developing States and Economic Vulnerabilities," *World Development* 23 (1995): 1615-1632.
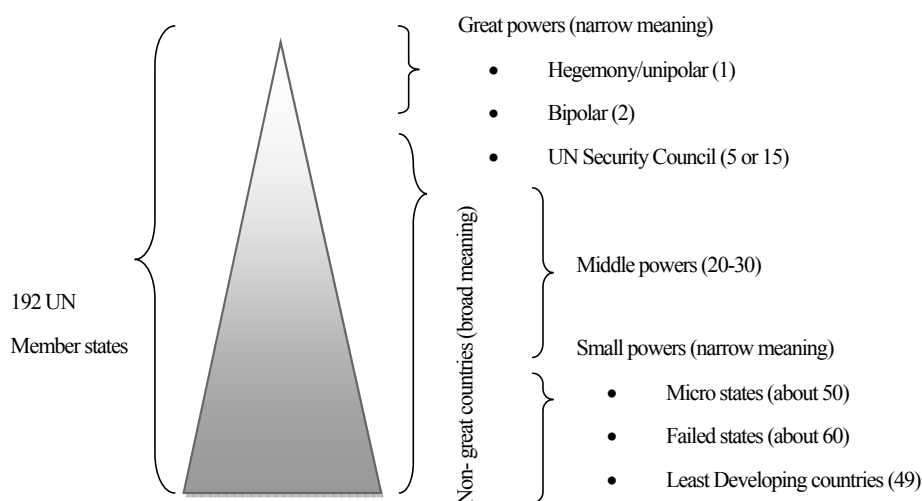
26) Goedon Cordina, "The Microeconomic and Growth Dynamics of Small States: Stylised facts based on a survey of the literature and statistical observation," in *Small States: Economic Review and Basic Statistics* 12, (London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2007): 21-40, 23-37. Lino Briguglio, "Small island developing states and their economic vulnerabilitiey," *World Development* 23 (1995): 1615-1632.

27) World Bank, "*Assessing Aid: What Works, What Doesn't and Why,*" (New York: Oxford University Press and World Bank, 1998).

28) James Dobbins at al., *The Beginner's Guide to Nation-Building* (California: the RAND Corporation, 2007), xvii.

29) Harden, *Small is Dangerous*, 1.

30) UN-OHRLLS's web page. http://www.unohrlls.org/en/ldc/related/62/ (accessed on November 10, 2008)

Figure 1 Hierarchical Image of the International Society

Great powers (narrow meaning)

- Hegemony/unipolar (1)
- Bipolar (2)
- UN Security Council (5 or 15)

Middle powers (20-30)

Small powers (narrow meaning)

- Micro states (about 50)
- Failed states (about 60)
- Least Developing countries (49)

192 UN Member states

Non- great countries (broad meaning)

（Source: author）

As revealed in this section, even when employing the same words, the phrases "super power," "great power," "middle power," or "small power," can posses various meanings and usages depending on the contexts and users. In addition to the lack of clear definitions, various and arbitrary political usages of these terms throw much academic research into confusion. Because in many cases, those concepts are supposed to be basic and simple, lack of shared definitions and misinterpretation of those concepts could shake the foundations of whole research projects or theories. In fact, much of the research examining middle powers hardly co-operates with each other because of the disagreement regarding definition the basic concept of "middle power". Researchers have to be aware of the diversity of usages and ways of classification.

2. Ways of Classification

Researchers and policy practitioners are not always conscious that they are intentionally and unintentionally assuming hierarchy when they are referring to the phrases "super power," "great power," "middle power," or "small power." Thus, users of the phrases do not always clearly present how they classify states. However, as long as they are applying those words to countries, they are categorizing countries into a few groups. Most of the usages are applicable to one of the three coexisting ways of classification. The most basic hierarchical classification is based on national power. The second one is an international institutional classification. The third classification is derived from perception and recognition. Each method of classification has advantages and disadvantages. The coexisting methods of classifications in addition to lack of clear definitions in context on the users part are the underlying reasons for the vague and diverse understandings of international hierarchy.

1. National Power

The most basic classification is based on "national power". However, "national power" is one the most contested concepts in IR. Even leading IR textbooks had seventeen different definitions of power although it was usually explained as a basic concept.[31] Power in IR is considered to have three basic features. The first one is power as capabilities, which are power resources including military power, economic power, population and natural resources.[32] The power resources are conceived as the means to affect the behavior of others. The second form of power is influence, which is the power exercised in relationship between actors. The third one is structural power. Susan Strange defined structural power as the power to decide how things shall be done and the power to shape frameworks in which states conduct international policies.[33]

For international comparison of power, power has to be measured quantitatively. However, there are three remaining problems in measuring power in IR. Firstly, two of the basic aspects of national power, which are influence and structural power, have inherently subjective and immeasurable natures. Recently, Joseph Nye presented the concept of soft power which he defined as the ability to attract others to affect sense of value and ways of thinking.[34] To observe how these aspects of power work, detailed qualitative research has to be done on each case. It is difficult to objectively measure their effects because they are psychological relations existing only between those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised.[35]

The second reason underlying the difficulty of defining and measuring power is multiplicity of capabilities and unavailability of accurate data. For example, Hans J. Morgenthau listed eight elements of national power: geography, natural resources, and industrial capacity, military preparedness, population, national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy.[36] Among those, power resources, such as military power, populations, and GNP, are more visible and recognizable than others and thus have received central attention.[37] However, measuring and comparing those elements of capabilities all across the world have technical obstacles. For instance, even data for the annual national defense budgets of particular countries were available they does not fully represent the military strengths of these countries because military strength was the result of many components, such as the budget, the number of personnel, equipment, and even alliances. Furthermore, measuring and comparing capabilities is often hampered by the unavoidable bias of data that comes from different statistical methodologies depending on countries, organizations, and time.[38] The data of less developed countries are typically less available or reliable.

The last point to be noted is the contextual and changeable nature of power. Fungibility of power, which is the ability to transfer or work as a replacement for other power resource, is one of the big-

31) Marry Nowe Ransom, "International Relations," *Journal of Politics* 30 (1968): 368.
32) David A. Baldwin, "Power Analysis and World Politics: New Trends versus Old Tendencies," *World Politics* 31 (1979): 163.
33) Susan Strange, *States and Markets* (London: Pinter, 1988), 25; Susan Strange, *The Retreat of The State: The Diffusion of Power in the Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
34) Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).
35) Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 14.
36) Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 80-108.
37) Baldwin, "Power Analysis and World Politics," 192.
38) Goedon Cordina, "The Microeconomic and Growth Dynamics of Small States": 21- 40, 23.

gest contentions regarding the nature of national power. For instance, if the fungibility of military power is high, a state possessing military strength could have advantages even in non-military areas. Conversely, from the standpoint of assuming low fungibility, strong military force does not always affect other areas. Thus, a country's strength would vary depending on issues. Literature which assumes a low fungibility of power resources is likely to focus on the contextual nature of power. One power resources' effects differ from age to age as well as from issue to issue. Many researchers agree that power has fungibility as well as a contextual nature in greater or lesser degrees.

Although there is no common agreement on the way to estimate national power, many research projects attempted to calculate and compare countries' respective power.[39] Among the various academic work, the equation form devised by Ray S. Cline is the most frequently cited in contemporary IR. Cline created the following well-known formula for measuring national power and used it in the ranking of more than 70 countries in his research.

$$PP = (C + E + M) \times (S + W)$$

PP = Perceived Power,
C = Critical Mass = Population + Territory
E = Economic Power,
M = Military Power,
S = Strategic Purpose,
W = Will to Pursue National Strategy

Table 1 is R. S. Cline's attempt to compare and rank states based on national power in 1978 and 1991 in accordance with his formula.[40] These two studies by Cline are one of the few works estimating and comparing the national power of more than 70 states. The longitudinal axis and numbers on the axis of Table 2 represent evaluated value of national power. The numbers at the latitudinal axis represents the ranking of each state. The figures of national power in each study are better adapted to make comparisons with other counties in the same year than the same country in different years.

---

39) For example, Correlates of War projects' Composite Indicator of National Capabilities (CINC); Ashley J. Tellis, et al., *Measuring National Power in the Postindustrial Age* (California: Rand Corporation, 2000); Ping, *Middle Power Statecraft*; Lewis W. Snider, "*Identifying the Elements of State Power: Where do we Begin?*" *Comparative Political Studies* 20 (1987): 314-356; Michael P. Sullivan, *Power in Contemporary International Politics* (Columbia: University of South California Press, 1990).

40) There are several points to be noted in his studies. Firstly, his experience in U.S. government and the Central Intelligence Community (CIA) made his attitude toward national power and foreign policy realistic; however, it also affected his perception to measuring national power. For example, Cline weighed nuclear weapon so heavily in the research in 1978 that nations which have nuclear weapons were extremely overstated. Secondly, measuring "strategic purpose" and "will to pursue national strategy" in Cline's formula is inevitably subjective although these elements are thought to be important in the formula. Thirdly, the data used in the research were partly revised by Cline. There was uncertainty of the data because of the world affairs during the Cold War.

Table 1   Dispersion of Evaluated National Power in 1978 and 1991.
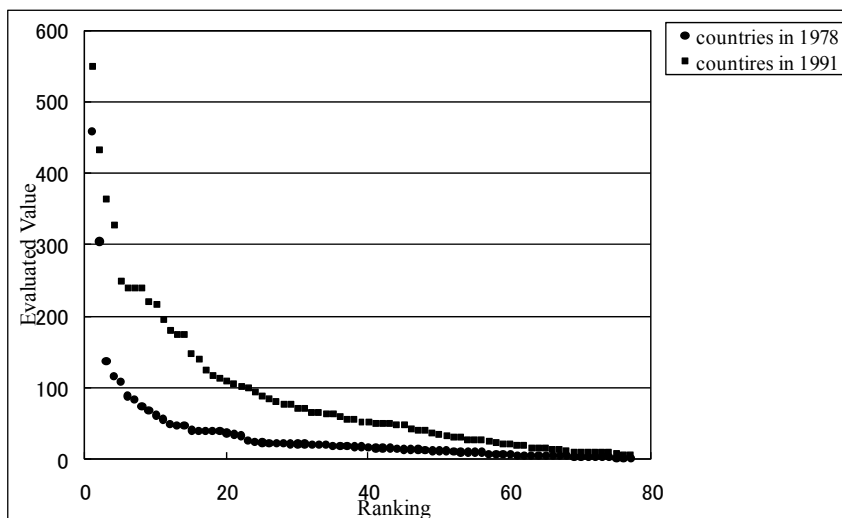
(Source：R.S. Cline, *World Power Trends and U.S. Foreign Policy for the 1980s; The Power of Nations in the 1990s.*)

The results of Cline's two research projects show an even and continuous distribution of countries. The possible "great powers," which occupy the top half of the table, are few in number in both 1978 and 1991. Other than these remarkably few great powers, almost all states are dispersed evenly. Thus, a clear division between middle and small states cannot be observed in Table 1. If there were two or three distinct clusters, states could be categorized clearly and objectively as to their national power. Therefore, because of the even distribution of states in terms of national power, three hierarchical classifications have unavoidable tendencies to be arbitrary, judging from the results of Cline's research.

A lot of previous IR work attempted to classify states based on power distribution. However, power has been one of the most important and contentious concepts because of the absence of a common standard. In addition, there are remaining methodological problems for measuring power. Despite of these problems, if Cline's studies of calculating national power are applied, grouping states into three categories based on national power cannot be objective. The hierarchical classification applying national power can be neither objective nor systematic as a basis of further research.

With awareness of those problems and limitations, this classification is still useful for specific aims. Broad comparisons of countries based on national power gives overall pictures of the world and general positions of particular countries. Also, even research with subjective categorizations or definitions could make a significant contribution as long as possible bias and problems are clearly noted. Robert Koehane summarized such views as presented by David Vital, in that "a definition should be judged not only on the relevance of its categories but also on the power of the explanations that it suggests."[41] Furthermore, a country's strength in particular issues and time are measurable with specific aspect or indicators of national power although total national power is immeas-

---

41) Robert Keohane, "Lilliputians' Dilemmas: Small States in International Politics," *International Organization* 23 (1969): 294; David Vital, *The Inequality of States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 9

urable and contextual. For example, judging from GNP in 2007, United States, China and Japan are the three most powerful countries; however, Russia, Canada and Norway, the three biggest exporters of natural gas, thus in the issues of natural gas export, these countries could prove to be more powerful.[42] These facts are certainly useful in international economy for specific research aims.

2. International Institutions

The second classification is based on international law and institutions. Some international institutions and treaties provide clear divisions between each group in the international hierarchy. The membership of the Security Council of the United Nations (UNSC) is a typical example of this second classification. The permanent membership with the veto power creates obvious differences in terms of political rights in the United Nations. Other than the UNSC's membership classification, possessing nuclear weapons within the system of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty institutionalizes international hierarchy between the haves and the have-nots in terms of nuclear weapons. In the economic area, the membership of the G8 has rights and statuses for member states. For example the members of the G8 have the right to attend and make remarks at regular meetings. Even if it is not clearly regulated by international law or institution, positions and achievements in international institutional activities often authorize a country as a major power in particular areas.

Essentially, these categorizations are created by states, mostly powerful or influential states at the time in a particular area. As Patrick A. McCarthy indicated, many international organizations officially differentiate the major powers from others in particular way.[43] Those categorizations inevitably represent power distributions among countries at one time and in one area in accordance with the major powers' will. Therefore, those classifications are not applicable throughout time and issues. In fact, at the peace conference of Paris in 1919, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Japan obtained great power status and its exclusive rights; however, after 26 years, during San Francisco conference the United States, the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and China established exclusive positions in the Security Council.

This categorization presents clearer groups of states than the other two methods of categorization. However, institutional classifications represent only one specific aspect of international hierarchy and are also affected by politics at some point in time. Therefore, those issue- and time-specific features of classification are not expandable into other issues or time.

Based on the advantages and disadvantages of this particular type of classification, positions in international organizations can explain how authority and effective influence in particular issues were constructed and worked in specific areas and time. Membership in one exclusive committee provides certain authority and influence to member countries in particular areas. Moreover, because institutional positions are stable in many cases, they offer practical understandings of back grounds of international politics to analyze particular issues. For example, information regarding the members, observers and chair country of a G8 meeting makes it easy to interpret the selections of topics discussed in the meeting.

---

42) CIA World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/index.html (accessed on November 20, 2008)

43) Patrick A. McCarthy, *Hierarchy and Flexibility World Politics* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 1998), 55-56.

3. Perceptions and Discourses

The third classification is based on perceptions and discourses. In this third way of classification, the discourses and understandings of the country in question determine its international position. There is surprisingly a lot of IR work which avoids presenting clear classification and rely on international and domestic perception or discourses.

The first group of researchers who apply this third way of classification stresses the role of social agreement or shared image in categorizing states. From historical IR perspectives, Martine Wight put emphasis on social agreement defining great powers.

> It is easier to answer [the question 'what is a great power?'] historically, by enumerating the great powers at any date, than by giving a definition, for there is always broad agreement about the existing great powers.[44]

Even some of neo-realists who advocate scientifically precise research methods in IR leave the classification of nations to perceptions.[45] For example, as a representative of neorealism, Kenneth Waltz indicated the hierarchical understandings as follows:

> Historically, despite the difficulties, one finds general agreement about who the great powers of a period are, with occasional doubt about marginal cases... Counting the great powers of an area … [is an empirical question 'what is a great power?'] historically , by enumerating the great powers at any date, than by giving definitions, for there is always broad agreement about the existing great powers.[46]

The second standpoint of the third way of classification pays attention particularly to perceptions of domestic actors and self declarations. For example, Robert Keohane typically framed a small state as "a state whose leaders consider that it can never, acting alone or in a small group, make a significant impact on the system."[47] Jeanne A. K. Hey's statement also represents this view: "states are deemed small not by any objective definition, but by their perceived role in the international hierarchy."[48] Robert Rothstein defined a small country as "a state which recognizes that it cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities and that it must rely fundamentally on the aid of others."[49] In addition to research focus on national identity, the role theory suggested by K. J. Holsti also put emphasis on policy practitioners' perception on national role.[50]

The last group of researchers in this view focuses on others' recognition or international mutual understandings to classify countries. For example, Hedley Bull defined great power as a country which is "recognized by others to have, and conceived by their own leaders and peoples to have, certain special rights and duties."[51] Laurent Goetschel also described the small powers as "a state perceived as no danger to neighboring states."[52] According to Barry Buzan's recent work, the key

---

44) Martin Wight et al., *Power Politics*, 41.
45) Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers*, 58-59.
46) Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 131.
47) Keohane, "Lillputians' Dilemmas": 296.
48) Hay, ed., *Small States in World Politics*, 3.
49) Robert Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 27.
50) K.J. Holsti, "National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy," *International Studies Quarterly* 14, (1970): 243
51) Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers*, 58-59. Bull, 1977: 200-202.
52) Robert Laurent Goetschel, "The Foreign and Security Policy Interests of Small States in Today's Europe," in Laurent Goetschel Dordrecht, ed., *Small States Inside and Outside the European Union: interests and Policies* (Netherlands: Kluwer Academic), 13.

idea of this view is "not just what states say about themselves and others, but how they behave in a wider sense, and how that behavior is treated by others." [53]

Despite the fact that a lot of researchers employed the categorization based on perceptions and recognitions, one research's categorizations can hardly expand to other research because this classification is inevitably arbitrary and fluctuating depending on time and person. In fact, a research conducted by Norman Z. Alcock and Alan G. Newcombe showed that the perception and images of great powers are different between people in Canada and Latin America because of the deference in histories and backgrounds of these two countries. [54] Various research methods, including the application of the psychological research methods and discourse analysis, to observe perceptions, are still in progress. [55]

This classification has various usages although it also requires further research as well as the other two classifications. Policy practitioners' and domestic actors' perceptions on their countries' international positions play significant roles in the policy-making process and international negotiations. For example, countries with confidence in being a key player in a particular area, such as a key exporter of a rare natural resource or being a leading supporter of an international committee, are more likely to take initiatives and less likely to compromise in those particular issues. Moreover, by focusing on one specific point, such as self-recognition as a leading county in a certain area, it might be possible to compare several countries' international activities or a county's policy in several issues.

Conclusions

In conclusion, several causes are working to the frequent used phrases "super power," "great power," "middle power," or "small power" remain unclear. Firstly, there are three coexisting ways of classifications in IR. Secondly, users of these phrases do not always clarify which classification method they are applying. Thirdly, each classification method includes arbitrariness problems although they have certain benefits. Lastly, the results of each categorization do not always correspond with each other and are not applicable across all issues. These points have to be noted because hierarchical images of international society are basic ideas in many research projects. Researchers have to be aware and careful of conscious and unconscious hierarchical assumptions and methods of classification when they employ these words in research because each method to classify countries has adequate and in-adequate usages. This article concludes with a hope for further research on a way to make full use of each categorization.

---

53) Buzan, *The United States and Great Powers*, 67.
54) Norman Z. Alcock and Alan G. Newcombe, "Perceptions of National Power," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 14, (1970): 339-342.
55) For example, Allen M. Shinn, Jr., "An Application of Psychophysical Scaling Techniques to the Measurement of National Power", *The Journal of Politics* 31 (1969): 932-951.