



OCTOBER 2017

What makes a country powerful?

Are the Netherlands more powerful than Italy or Spain and are Sweden and Switzerland more powerful than the Netherlands?¹

Yes, according to the power rankings of respectively *International Strategic Analysis* (ISA) and *U.S. News & World Report*.

The *2017 ISA Country Power Rankings* published by ISA, an international research and consulting firm headquartered in Luxembourg², are based on an analysis of seven categories of power: economy, demography, military, environmental and natural resources, politics, culture and technology. *U.S. News & World Report*³ uses another set of criteria for its *best countries/power rankings*: leadership, economic influence, political influence, strong international alliances and strong military alliances.

Probably as a result of the diverse approaches, the two lists are remarkably different. The United Arab Emirates, for

example, are number 10 on the US News list but do not appear on the ISA list, and Canada, Australia and India are 3, 5 and 6 on the ISA list but only 12, 16 and 17 on the list of US News.

How seriously should we take these rankings? Not too seriously, if only because they are not always built on thorough knowledge of the countries. US News states, for example, that the “Kingdom of the Netherlands emerged in 1815 after years of Spanish and later French occupation”, ignoring that the Dutch Kingdom was preceded by the Dutch Republic, an independent and relatively powerful state from 1648 to 1795. Besides that, without an agreed definition of power, any ranking of countries according to their power will remain arbitrary. Should we, like ISA, consider a country powerful because of its large natural resources or should we rather look at its actual influence abroad, as U.S. News & World Report does?

However, it would be unwise to dismiss the efforts to rank the relative power of countries offhand. Even when we disagree about the definition of power, every diplomat will agree that power, including perceived power, plays a crucial role in international relations. It therefore makes sense to consider why some countries are considered to be more powerful than others.

1 An earlier and shorter version of this column under the title *Which countries are powerful* appeared in *Diplomat Magazine* (August 2017). I gratefully made use of some suggestions of Rem Korteweg. However, I bear all responsibility for the end result.

2 <http://www.isa-world.com/reports-forecasts/the-2017-isa-country-power-rankings/>

3 <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/power-rankings>

2017 ISA Country Power Rankings	2017 Power Rankings according to U.S. News	2015 GDP according to the United Nations	2017 Military Strength Ranking
1. USA	1. USA	1. USA	1. USA
2. China	2. Russia	2. China	2. Russia
3. Canada	3. China	3. Japan	3. China
4. Russia	4. UK	4. Germany	4. India
5. Australia	5. Germany	5. UK	5. France
6. India	6. France	6. France	6. UK
7. Japan	7. Japan	7. India	7. Japan
8. Germany	8. Israel	8. Italy	8. Turkey
9. UK	9. S. Arabia	9. Brazil	9. Germany
10. France	10. UA Emirates	10. Canada	10. Egypt
11. Brazil	11. S. Korea	11. S. Korea	11. Italy
12. South Korea	12. Canada	12. Russia	12. South Korea
13. Saudi Arabia	13. Turkey	13. Australia	13. Pakistan
14. Netherlands	14. Iran	14. Spain	14. Indonesia
15. Spain	15. Switzerland	15. Mexico	15. Israel
16. Italy	16. India	16. Indonesia	16. Vietnam
17. Mexico	17. Australia	17. Netherlands	17. Brazil
18. Switzerland	18. Italy	18. Turkey	18. Taiwan
19. Poland	19. Sweden	19. Switzerland	26. Canada
20. Indonesia	20. Pakistan	20. S. Arabia	27. Spain
21. Israel	21. Netherlands	21. Sweden	29. Sweden
22. Turkey	22. Spain	22. Nigeria	37. Switzerland
23. Argentina	23. Qatar	23. Poland	38. Netherlands

ISA is right to point to the connection between the GDP, the size and the number of inhabitants of a country and its power. Nobody will be surprised that the United States therefore tops both lists. However, such resources do not automatically translate into actual influence and that argues for the criteria used by U.S. News & World Report.

At the top of this page both lists are placed alongside the rankings according to Gross Domestic Product and according to military strength. It is worthwhile to have a close look at the differences between those lists. Of course, there is a close correlation between the political power of a country on the one hand and its GDP and its military power on the other hand, but the differences are very interesting.

The weakest link is between the political power of a country and its military forces. Egypt, for example, might be in the top ten of military powers, but its political influence (45 in the U.S. News list) is considered to be much lower than that of Canada (12), although Canada's military force is considered to be much weaker (26). The same applies to the skewed connection between the military power of Spain (27),

Sweden (29), Switzerland (37) and the Netherlands (38) and their political power (resp. 22, 19, 15 and 21 in the U.S. News list).

A concrete illustration of the influence of a country is its ability to obtain visa-freedom for its citizens. Visa-free travel is handy for tourists and, more importantly, can be crucial for international trade and investment. It will therefore not come as a big surprise that according to the *Global Passport Power Rank 2017*⁴, Germany and Singapore top the list (their inhabitants can visit 158 countries without a visa), followed closely by Sweden and South Korea, whose citizens can visit 157 countries visa-free. However, Italy and Spain (156) and Switzerland and the Netherlands (155) are not far behind.

It might be worthwhile for the Dutch to consider seriously why US News believes that Switzerland and Sweden are more powerful than the Netherlands, although both countries have less inhabitants and a smaller GDP.

4 <https://www.passportindex.org/byRank.php>

Switzerland provided a good example of its 'power' during its chairmanship of the OSCE in 2014. Hopefully, historians will describe in detail how Switzerland managed to fulfil its chairmanship so well, in particular when the crisis in Ukraine broke out. The fact that Didier Burkhalter simultaneously fulfilled the functions of minister of Foreign Affairs and of President of Switzerland might have helped to make his OSCE chairmanship a responsibility of the whole Swiss government. Would the Netherlands be able to do the same? Would a Dutch chairmanship of the OSCE be supported by the whole government? Or would the domestic ministries not care about a mediocre Dutch chairmanship?

Sweden showed its power last year when it easily won a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for two years, while Italy and the Netherlands had to do with one year each. Why is it that apparently many countries have more confidence in Sweden than in the Netherlands?

Could it be that their neutrality forced Switzerland and Sweden to develop their own foreign policy strategies and forced them to make the necessary funds available for implementing them, whereas the security provided by NATO seduced the Dutch government into neglecting strategic thinking and into rash reductions of the budgets for diplomacy, defence and development?

About the Clingendael Institute

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