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## **Political Sophistication and the Perception of Power in International Relations: a Semiotic Approach**

**Silviu-Petru Grecu**

University “Al.I.Cuza”, Iași, Faculty of Philosophy and Social- Political Sciences,  
Department of Political Sciences, International Relations and European Studies/ Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
[silviu.grecu@uaic.ro](mailto:silviu.grecu@uaic.ro)

**Horia Costin Chiriac**

University “Al.I.Cuza”, Iași, Faculty of Philosophy and Social- Political Sciences,  
Department of Communication Sciences/ Ph.D. Lecturer  
[costinhoriachiriac@gmail.com](mailto:costinhoriachiriac@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** The aim of this paper is to create a comprehensive image of power at the beginning of the XXI-st century. The research objectives are related to: i. the radiography of the perception of the political power regarding the main actors: USA, Russian Federation and China; ii. the identification of the relationship between global economy conditions, terrorist attacks and the dynamics of the political power in international arena; iii. the estimation of the magnitude of the statistical correlation between economic development, democratic order and the perception of the political power in international sphere. The research design is obviously quantitative, being based on descriptive statistics and linear and non-linear equations of regressions for estimating the main predictors and vectors which could influence the perception of the power. We use comparative case studies between USA, Russian Federation and China for exploring several associations between independent factors and the perception of the power and influence in the international context. Regarding the empirical findings, we have to stress that China’s power and influence are related with cyber-attacks from other countries ( $r = 0.707$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and USA’s power and influence are related with the conditions of the global economy ( $r = 0.594$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ). Regarding the perception of the Russian Federation’s power and influence, we can observe linear associations with cyber-attacks ( $r = 0.605$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ) and flawed democratic order ( $r = 0.429$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). Empirical findings reflect a new political geometry in the international arena, where the classical system is replaced by a multipolar model with two dominant political actors: USA and China. Synthesising, this article reflects the importance of the political perception and the political psychology in the sphere of international relations, where we can make the distinction between real and potential (or perceived) political power. This new geometry implies a new level of significance and a new semiotic strategy for interpreting both subjective and objective facts of the political world.

**Keywords.** Political power, political perception, global economy, cyber attacks, democratic order.

## **1. Political perception, power and International Relations. A cross-theoretical perspective**

This article aims to create the nexus between the field of the political psychology, political semiotics and International Relations. The main goal of the political psychology is related to a specific manner of understanding the political world. This kind of social comprehension generates, in practice, different ways of setting mental attitudes and observable behaviors. Political perception is one of the primary forms of the cognitions and attitudes. In this respect it depends on the human's ability of computing and signifying the social and political stimuli.

Although cognition implies a high level of accuracy and rational strategies for computing different social, biological or physical stimuli, perception could be seen in association with emotional dimension. The particularity of the political cognition and perception consists in the hybrid model based on both emotion and rationality [1]. In a general perspective, political perception could be defined as "the process through which we use available information to form impressions of other people, to assess what they are like. We will not refer to physical characteristics that form impression, but on a broader system of characteristics which belong to the target (i.e. physical aspect), to the perceiver (i.e. personal memories), to the situations (i.e. conflict or friendship), to behaviour and interaction features" [2]. Political perception depends on the level of the social and political stimuli and the magnitude and complexity of the situations or phenomena which are perceived by individuals.

For a better understanding of the social and political perception, we have to introduce two main but incommensurable paradigms: i. the theory of mind (ToM) and ii. the social learning theory. From the first point of view, social perception depends on the brain structure and individual's subjectivity. Recent trends from cognitive neurosciences emphasized the idea that both amygdala and prefrontal cortex are involved in processing social stimuli. Social perception could be reduced to a mental schemata based on emotional filtering and responses [3,4,5]. Beyond emotional sphere, perception depends on the other psychological processes like as episodic and semantic memory, attention and mental concentration. The second perspective refers to the influence of the social context in modelling the perceptive and cognitive processes. In this meaning, researchers from 1940s-1950's have demonstrated that social interactions and mass-media are the main vectors for shaping political perception, attitudes and perception. Thus, researchers have demonstrated that social proximity could directly influence the social and political behaviour [ 6,7,8,9]. In practice, researchers have demonstrated through Markow's statistical model that proximity (both social and geographical) is the main channel for generating the cognitive models. Beyond the cognitive psychology cognition and perception could be interpreted in terms of social and symbolical interaction between environment and individuals.

A key-concept in the field of political cognition is represented by the political sophistication. Thus, this mental process is seen as the mental disposition for sharing and explaining the role played by structures, institutions and political system [10]. Beyond this approach, political sophistication is based on the mental complexity filtered by the ideological perspectives [11]. This kind of cognitive approach is based on the conceptualization of the public life. "Citizens will rely on habitual responses to political communication when that suits them and they see no reason to re-evaluate their attitudes, weak or strong, towards individuals or parties. However, when circumstances necessitate and specific emotional states are encouraged, voters will engage in much deeper forms of cognitive consideration." [12] This manner of conceptualization of the political life is based on both emotional and rational

attitudes. Empirical studies from neurosciences demonstrated the emotional basis of the political cognition. In this respect, researchers named this type of cognitive approach: “hot cognition” [13]. Regarding political sophistication we agree that “sophistication is a matter of cognition. The most elementary cognitions - of individual, tangible objects - are the bits of memory, the words in the grammar of thought. More complex cognitions link more elementary ones in much the same way as phrases or sentences link words. Cognitive psychology speaks of associations, social psychology of beliefs and attitudes.” [14]

Related to the sphere of political cognition and sophistication, the study aims to create an exploratory framework for understanding how citizens perceive the political power. In this respect, political power is seen as “as simply the generalized capacity to attain ends or goals in social relations, independently of the media employed or of the status of "authorization" to make decisions or impose obligation” [15]. The Talcott Parson’s approach regarding the political power stresses the dimension of the power related to influence. This definition of the political power could be completed by the coercive dimension. Political power is defined in terms of social influence and political coercion. Regarding the international arena we can underline the same semantic regarding the power. International political power is related to political domination, influence and coercion. All these attributes of the power generate the struggle for power in the international context [16]. Several scholars define political power in terms of governmental influence in different aspects of the social life. They have introduced the idea of the “governmentalization of the State” [17]. Through mathematical models based on differential equations and optimizations scholars demonstrated that political power is a function which depends on the type of the regime, economic structures and institutional equilibrium [18]. Regarding the collective action, scholars defined political power in terms of the game theory and rational choice [19]. In relation with the collective action, political power is analyzed, at the ontological level, in terms of intentionality. Thus, political power is socially constructed and has its origins in the sphere of collective intentionality [20].

Due to its focus on the problem of meaning, Semiotics can be successfully applied to the study of power, helping us to better understand the symbolic value of power perception in various contexts. The problem of military and economic power can be approached from a geo-strategic perspective, taking into account the perception of the United States, China and Russia military and economic power by other 23 countries around the World. As we are going to see, important mutations took place in the last decades in this regard, determining us to pay attention to more recent tendencies.[21] One important question we want to answer is whether or not we are witnessing a paradigmatic swift of power balance, at least at the level of power perception.

In order to attain a more accurate perspective on the subject, we are going to treat the charts obtained by representing a few statistical correlations within the data we use as genuine signs which are suitable for semiotic analysis. In this context, the road from the signifier to the signified, in the language used by Ferdinand de Saussure, involves an effort of a brief historical and geostrategic contextualisation, due to the fact that the concept of power has multiple facets, as we already mentioned above. Given the fact that international political power is related to political domination, influence and coercion, one can easily observe there are at least two different connotations of power: a positive one and a negative one. International political power can be perceived as a protective power by the allies and as a potential or an immediate threat by the geostrategic competitors.

Unfortunately, the charts that represent the level of power perception give no indications in this regard. Therefore, when interpreting these charts we are going to take into account the history of the relations among various states along with the geostrategic positioning adopted by them recently. Such an interpretative attitude can be easily justified if one takes into account the semiotic profile of the charts as signs of power. Using the classification of Charles Sanders Peirce, we can observe the fact that these charts are not just indexes of power perception, but genuine symptoms of power, meaning a special category of indexes that belong within the phenomenon they stand for, because the fact of

being perceived as powerful can be considered a form of power in itself.[22] The famous theory of atomic deterrence represents a good example in this respect. Moreover, each geostrategic actor is characterized by a specific thematic profile of its political power, meaning that he projects the political power as military power, scientific or technological power and economic power. In the same time, we can consider these facets of political power as ingredients of political power that are present in different proportions in the case of each state, influencing the way in which the power of that specific state is perceived.

Coming back to the Saussure perspective upon signs, we can observe also an interesting parallelism. When interpreting a chart regarding the perception of political power belonging to different geostrategic actors, we use a synchronic approach that is quite similar with the synchronic approach used by Saussure in synthetizing the presence of what he called linguistic sign in various Indo-European languages. In this context, what he called “acoustic image” represents in our case a perceptual response towards the physical component of the signifier that involves the gestation of a mental representation associated with the signified. More explicitly, the chart (the graphical component of the signifier) can be linked to an explanatory concept (the signified) only by historically contextualizing and clarifying its meaning for us (clarifying our mental representation associated with it). Our perceptual familiarisation with the chart represents in this context the mental component of the signifier, in the language used by Saussure.[23]

## 2. Methodological framework. Guidelines, perspectives and data

This section presents the methodological framework and the main empirical tendencies for underling the relation between political perception and the dynamics of the power in international arena. The aim of the study is to observe the citizens’ perception of the power at the beginning of the XXIst century. At the normative level, we have several research objectives as: i. the radiography of the perception of the political power regarding the main actors: USA, Russian Federation and China; ii. to identify the relationship between global economy condition, terrorist attacks and the dynamics of the political power in international arena; iii. to estimate the magnitude of the statistical correlation between economic development, democratic order and the perception of the political power in international sphere. The main research questions are: i. what type of political system characterizes the dynamics of the power in international environment at the beginning of the XXIst century? and “how could economic and political conditions influence the citizens’ perception of the political power in international relations?”

The research hypothesis is that: *international system is perceived to be bipolar with an emergent political power*. For testing this research hypothesis we use several data from secondary sources:

**Table 1. Research Variables**

Variable	Source
Global climate change	Pew Research Center <a href="https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-a-rising-concern/">https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/02/10/climate-change-still-seen-as-the-top-global-threat-but-cyberattacks-a-rising-concern/</a>
The Islamic militant group known as ISIS	Pew Research Center
Cyberattacks from other countries	Pew Research Center
North Korea' nuclear program	Pew Research Center
The condition of the global economy	Pew Research Center
U.S. power and influence	Pew Research Center

Russia's power and influence	Pew Research Center
China's power and influence	Pew Research Center
GDP growth (%)	World Bank
GDP (millions \$)	World Bank
Democratic Index	The Economist Intelligence Unit

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<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?view=chart>  
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?view=chart>  
<https://www.eiu.com/topic/democracy-index>

Starting from these quantitative data we use as analytical model both a linear correlation and multi-linear equations of regressions as:

$$Y = a + b_1x_1 + b_2x_2 + \dots + b_nx_n + u_{ij}$$

where Y= dependent variable,  $X_{1,n}$ = independent variables and  $u_{ij}$ = coefficient of residuals

The research sample is based on 26 countries from all the geographical areas for covering different geographical space and proximity. All these estimations will be realized at three levels: descriptive statistics, associations and correlations between variables and the level of likelihood in the probabilistic distributions. In the table no.2 we introduce the main units which compose our statistical sample. All the quantitative data are relevant for 2019, the methodological aim being related to a transversal perspective regarding the perception of the main threats and power from the international environment.

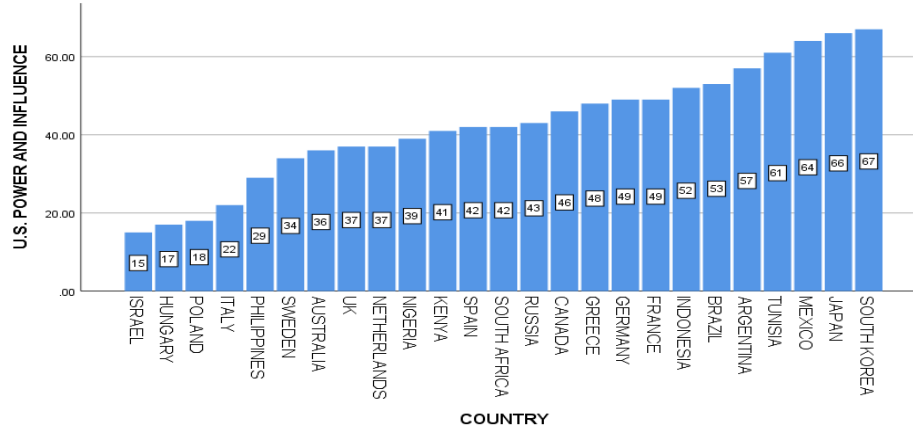
**Table 2. Units of Analysis**

No.	Units of Analysis	Geographical Area
1	Israel	Middle East
2	Nigeria	Africa
3	Russia	Europe
4	Poland	Europe
5	Indonesia	Asia
6	South Africa	Africa
7	U.S.	North America
8	Australia	Australia
9	Tunisia	Africa
10	Canada	North America
11	Hungary	Europe
12	UK	Europe
13	Philippines	Asia
14	Sweden	Europe
15	Netherlands	Europe
16	Germany	Europe
17	Italy	Europe
18	Kenya	Africa
19	Brazil	South America
20	Argentina	Asia
21	Japan	Asia
22	Mexico	North America
23	Spain	Europe
24	France	Europe
25	South Korea	Asia
26	Greece	Europe

### **3. Empirical findings. The perception of power at the beginning of the XXI-st century**

This section presents the empirical results related to the research objectives. Regarding the first research objective, to create the radiography of the perception of the political power regarding the main actors: USA, Russian Federation and China, we can stress the fact that there are significant differences in the perception of power in different geographical areas, Thus, U.S. is perceived as a dominant political power in the international arena by a mean of 40.92% of respondents with  $\delta = 16.77\%$ . With  $p = 0.05$  we can estimate  $(1-\alpha) \in [34.14; 47.69]$ . The distribution has a left asymmetry (Skewness= -0.533, Kurtosis= 0.09). For the first quartile ( $Q_1 = 32.75$ ) we can mention several countries like: Israel, Poland, Hungary and Philippines which consider that US have a low power and influence in the international arena. In opposition, countries from the third quartile ( $Q_3 = 52.25$ ) like Brazil, Argentina, Tunisia, Mexico, Japan and South Korea consider that US has a high level of power and influence in international relations. In figure 1 is displayed the perception of the US power and influence in 26 countries from our sample.

**Figure 1. The perception of the U.S. power and influence**

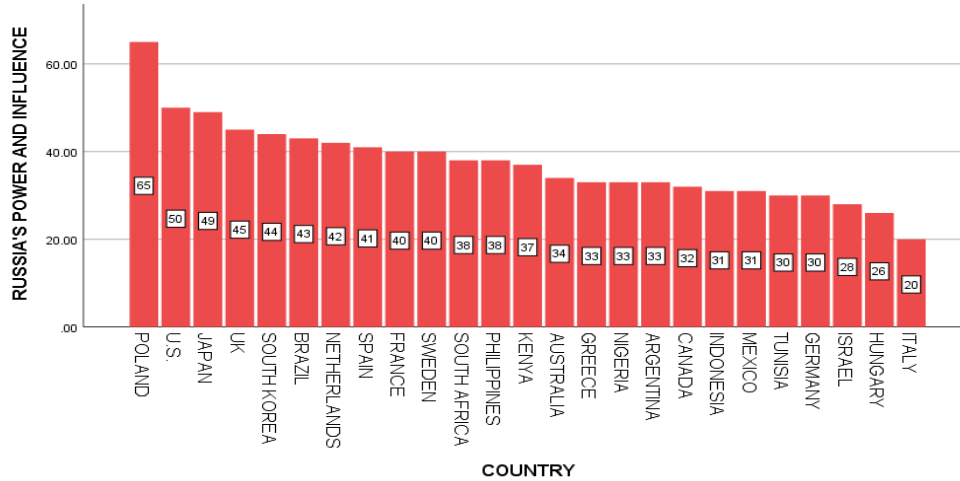


From a geostrategic point of view, we can observe that US positioning towards Asia as the main field for geostrategic competition with China seems to be reflected quite well in the perception of different countries. Allies of US from other regions of the world like Israel, Poland or Hungary seem to be frustrated by the lower involvement of US in their neighborhoods, while Asian countries like Japan and South Korea perceive in a positive manner the attention paid by US to Asian problems. The case of Philippines raises some questions marks, but the result might reflect the stress produced by the involvement of China in the South China Sea, a movement against which the countermeasures taken by US Fleet seem to be not as effective as expected. The democratic model represented by the US might have raised some attention in Tunisia, the only country in the Middle East where some democratic reforms took place lately, while countries from Central and South America like Mexico, Brazil and Argentina remain quite conscious of the dominant position maintained by US in the region.

In the second case, we can observe that Russian Federation is perceived to have power and influence in international relations by 35.88% of the respondents from the national samples with  $\delta = 11.63$ . Moreover, Russia has the confidence level  $(1-\alpha) \in [31.18; 40.58]$  and left asymmetry (Skewness = - 0.564, Kurtosis= 3.654). In the figure 2 are presented the values for the perception of the Russia's power and influence. The first quartile ( $Q_1 = 31.00$ ) is represented by Italy, Hungary, Israel, Germany, Tunisia and Mexico which consider that Russian Federation has a low influence and power in the international environment. In opposition, countries from the third quartile ( $Q_3 = 42.5$ ): Brazil, South Korea, Japan, UK, US and Poland consider that Russia has an important role in shaping a model of influence and power in the international sphere.



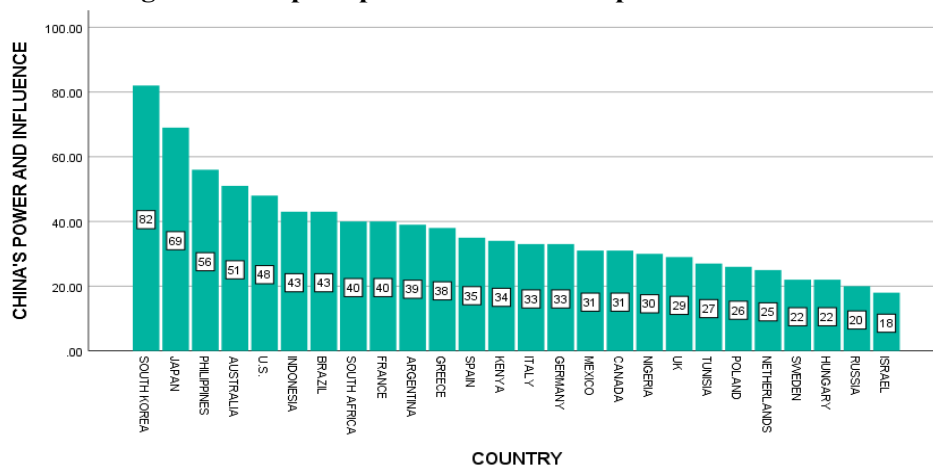
**Figure 2. The perception of the Russia's power and influence**



As the core component of the former USSR which was a major actor in the Cold War, Russian Federation remains significant for countries like South Korea, Japan, UK, US and Poland. In the same time, the strategy by which Russian Federation transformed itself in a major provider of oil and natural gas for some of the European countries, combined with the fact that NATO alliance included some countries from Eastern Europe seem to reduce the fears of countries like Italy, Germany and Hungary.

China is perceived to be an emergent power in the international arena by a mean of 37.11% of the respondents with  $\delta = 14.85\%$ . With  $p = 0.05$  we can estimate  $(1-\alpha) \in [31.11; 43.11]$ . The distribution has a right asymmetry (Skewness= 1.44, Kurtosis= 2.51). For the first quartile ( $Q_1 = 28.00$ ) we can mention several countries like: Israel, Russia, Hungary, Sweden, Netherlands, and Poland which consider that China has a lower power and influence in the international arena. In opposition, countries from the third quartile ( $Q_3 = 43.00$ ) like Brazil, Indonesia, US, Australia, Philippines, Japan and South Korea consider that China plays a major role in the international relations being an emergent political power.

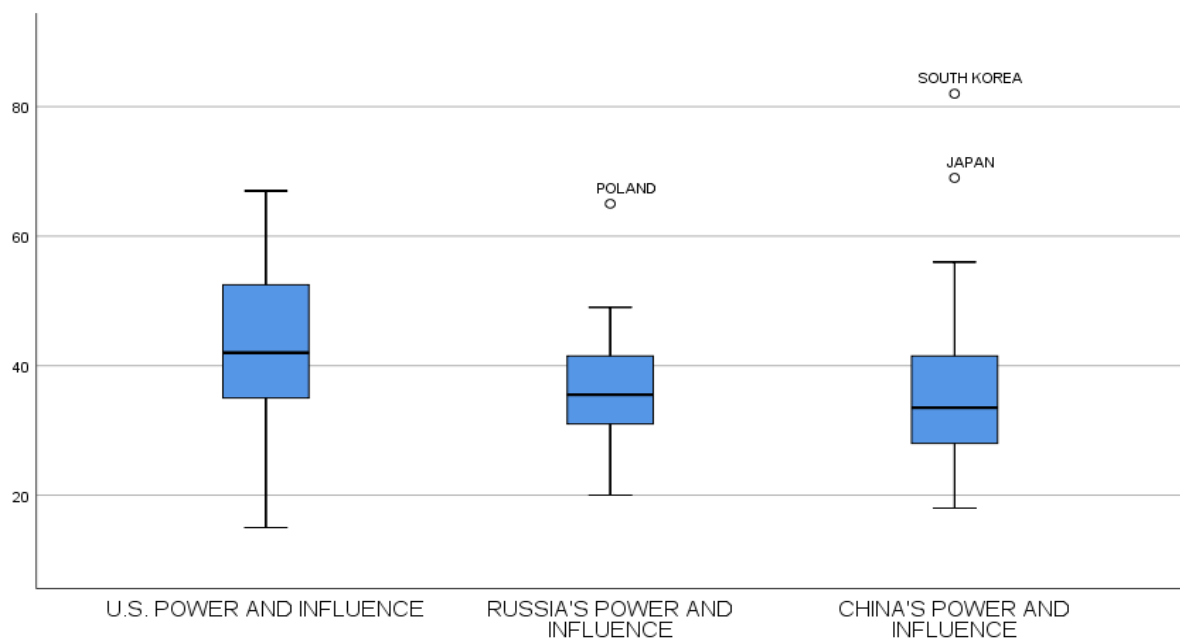
**Figure 3. The perception of the China's power and influence**



As the chart reveals, the emergent power of China is better perceived in Asian countries that share the same vicinity with it, like Indonesia, Philippines, Japan and South Korea, in countries that maintain with the Asian region a strong economic relation like Australia, in countries that are on their turn emergent economic powers like Brazil and finally, in US for which China represents in the same time an important economic partner, but also the main geostrategic competitor.

Regarding the perception of power in our sample we can observe that there are several hierarchies between countries which emphasize the idea of an imperfect bipolar system with an emergent political power: China. In this meaning, the figure 4 reflects the median position of each political power as it is perceived by the citizens from 26 nations:

**Figure 4. The perception of power and influence in international environment**

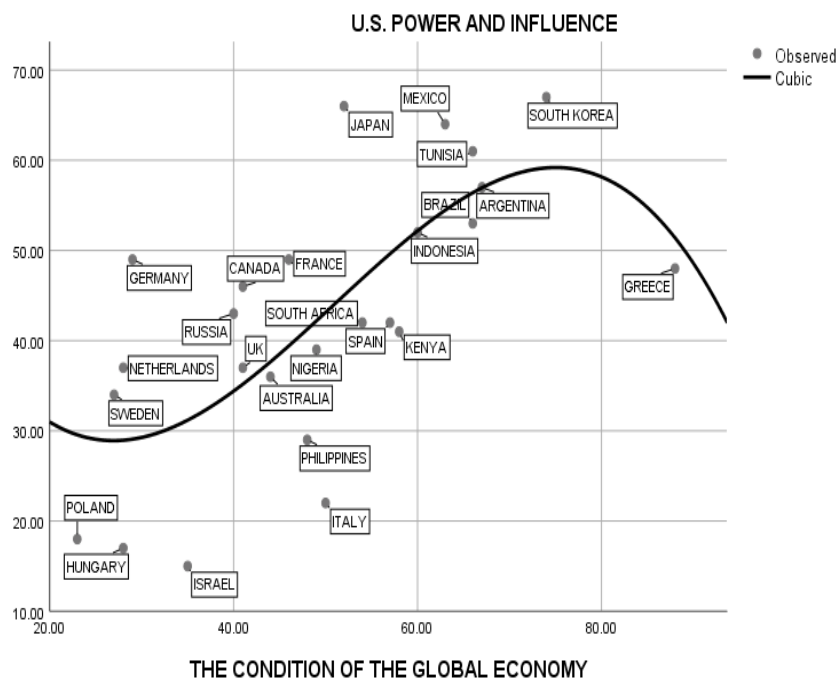


#### 4. Global Economy, Cyber terrorism and political power

The second objective of the research regards the relationship between the perception of the power and several threats of the contemporary world. We have extracted from the secondary sources data related to the main dangers and threats of the beginning of the XXIst century. However, at the empirical level we have observed several associations between the perception of the power and terrorist attacks, cyber-terrorism and the dynamics and conditions of the global economy. In this respect, the study uses both linear and polynomial equations of regressions for testing the relation between these variables. The conditions of the global economy are more associated with the power of the US. This fact is obvious starting from the economic history of the XXth century. US were considered the main economic power after the Second World War. Economic evolution during the Cold War and the economic conditions related to the post Bretton Woods' Agreement are several economic perspectives which sustain the economic "hegemony" of the US. Regarding several aspects of the

structural power Susan Strange sustained the fact that: “while this misuse of power has sheltered the US taxpayer and consumer (and to a lesser extent, workers) in the short run, it runs a serious risk in the long run of weakening both the system and the structural hegemony of the United States” [24]. In the figure no. 5 is presented the nonlinear relation between the economic framework and the perception of the US power and influence. In this case, the association between variables is nonlinear, being explained by a cubic model with  $R^2 = 0.484$  ( $F = 6.57$ ,  $p = 0.03$ ).

**Figure 5. US power and influence and the conditions of the global economy**



Although the linear association  $R = 0.69$ , the polynomial function between these components reflect a middle positive statistical association in the perception of power and influence of the US in terms of economy. In this context, South Korea, Mexico, several countries from South America and part of the Western Europe consider that the power of the US is related to their economic implication in the international system.

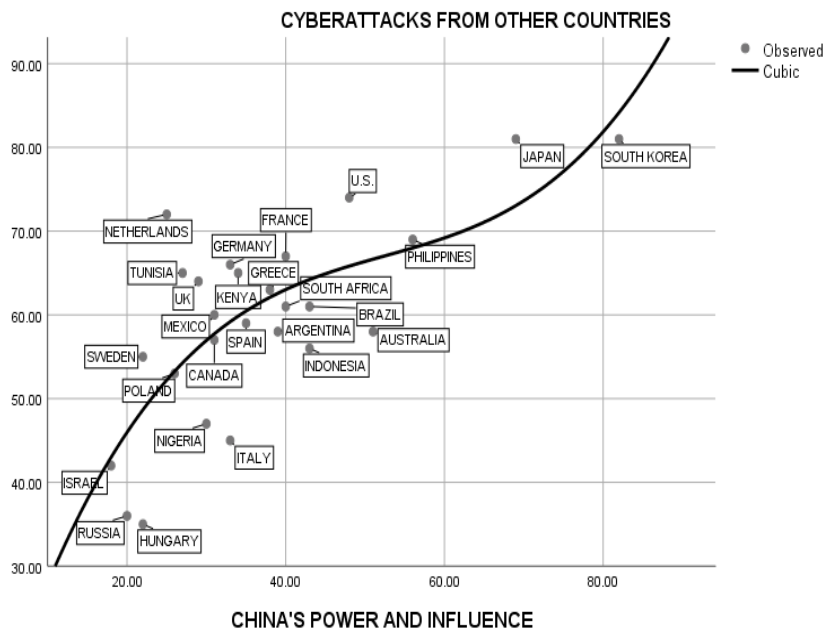
In the era of globalization this result does not come as a surprise, given the fact that US maintains a central position in the World Economy. Therefore, the influence of US remains important for various countries that are motivated to increase their role in the international economic relations.

Regarding the perception of China’s power and influence we have to stress the fact that there are several middle statistical correlations with the perception of the cyber-terrorism from other countries. Thus, the relation has  $R^2 = 0.538$ ,  $F = 8.524$ ,  $p = 0.001$  in a cubic equation of regression. In countries like Japan and South Korea respondents had considered that China has a high level of power and influence in the international system (more than 70% of the respondents). In this meaning, respondents from these countries had considered the main threat of the contemporary world the cyber-attacks from other countries (80% of the respondents). In opposition, in countries like Israel, Russia and Hungary we could identify a low level of perception for both variables (China’s power and influence and the threat of the cyber-attacks from other countries).

In an intriguing accordance with the prescriptions of Sun Tzu in his masterpiece “The Art of War”, China seems to maintain the local strategic pressure on the “visible front” of South China Sea, gaining

in the same time terrain on the “invisible front” of cyberspace by the use of cyber-attacks against major Western Powers and most of all against US. This behavior provides important military information to China, but influences the way in which the thematic profile of its power is perceived by other countries.

**Figure 6. The relation between the perception of the China’s power and influence and the level of cyber-attacks from other countries**



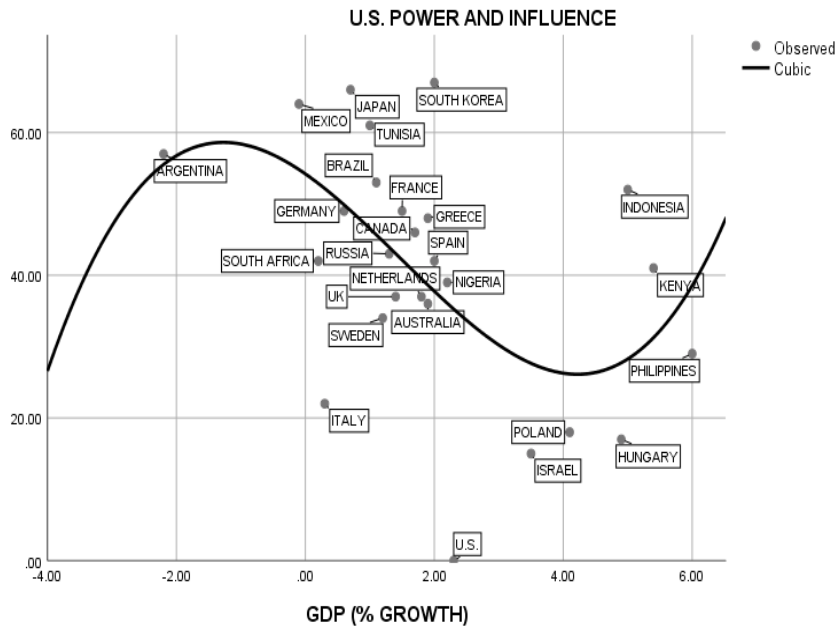
### 5. Economic growth, democracy and the perception of the power in the contemporary world

The first part of the article underlines the structure of the power at the beginning of the XXIst century. Moreover, we discuss in terms of subjective power which depends on the citizens’ ability to conceptualize the political proximity. In this respect we have to note that in 26 countries from our sample respondents perceived a bipolar flexible system of the power in international arena based on US, China and Russia Federation. However they had associated the dynamics of the global economy with the potential power of the US and the modern forms of the terrorism (cyber-attacks) with the emergence of the China’s power and influence. Starting from these premises we intent to create a comprehensive framework for understanding how political perception depends on the national economic condition and the political regime.

Regarding the relation between economic development measured by GDP growth (%) and the perception of the political power, we estimate a middle negative association in the case of the US. Countries with emergent economies are more predisposed to perceive at low or middle level the power and influence of the US in the international system. At the statistical level, we can estimate a middle negative correlation with  $R= -0.437$ ,  $p=0.02$ . In figure no.7 are displayed the values of the GDP growth and perception of the power in 26 nations from our sample. We can observe that emergent economies are more predisposed to diminish the impact and importance of the US in the sphere of the global economy. If we create the nexus with the previous section, where US is perceived as power in economic terms, we can observe a kind of erosion of the US perception as dominant actor in the international system. Scholars have discussed about the end of the US domination and have identified

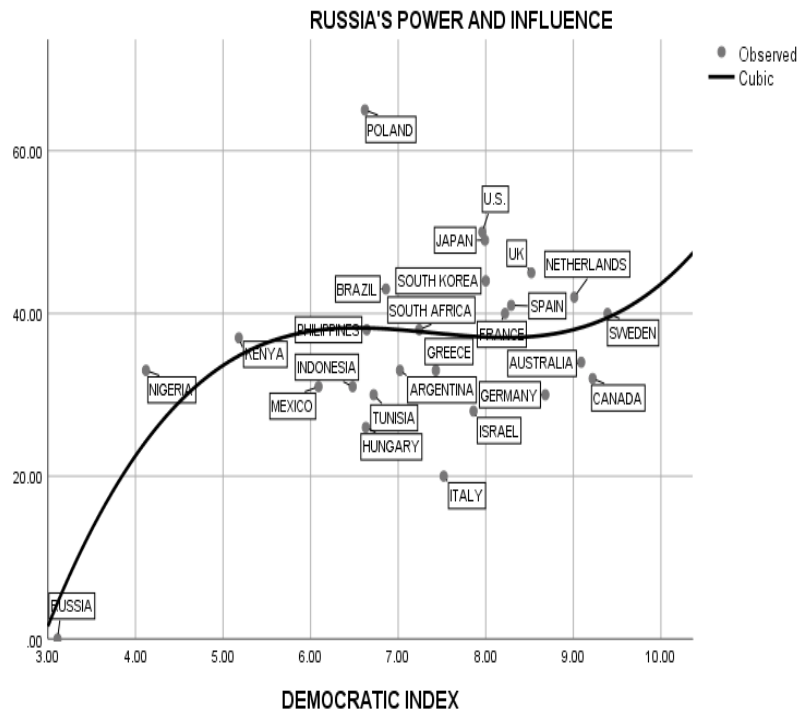
several sources which are involved in the erosion of the American power. Thus, internal problems, partisan system, foreign policy and social vulnerabilities are several explanations for “the end of the American century” [25].

**Figure 7. The relation between the perception of the US power and influence and the level of GDP growth**



Another important variable which could be implied in the sphere of the political perception and sophistication is represented by the regime type. Democratic regimes are more linked to accurate political cognition than authoritarian order. In the second case, in the field of political psychology we can identify cognitive bias and political stereotypes. Starting from this perspective we are interested to test the relationship between democratic index and the perception of the power and influence related to US, Russia and China. Political culture and cultural heritage shapes different forms of democratic regimes. Economic development associated with participative political culture generates an open perspective regarding politics and society [26, 27, 28]. Democratic index has the mean of the values 7.30, with confidence level for  $p=0.05$  [6.47; 8.13], fact which reflects the image of the flawed democracy. With several exceptions our statistical sample is based on flawed democracies and hybrid political regimes from Asia and Europe. We intent to underline the fact that flawed democracies are more predisposed to perceive Russia and China as the main powerfully actors of the contemporary international environment. At the empirical level we could partially confirm this premise. In this meaning, statistical associations demonstrate a middle Pearson correlation between the perception of Russia’s power and influence and democratic index ( $r = 0.429$ ,  $p = 0.02$ ). South Korea, Japan, US and UK have a middle perception of the Russia’s influence in the international system with 40-45% of the respondents. High values of the Russia’s power and influence are registered in Poland (>60% of the respondents). This fact could be explained by both geographical position and historical experiences with the former Soviet Union.

**Figure 8. The relation between the perception of the Russia’s power and influence and the level of Democratic Index**



## 6. Conclusions

The key-concept in political psychology is represented by the social and political cognition. As matter of cognition, the perception of the social and political phenomena is the first step in citizens’ ability of understanding and explaining the political world. This study emphasizes the role played by the cognitive approach in the perception of the dynamics of the power in international environment. In this respect, the study demonstrates that citizens from 26 national states, which represent the statistical sample, perceived the international arena in terms of a flexible bipolar system based on US, China and Russian Federation.

Although US tend to conserve the position of world economic and political leader, empirical findings associated with other theoretical approaches suggest the erosion of the US power and influence. Probably, the beginning of the new century could be characterized by the “end of American era”. Moreover, US power and influence is related with the conditions of the global economy. Regarding the main threats of the contemporary world, respondents suggest that terrorism and cyber-attacks could be the main challenges of the new century. Empirical results suggest a middle linear association between the China’s power and influence and the increasing rates of cyber-attacks from other countries. For emergent economic countries, characterized by an increasing rate of GDP, US is perceived in terms of low or middle international power. Emergent economies are more interested to develop their proper position in international arena and to diminish the role played by the former “economic hegemon” US. Regarding the influence of the democratic regimes, we should appreciate the fact that flawed democracies are more predisposed to consider that Russian Federation could be a major threat in the dynamics of the international relations. Beyond these empirical results, this article describes a new semiotics of the international relations, with discrete changes and recalibrations of the real or perceived political power.

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