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CHAPTER I

What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?

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The balance of power is one of the oldest and most fundamental concepts in the study of international relations. David Hume regarded the balance of power as a scientific law, and Glenn Snyder called the balance of power “the central theoretical concept in international relations.” Historians talk about the “golden age” of the balance of power in the 18th or 19th centuries, but they have also applied the concept to the Renaissance and to ancient civilizations in China and Greece. Hans Morgenthau, echoing Hume, referred to the balance of power as an “iron law of politics,” while others, such as Henry Kissinger, treated the balance of power as more of an art than a science, practiced more skillfully by some political leaders than by others.¹

Although the idea of the balance of power lost favor with the rise of idealism after World War I, it regained a prominent position with the turn to realist international theory after World War II. The writings of Morgenthau, Edward Gulick, Inis Claude, and Ludwig Dehio were particularly important, as was Kenneth Waltz’s development of structural realism, which was intended to put realist theory on a more sound social science footing.²

While the balance of power concept is one of the most prominent ideas in the theory and practice of international relations, it also is one of the most ambiguous and intractable ones. While some theorists use the concept to describe the actual distribution of power in the international system, others use it to refer to an ideal distribution of power or a particular kind of system, and still others see balance of power as a state strategy rather than as an international outcome. Many treat balance of power as a theory of international politics, yet theorists do not agree on the key assumptions or propositions of the theory or even what the theory purports to explain. Some say a balance of power helps maintain the peace; others say it contributes to the onset of war; still others claim that the theory makes no determinant predictions

about war and peace at all. A scholar may use the balance of power concept to mean several different things, even in a single article or book, usually without being explicit about exactly what is meant in any particular context. The varied ways in which the term *balance of power* has been used led Richard Cobden to call it “a chimera—an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing.”³

One manifestation of the ambiguity of balance of power theory is its application to the contemporary world. Despite the historically unprecedented power of the United States at the opening of the 21st century, the other leading states in the international system have not “balanced” against the United States either through the formation of defensive alliances or through a massive buildup of their own military strength. For many theorists, this behavior is a puzzle. Fareed Zakaria asks, “Why is no one ganging up against the United States?” John Ikenberry asks why, despite the unprecedented concentration of American power, “other great powers have not yet responded in a way anticipated by balance-of-power theory.”⁴

Characterizing the absence of balancing against the United States as a puzzle constitutes an erroneous interpretation of balance of power theory. Few balance of power theorists, at least in the tradition of Western international theory that includes Morgenthau, Claude, Gulick, and Dehio, would predict balancing against the United States, at least given current magnitudes of American strength and current U.S. behavior. To understand this view, we must take a long step back and outline the essential features of balance of power theory. In doing this, the chapter clarifies its key concepts, resolves many of its ambiguities, and specifies its primary propositions. It then returns to the puzzle of the absence of balancing against American primacy.

Summary of Balance of Power Theory

While some theorists use the balance of power concept to refer to the actual distribution of power in the system, that usage is confusing because it might reflect an equal balance, a favorable balance, an unfavorable balance, or any other distribution of power.⁵ If the focus is on the relative distribution of power in the system, it is better to use the term distribution of power. The concept of a balance of power system is also problematic, particularly when

theorists couple it with a discussion of the “goals” of the system, such as maintaining the peace or the independence of the states in the system. This formulation confuses systems as structures with the behavior of units within that structure, and it confounds state preferences with international outcomes that are the joint product of the behavior of two or more actors. Units have goals, but systems do not. In addition, the common tendency to treat the balance of power as a system implies that systems are real and have some objective existence. It is better to think of systems as analytical constructions that theorists develop and use to describe and explain reality. Such analytical constructions are what we mean by *theory*. I treat the balance of power as a theory—one that purports to explain both the foreign policy behaviors of states and the resulting patterns of international outcomes.⁶

There is no single balance of power theory, but instead a variety of balance of power theories. Most of these theories are really sets of discrete hypotheses that have yet to be integrated into a well-developed theory.⁷ All versions of balance of power theory begin with the hard-core assumptions of realist theory: the system is anarchic, the key actors are territorial states, their goals are the maximization of power or security, and they act rationally to promote those goals.⁸ Scholars then add additional assumptions and provide different nominal and operational definitions of key concepts, and this results in different and sometimes contradictory propositions. For example, while classical balance of power theorists such as Morgenthau argue that multipolar systems are more stable than bipolar systems, Waltz makes the opposite argument.

Some balance of power theorists have suggested that the purpose or function of a balance of power system is to maintain the peace.⁹ The problem with this conception, besides attributing goals or purposes to a system, is that it contradicts the argument of most balance of power theorists that states systematically rank some goals higher than peace, including maintaining their independence, avoiding hegemony, or perhaps preserving the general status quo.¹⁰ Given these higher-order goals, states conceive of war as an acceptable instrument to advance their interests, if only as a last resort. For this reason we cannot make the general statement that balance of power systems or balance of power strategies promote peace, though it is conceivable that a particular version of balance of power theory might specify the conditions (including particular distributions of power) under which war or peace is most likely to occur.¹¹

Balance of power theorists disagree over the relative importance of various state goals, but states' primary goals are interrelated and can be conceived as a nested hierarchy of instrumental goals. The primary aim of all states is their own survival, defined in terms of some combination of territorial integrity and autonomy. States also have secondary security goals, and these are best seen as instrumental for the higher-order aim of survival. The most important goal is the avoidance of hegemony, a situation in which one state amasses so much power that it is able to dominate the rest of the states in the system, which would put an end to the multistate system. Thus Polybius wrote that "we should never contribute to the attainment by one state of a power so preponderant, that none dare dispute with it even for their acknowledged rights." Similarly, Vattel wrote, "The balance of power . . . [is] an arrangement of affairs so that no State shall be in a position to have absolute mastery and dominate over others."¹² This is the single most important theme in the balance of power literature.

Several further goals are seen as instrumental to preventing hegemony. One is to maintain the independence of other states in the system, or at least the independence of the other great powers; another is to maintain an approximately equal distribution of power in the system, defined in terms of some combination of individual state capabilities and the aggregation of state capabilities in coalitions.¹³ Each of these instrumental goals facilitates the formation of balancing coalitions against potential hegemony. Peace may also be a goal, both to promote state autonomy and security and to attain nonsecurity goals, but in balance of power theory the goal of peace is conditional on the avoidance of hegemony and perhaps the achievement of other instrumental goals.

The argument that the highest goal of states, besides securing their own survival and autonomy, is to prevent hegemony does not imply that states intentionally limit their own power for the sake of the system. Rather, state strategies to maintain a balance or equilibrium of power are not ends in themselves but means to maximize their own security. While some realists—particularly "defensive realists"—argue that states often limit their pursuit of power to maximize their security, others argue that even if all states aimed to maximize their power, the result would still be a balance or equilibrium in the system as a whole. In other words, the maintenance of the "system" is the unintended consequence of the actions of many states as each attempts to maximize its own interests under existing constraints.

This view is reflected in Claude's notion of an "automatic" balance of power system, in Waltz's formalization of neorealist theory, and in other conceptions of balance of power as a "law" of behavior. It is modeled after the ideas of Adam Smith and classical economics. Thus Morton Kaplan writes that "like Adam Smith's 'unseen hand' of competition, the international system is policed informally by self-interest," and Arnold Wolfers notes that "though no state is interested in a mere balance of power, the efforts of all states to maximize power may lead to equilibrium." This leads A. J. P. Taylor to conclude that "only those who rejected *laissez faire* rejected the Balance of Power."¹⁴

Others disagree with this view of an automatically functioning balance of power system and offer different conceptions. Claude identifies a "manually operated" balance of power system, in which balancing is not automatic but instead the result of "constant vigilance" and conscious and deliberate strategic choices by individual states, and a "semiautomatic" system, in which a conscious and vigilant balancing strategy is pursued by one state in particular, often known as the "balancer" or "holder of the balance." Historically this role is associated with Britain in the European system, and there is much evidence to suggest that British policymakers have self-consciously defined their role in this manner. In his famous memorandum of 1907, Sir Eyre Crowe noted Britain's historic role of "throwing her weight now in this scale and now in that, but ever on the side opposed to the political dictatorship of the strongest single State or group at a given time." Churchill echoed those words: "For four hundred years the foreign policy of England has been to oppose the strongest, most aggressive, most dominating power on the Continent."¹⁵

Though scholars often refer to Claude's distinction among automatic, semiautomatic, and manual balancing systems, that distinction is in fact rather blurred. The idea of states operating automatically, without "constant vigilance" and deliberate policy choice is not really plausible. Claude himself notes that "most writers who indulge in the language of automatism would, in fact, agree that equilibrium within a balance of power system is 'a diplomatic contrivance.'¹⁶

I would reconceptualize the distinction between these different balancing systems in the following way. In the *automatic* system, all states make choices, but those choices are basically determined by the distribution of power, so state foreign policy strategies carry little independent causal weight

on international outcomes. In the semiautomatic conception, only the foreign policy strategies of the “balancer” have a causal impact on outcomes, while in the manual conception the strategies of all states, or at least of all of the great powers, determine the degree of equilibrium in the system.

Most of these conceptions of the balance of power fall within a realist theory that strictly defines balance of power in terms of power and interest. In some conceptions of the balance of power, even classical ones, one can find references to the importance of the necessary normative underpinnings of balance of power systems. Morgenthau, for example, emphasized the importance of a “moral consensus” as to the legitimacy of the system, even during the “golden age” of the balance of power. The central role of norms of restraint and of policymakers’ conceptions of their own self-interest in terms of the interests of the broader community is even more explicit, more systematic, and more central in Paul Schroeder’s work on the Concert of Europe and other international systems.¹⁷

Let me return to the basic assumption of balance of power theory—that states act rationally to maximize their security or power in anarchic systems without a higher authority to regulate disputes. Some interpreters of balance of power theory include a number of additional assumptions: the existence of four or five great powers, an equilibrium of military power in the system, a balancer, a “flexible” alliance system, the existence of an “open colonial frontier,” a consensus regarding the legitimacy of the system, the limited aims of states, and other considerations.¹⁸

The problem with injecting additional assumptions into the theoretical mix is that it deprives balance of power theories of much of their explanatory power by restricting their applicability to a very narrow set of theoretical conditions and, therefore, to a small number of specific historical eras. Within such systems, several key propositions of the theory would become nearly tautological. If, for example, the system is characterized by states with limited aims and consensus regarding the legitimacy of the system, then it will not be particularly surprising if there are few major wars to overthrow the system and establish one state’s hegemony. These “assumptions” are better conceptualized as variables that form the basis of hypotheses that can then be tested against the evidence. Those who introduce these additional assumptions are basically proposing a set of hypotheses about the optimal conditions for the effective functioning of the system.

Given the primacy of avoiding hegemony in the hierarchy of state goals,

balance of power theorists suggest a number of strategies that states can adopt. One important distinction they make is between *external balancing* and *internal balancing*. External balancing is primarily the formation of alliances as blocking coalitions against a prospective aggressor, but it also includes territorial compensations or partitions for the purposes of redistributing the sources of power and, if necessary, threats of force, intervention, and even war. Internal balancing is an internal buildup of military capabilities and the economic and industrial foundations of military strength. Although there have been few attempts to specify the precise conditions under which each of these means is used and in what combination, it is clear that alliances play a central role in most versions of balance of power theory.¹⁹

Predictions of Balance of Power Theory

Balance of power theorists disagree about many things, but there are two things they almost all agree on, one involving international outcomes and the other involving state strategies: sustained hegemonies rarely if ever arise in multistate systems, and a balancing coalition will form against any state that threatens to gain a position of hegemony that would enable it to impose its will on other states.

These hypotheses focus on the threat of hegemony over the system, not other kinds of threats, and consequently are unaffected by debates among balance of power theorists as to whether states balance against the strongest power in the system (Waltz and Mearsheimer) or against the greatest threats to their interests (Walt), which are defined by intentions as well as capabilities.²⁰ When the issue is hegemony, the Waltz-Walt debate vanishes, because hegemony over the system almost always constitutes the greatest threat to the interests of other states, or at least to the other great powers, and only the strongest power in the system can threaten to impose hegemony. If the question is whether states balance against concentrations of power or threats other than hegemony, however, intentions take on a greater role in explaining balancing behavior.

It is also important to note that Waltz and a few other structuralists argue that neorealist theory predicts only outcomes, not state strategies or foreign policies, though admittedly Waltz is not always consistent on this point.

Waltz predicts that balances of power (defined as non-hegemonic outcomes) occur naturally, but he leaves open the question of *how* they occur. For Waltz, outcomes of balanced power do not necessarily require deliberate balancing behavior by states.

It is certainly true that balanced outcomes and balancing strategies are analytically distinct, and that it is possible in principle to have one without the other. States might balance, but such balancing might not be sufficient to maintain a balanced outcome and prevent hegemony. It is also possible that no state is interested in dominating the system and that no state feels threatened, which would lead to a balanced outcome without balancing behavior.

Waltz is free to be neutral on the question of balancing strategies, but it then becomes incumbent on him to specify the alternative causal mechanisms through which non-hegemonic outcomes repeatedly (or always) arise. A theory that successfully predicts balanced outcomes and specifies the mechanisms leading to such outcomes is, all things being equal, superior to a theory that does the former but not the latter, because a theory of both outcomes and mechanisms has greater empirical content and explains more variation in the empirical world. For these reasons, nearly all balance of power realists focus on both balanced outcomes and the balancing strategies designed to achieve them, and I do the same.

One can identify, in balance of power theory, several distinct causal paths that might lead to the absence of hegemony in the system, and thus explain why the balancing mechanism almost always works to avoid hegemony. Three are particularly salient: (1) potential hegemonics anticipate that expansionist behavior would lead to the formation of a military coalition against them and refrain from aggression for that reason; (2) they begin to expand or aggressively build up their armaments but pull back after being confronted by a balancing coalition or unwinnable arms race; or (3) they pursue expansionist policies and are defeated in war by a blocking coalition.²¹

It is important to note that the first two paths result in peace but the third does not. This is why the outbreak of war, even major war, does not necessarily constitute evidence against balance of power theory or the balancing hypothesis. Balancing hypotheses predict either state strategies of balancing or balanced outcomes. They do not predict peace or war.²²

Another important point is that although balancing is observed in the second and third paths but not in the first (because in the first path the

potential hegemon does nothing to trigger balancing), balancing plays an important causal role in all three causal paths. That is, unobserved balancing is just as important as observed balancing in terms of its causal impact on the outcome of non-hegemony.

A problem in earlier studies of balancing is that scholars have tended to focus on observed balancing rather than on unobserved balancing. Consequently, they failed to recognize the causal importance of balancing in the first path to non-hegemonic outcomes. They analyzed the wars that have occurred and asked whether states balanced against the aggressor, and they neglected cases where wars did not occur, perhaps because potential hegemonics anticipated balancing. The result is a *selection bias* in the empirical examination of balancing and an *underestimation* of the causal impact of balancing.²³

Nearly all balance of power theorists, despite their many disagreements, would accept the idea that hegemonies do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system. States with expansionist ambitions either are deterred by the anticipation of balancing coalitions or, if deterrence fails, are defeated in war by the emergence of a blocking coalition. Yet the United States, which would seem to qualify as a hegemon or potential hegemon by almost any definition,²⁴ has not faced a balancing coalition, at least not in the form of a defensive (or offensive) alliance of other major states, and I have argued that this absence of balancing is not a violation of balance of power theory. Let me now try to explain this apparent contradiction in my argument and demonstrate that the common characterization of the absence of anti-American balancing as a puzzle for balance of power theory represents a misleading interpretation of that theory.

The Scope Conditions of the Theory

The basic problem with nearly all interpretations of balance of power theory is that the theory and its central propositions about balanced outcomes and balancing strategies are presented as universals, applicable in principle to any international system.²⁵ But few social science theories are universally valid, nearly all have scope conditions that specify the domain of the theory, and balance of power theory is no exception. No system-level theory of inter-

national politics is complete without a specification of the system under consideration, the basis of power in the system, and the key actors in the system.²⁶ The scope conditions for balance of power theory are generally implicit rather than explicit. Balance of power theory—at least as developed and modified in a long tradition of Western international theory and passed along by Morgenthau, Gulick, Claude, and others—contains implicit assumptions that serve as scope conditions for the theory: the system is Europe, the basis of power in that system is land-based military power, and the key actors are the European great powers.

Thus, the “best case” for balance of power theory is Europe, or at least Europe before 1945, at which point the European system ceased to be the dominant subsystem in world politics. Patterns of balancing against potential European hegemonies, from Philip II to Napoleon to Hitler, cannot necessarily be generalized to the contemporary period defined by American dominance in military, commercial, and financial power in the global system. Balancing against the United States might occur, but any such predictions cannot be based on the European experience or on a straightforward extrapolation of a balance of power theory that is derived from that experience.²⁷

THE GREAT POWER BIAS IN BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

While balance of power theorists speak very loosely about “states” balancing, nearly all treatments of balance of power theory strongly imply that the great powers do most of the balancing. Small and medium states as well as great powers prefer that the power of an aspiring hegemon be limited, but only the great powers have the military capacity to make a difference. Weaker states know that they can have only a marginal impact on outcomes, and given their vulnerability and short-term time horizons, they will sometimes balance and sometimes bandwagon, depending on the context.

The great-power bias in balance of power theory and in the balancing proposition in particular is pervasive in the literature, and one that most traditional realist theories and many diplomatic histories share. Claude argues that “balance of power theory is concerned mainly with the rivalries and clashes of great powers.” Waltz explicitly states that any theory of international politics must be based on the great powers because the great powers define the context for others as well as for themselves, and Mearsheimer’s

great-power focus is clear in his recent book on *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. As for diplomatic history, the majority of Western diplomatic historians have followed Leopold Von Ranke in conceiving European history as the history of great-power relations. A. J. P. Taylor, for example, argues that “the relations of the great powers have determined the history of Europe.” Finally, formal theorists create stylized balance of power models consisting of just a handful of actors, representing the great powers.²⁸

There are other manifestations of the great-power bias in balance of power theory. The very notion of equilibrium in the system refers to an equilibrium among the great powers, not among states in general. While balance of power theorists emphasize the importance of maintaining “independent states” as an important purpose of a balance of power system, what they mean is that the great powers attempt to preserve the independence and integrity of other great powers (and not of weaker states) because those great powers might be needed in a balancing coalition against hegemonic threats. The number of great powers in the system is, after all, a key independent variable in many formulations of the theory. One of Kaplan’s “rules” for a balance of power system is to “stop fighting rather than eliminate an essential national actor,” which leaves little doubt about the identity of the “essential actors.” The concern for the independence of the great powers but not others is also clear in the argument advanced by Gulick and others that another means of maintaining the balance of power is partitioning weak states.²⁹ Finally, in debates over the relative stability of bipolar and multipolar systems, theorists usually define stability as the absence of war between the great powers, not the absence of war in general.³⁰

THE EUROCENTRIC BIAS IN BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

Some scholars explicitly acknowledge the European focus of the Western literature on the balance of power. Several book titles reflect this: Gulick’s *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power* and Dehio’s *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle*. Sheehan also recognizes the Eurocentric nature of the theory:

The balance of power concept for some 200 years after its confirmation as the basis of the European state system remained a purely European phenomenon. Its logic was not applied beyond the boundaries of the European continent. This may have been because the strongest proponent of the

theory, Britain, had the most to lose from such a development. It may also have been related to the fact that the European balance of power idea was, in terms of its origins, part of a peculiarly European solution to the problems afflicting the European imagination.³¹

The Eurocentric bias in balance of power theory is not surprising given that most of the literature is written by Europeans, especially by the British and subsequently by Americans (whose security outlook was primarily Eurocentric until the late 20th century). The illustrative evidence for theories of balance of power draws on the modern European great-power system beginning with the Treaty of Westphalia, with some applications to the Italian city-state system and early modern Europe, but with a disproportionate focus on the “golden age” of the European balance of power in the 18th and 19th centuries. This Eurocentric bias in balance of power theory relates closely to its great-power bias—from the origins of the modern great-power system in the late 15th century until the end of the 19th century, all of the great powers in the system were European.

The Eurocentric bias manifests itself in numerous other ways in balance of power theory. The concept of a “balancer,” while generalizable in principle, is nearly always illustrated by Britain’s role in maintaining an equilibrium of power on the European continent, especially by its willingness to shift its weight to the side of the weaker coalition. The hypothesis that the stability of a balance of power system is enhanced by an open colonial frontier, which provides a “safety valve” for the dominant actors in the system to expand their power and influence without directly threatening each others’ vital interests in the core of the system, clearly reflects the experience of the European colonial powers (and provides a self-interested rationalization for European colonialism).³²

Most scholarship on the balance of power conceives of hegemony not in abstract terms but rather in terms of dominance over the European system, and illustrations of the formation of balancing coalitions in responses to threats of hegemony all come from the last five centuries of the European experience. Thus, balance of power theorists talk about balancing coalitions against the Habsburgs under Charles V in the early 16th century, Philip II at the end of the 16th century, and the combined strength of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire in the Thirty Years War; against France under Louis XIV and then Napoleon; and against Germany under Wilhelm and then Hitler. It is revealing that even Waltz, who frames his neorealist balance of

power theory in more universal terms, illustrates his arguments with examples of balancing against Charles I,³³ Louis XIV, Napoleon, Wilhelm II, and Hitler.³⁴

True, it is common to refer to Pax Britannica in the 19th century and to treat Britain as a hegemon or leader during much of that period, but that argument is associated with hegemonic stability theory, power transition theory, or leadership long cycle theory, not balance of power theory.³⁵ For balance of power theorists, the leading threats to hegemony over the system for the last five centuries have been posed by the states identified above, which have all been European continental powers focused primarily on the politics of the continent. For balance of power theorists, it was Germany, not Britain, who was the leading power in the system by the end of the 19th century, and it was against Germany, not Britain, that most of the other great powers aligned in the early 20th century.

This European continental focus of balance of power theory is closely related to another unstated assumption of the theory: the basis of power in the system, and thus the basis for hegemony in the system, is land-based military power in the form of large armies. It was the strength of the armies of Charles V, Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Wilhelm, and Hitler that constituted hegemonic threats and that triggered balancing coalitions over the last five centuries.

This conception of power in terms of land-based military power in nearly all applications of balance of power theory should be contrasted with hegemonic stability theory’s focus on financial and commercial strength, with power transition theory’s measurement of power in terms of gross national product, and leadership long cycle theory’s conception of power in terms of naval capability (at least until the 20th century) and dominance in leading economic sectors.

Consider the different treatments of the late 19th century. Hegemonic theories identify Britain as the leading power in the system based on its dominance in finance, trade, and naval power on a global scale, while balance of power theorists see Britain, even at the peak of its strength, as posing little direct threat to the continental great powers of Europe. Similarly, to the extent that the United States was hegemonic after World War II, it was because of American dominance in the world economy and its ability to project military power on a global scale. The strategic balance was one of parity with the Soviet Union by the mid-1960s.

From a balance of power perspective, it is not surprising that no blocking coalition formed against Britain at the peak of its global economic and naval strength in the 1870s, but one did form against Germany, the leading power on the continent, in the period leading up to World War I. Similar logic explains why no balancing coalition formed against the Netherlands in the 17th century despite its dominance in world trade, finance, and naval strength, but instead against Louis XIV and his massive armies. The same logic explains why no great-power balancing coalition formed against the United States, by far the leading power in the world in terms of economic strength and naval and air power in the late 1940s, but instead against the Soviet Union, the leading land power in Eurasia and primary military threat to the major states of Europe. From this perspective, it is not surprising that no balancing coalition has formed against the United States in the early 21st century, despite its unprecedented military strength.³⁶

Given that most of the great powers in the system have been European, at least until recently, there are several reasons why the threat posed by global powers is less than that posed by other continental powers. Global powers have fewer capabilities for imposing their will on major continental states, fewer incentives for doing so, and a greater range of strategies for increasing their influence by other means. Effective military power diminishes significantly over distance, especially over water. Large armies massing on borders, threatening to mass on borders, or simply having the potential to mass on borders threatens the territorial integrity of other states in a way that strong naval power or financial strength does not. Whereas contiguous states with large armies threaten their neighbors by virtue of their very existence, global hegemonies do not.

This argument is reinforced by evidence from the literature on territory and international conflict, which suggests that a disproportionately high number of wars involve territorially contiguous states, that unsettled territorial disputes are an important predictor of war, and that rivalries are significantly more likely to escalate to war if they involve territorial disputes. The absence of territorial contiguity removes both a direct path for conquest and a source of many of the disputes that escalate to war, and hence an important source of threat.³⁷

Global powers differ from continental states in their interests as well as their capabilities, and those interests lead to different strategies. The goals of increasing commercial, financial, and naval power on a global scale do not

require military or political control on the continent, which means they are less threatening to the major European states. Global powers may impose their will on smaller states and other actors, but generally through means other than overt military force. The “imperialism of free trade” was as potent as military force in establishing British dominance in far corners of the globe.³⁸ In any case, the role of small states is not directly relevant for testing balancing hypotheses or balance of power theories more generally.

Thus, global powers historically defined their interests on a global scale and had fewer incentives to expand their influence in Europe. They appeared less threatening to European great powers and were consequently less likely to trigger balancing coalitions. This does not imply that they had no stake in what happened on the European continent. Global powers often perceived that their overall interests would be seriously threatened if any single state achieved a hegemonic position in Europe, because such a position would provide the resources that would enable the continental state to mount a serious challenge to the dominance of the leading global power. Thus, the leading global power often played a central role in balancing coalitions against potential European hegemonies. It is not an accident that the global leader in economic and naval power historically played the role of the “balancer” in balance of power theory.

Britain, as the leading global economic and naval power, had the most to lose from the extension of the balance of power concept beyond Europe to include the balance of naval and economic power on a global scale. It is no coincidence that Britain was the strongest proponent of balance of power theory. It is also no surprise that much of the balance of power literature is British (and now American) or that Britain has long defined its interests in terms of pursuing a balance of power on the continent but a preponderance of naval and colonial power on a global scale. Much of the theory and practice of maintaining the balance of power in Europe helped preserve the relative security of the naval and economic strength of the global power.

The Vienna Settlement is often interpreted in terms of the balance of power, for instance, but the system emerging from Vienna constrained France and possibly Russia while doing nothing to limit British naval or colonial power. As Roger Bullen notes, “the concept of the balance of power was hardly ever used except by British governments. The continental powers certainly did not consciously seek to uphold it.” British leaders advocated a balance on land while preferring hegemony at sea, and the two are not

unrelated. As Quincy Wright argued, "Each statesman considers the balance of power good for others but not for himself. Each tries to get out of the system in order to 'hold the balance' and to establish a hegemony, perhaps eventually an empire, over all the others." Similarly, Nicholas Spykman argued, "The truth of the matter is that states are interested only in a balance which is in their favor. Not an equilibrium, but a generous margin is their objective . . . there is security only in being a little stronger. . . . The balance desired is the one which neutralizes other states, leaving the home state free to be the deciding force and the deciding voice."³⁹

Continental statesmen and scholars, on the other hand, were often quite skeptical about the idea of the balance of power and its use by the British. As one French writer pointed out, "[T]he English, while pretending to protect the balance on land which no one threatens, are entirely destroying the balance at sea which no one defends." Both German and French writers argued that the balance of power should apply to colonial and maritime power as well as to the territorial balance of power in Europe. Such arguments themselves contained an important rhetorical component because they helped to rationalize the repeated charges that their states' own efforts to acquire territories and influence beyond Europe were being blocked by Britain and rival global powers.⁴⁰

The fact that balance of power theory contains certain normative biases and a strong rhetorical component will lead some to conclude that a scientific evaluation of the validity of the theory is impossible, but that would be pessimistic in the extreme. All theories contain normative biases to one degree or another, and to conclude that this precludes scientific analysis would leave us unable to test any of our theories or historical interpretations. Instead, we must recognize, as Popper did, that the logic of confirmation is distinct from the logic of discovery, that it does not matter how we generate out theoretical ideas as long as we are as careful and scientific as possible in testing them against the evidence.⁴¹

Contemporary Implications

This reinterpretation of balance of power theory suggests that the tendency to treat the theory and its propositions as universal is misleading because it fails to account for the scope conditions inherent in a long tradition of

Western writing on the balance of power. The theory grew out of the experience of the European great-power system, where sustained land-based hegemonies did not form and where potential threats of hegemony generated great-power balancing coalitions. The Eurocentric origins and orientation of balance of power theory have a number of important implications for the contemporary world.

One implication is that the absence of a great-power balancing coalition against the United States is not the puzzle that some have claimed. Balancing coalitions did not generally form against leading maritime powers in earlier international systems, and given the U.S. status as the dominant maritime power in the contemporary global system, we should not necessarily expect anti-American balancing coalitions to form.⁴²

The logic of my argument does not imply that balancing coalitions never form against leading maritime or global leaders, only that the threshold for balancing is much higher. I can certainly imagine the United States behaving in such a way as to threaten the interests of other great powers and eventually provoking a balancing coalition, but we are currently far from that point, and the trigger would involve specific behavior that threatens other great powers. While the threat from continental hegemonies derives from who they are, the threat from global hegemonies derives from what they do.

Some will argue, however, that we are living in a new kind of system, that the United States is a new kind of hegemon, and that the old rules of international politics no longer apply. Among other things, the ability of the United States to project its naval and military power on a global scale dwarfs anything that Britain was able to do at the peak of its global dominance, which should lower the threshold for balancing compared to that for previous global leaders. This was also true in the period immediately after World War II, of course, and it is revealing that a great-power balancing coalition formed not against the United States but instead against the Soviet Union. Still, the 2003 American invasion of Iraq provides clear evidence that the United States has the capability of posing a far greater threat to the territorial integrity of other states than have maritime powers of the past.

This line of argument suggests that one important task for future research is to specify the types of American behavior that are likely to trigger a countervailing balancing coalition. Another task, given the importance of alternative forms of resistance that fall short of formal military alliances, is to theorize about a broader range of strategic reactions to the dominant state in a

unipolar global system.⁴³ My argument is that traditional balance of power theory, with its focus on land-based power in Europe or perhaps in other continental systems, provides little guidance here and that we need new theoretical categories and approaches. Among the new theoretical categories that are needed is one for the United States, which is neither a traditional continental power like Napoleonic France nor a traditional maritime power like Britain.

Similar logic applies to the generalization of balance of power theory to contemporary regional systems, including the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and elsewhere.⁴⁴ While these efforts constitute important contributions to the literature, my argument about the scope conditions of traditional balance of power theory implies that we need to be careful in applying a theory that is drawn from the experience of the great powers to regional systems in which some of the theory's key assumptions might not fully hold.

In particular, the assumption of anarchy—the absence of a higher authority and of any mechanism for enforcing agreements within the system—is not fully satisfied in regional systems. There are likely to be differences in the dynamics of power in autonomous systems like the pre-20th century European great-power system as compared to the dynamics of power in nonautonomous systems, such as regional systems that are often influenced by powerful external states. This does not mean that we cannot talk about balancing in regional systems, only that we cannot assume that traditional balance of power theory can be automatically applied in such systems. Here again, we need new theorizing, not only about balancing behavior in particular regions of the contemporary international system but also about the theoretical dynamics of power politics in any set of nested systems. Several of the other chapters in this volume have taken an important first step in that direction.

Notes

1. David Hume, "Of the Balance of Power," in Paul Seabury (ed.), *Balance of Power* (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965), 32–36; Glenn H. Snyder, "Balance of Power in the Missile Age," *Journal of International Affairs* 14 (1961): 21–24; Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1967); Henry A. Kissinger, *A World Restored: Metternich, Castlereagh and the Problems of Peace* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973).

2. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1955); Inis L. Claude Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962); Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1962); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979).

3. Richard Cobden, *The Political Writings of Richard Cobden* (London: Unwin, 1969; originally published 1903). On the ambiguities of balance of power theory, see Ernest B. Haas, "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?" *World Politics* 5 (1953): 442–77; Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Michael Sheehan, *Balance of Power: History and Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design," in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (eds.), *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2002), 128–53.

4. Fareed Zakaria, "America's New Balancing Act," *Newsweek*, August 6, 2001; G. John Ikenberry, "Introduction," in G. John Ikenberry (ed.), *America Unrivaled* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 3.

5. This section draws on Jack S. Levy, "The Causes of War: A Review of Theories and Evidence," in Philip E. Tetlock, Jo L. Husbands, Robert Jervis, Paul C. Stern, and Charles Tilly (eds.), *Behavior, Society, and Nuclear War*, vol. 1 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 228–43; Levy, "Balances and Balancing," 130–33.

6. Although some theorists treat balance of power theory as synonymous with realist theory, that is misleading. Realist international thought includes both *balance of power realism* and *hegemonic realism*. The latter posits that hegemony or hierarchy, not balance, is commonplace. It does not regard the avoidance of hegemony as a high-ranking state goal for which states are willing to fight, and it does not predict balancing against extreme concentrations of power. Consequently, the falsification of aspects of balance of power theory does not necessarily falsify realist theory. We should focus our theoretical and empirical efforts on falsifiable theories (such as balance of power) rather than on non-falsifiable paradigms (such as realism). On the distinction between hegemonic realism and balance of power realism, see Jack S. Levy, "War and Peace," in Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse, and Beth A. Simmons (eds.), *Handbook of International Relations* (London: Sage, 2002), 350–68.

7. The main exception is Waltz's neorealism, described in his *Theory of International Politics*, which presents an integrated theory.

8. For an alternative interpretation of balance of power theory, one that emphasizes its liberal foundations, see Deborah Boucoyannis, "Balance of Power: The International Wanderings of a Liberal Idea," unpublished paper, Harvard University, 2003.

9. Claude, *Power and International Relations*, 55; Arnold Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1962), chap. 8.

10. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1968), chap. 14; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, R. Harrison Wagner, "Peace, War, and the Balance of Power," *American Political Science Review* 88 (September 1994): 593–607; Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 131; Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3rd ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988), 112; Sheehan, *Balance of Power*, Kissinger, *A World Restored*.

11. It is true that the *power parity hypothesis* predicts that an equality of power between two states is likely to lead to peace, and that the *power preponderance hypothesis* predicts the opposite (with most of the evidence supporting the latter). But these are dyadic-level hypotheses that assume that alliances play no role, while balance of power theory is a systemic-level theory in which alliances are central and in which the outcome of any particular dyadic-level balance of power between two states is theoretically indeterminate. On power parity, see Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke (eds.), *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

12. Polybius, *The Histories*, vol. 1, trans. W. R. Paton (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960); Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, trans. Charles Fenwick (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1916; originally published 1758).

13. Note that maintaining the independence of one's own state is an irreducible national value, whereas maintaining the independence of other great powers is a means to that end, not an end in itself. Balance of power theorists often blur this distinction.

14. Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 119; Wolfers, *Discord and Collaboration*, 83; Morton A. Kaplan, "Balance of Power, Bipolarity, and Other Models of International Systems," in James N. Rosenau (ed.), *International Politics and Foreign Policy* (New York: Free Press, 1961), 346; A. J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for Mastery in Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), xx. Also on automatic and manual conceptions of balance of power, see Colin Elman, "Introduction: Appraising Balance of Power Theory," in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, 1–22.

15. Crowe cited in Claude, *Power and International Relations*, 47; Winston S. Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (New York: Bantam, 1948), 207.

16. Claude, *Power and International Relations*, 49.

17. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 208–15; Paul W. Schroeder, "The Nineteenth-Century System: Balance of Power or Political Equilibrium?" *Review of International Studies* 15 (April 1989): 135–53.

18. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, chap. 14; Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, chap. 1; Stanley Hoffmann, "Balance of Power," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 506–10; Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2nd ed., rev. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), chap. 20.

19. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 168; Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, chap. 3.

20. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Stephen M. Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

21. There is in principle a fourth path to non-hegemonic outcomes: no state has an interest in achieving a dominant position in the system, even if it were unconstrained by the military power of others or by the fear of triggering a counter-hegemonic coalition. Few balance of power realists would accept such a possibility, however, and many liberals would agree with them. Immanuel Kant, for example, who is often identified as one of the founders of liberal international theory, argued that "it is the desire of every state, or of its ruler, to arrive at a condition of perpetual peace by conquering the whole world, if that were possible." Cited in Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, 2nd ed., eds. Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbraad (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1986), 144.

22. Jack S. Levy, "The Theoretical Foundations of Paul W. Schroeder's International System," *International History Review* 16 (November 1994): 715–44.

23. This selection bias is evident in many of the articles in the symposium on balancing published in the *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997); reprinted in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, part 1. The need to look at cases of unobserved balancing will be clear to anyone familiar with Sherlock Holmes' discussion of the importance of the dog that did not bark. "Negative" outcomes can be as important as "positive" outcomes.

24. U.S. military spending is as large as that of the next fourteen countries combined; the U.S. economy is as large as the next three countries combined; and U.S. spending on research and development, which is one indicator of future military power, is 80 percent of the world's total. See Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (July/August 2002): 20–33; Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*, 1–2; Ikenberry, "Strategic Reactions to American Global Predominance: Great Power Politics in an Age of Unipolarity," unpublished manuscript, Georgetown University, 2002.

25. This section builds on Levy, "Balances and Balancing."

26. As I have argued in two earlier studies, a serious flaw in the literatures on polarity and war and on hegemonic war is their failure to identify the system under consideration and the basis of power in that system. Jack S. Levy, "Theories of General War," *World Politics* 37 (April 1985): 344–74; Jack S. Levy, "The Polarity of the System and International Stability: An Empirical Analysis," in Alan Ned Sabrosky (ed.), *Polarity and War: The Changing Structure of International Conflict* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1985), 41–66.

27. For evidence of systematic (but not deterministic) patterns of balancing against potential European hegemonies, but the absence of such patterns against maritime hegemonies, see Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Hegemonic Threats and Great Power Balancing in Europe, 1495–2000," paper presented at

the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, Mass., August 29–September 1, 2002; and Levy and Thompson, “Balancing at Sea: Do States Coalesce Against Leading Maritime Powers?” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Penn., August 28–31, 2003.

28. Inis L. Claude, “The Balance of Power Revisited,” *Review of International Studies* 15 (April 1989): 77–85; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72–73; Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*; Leopold von Ranke, “The Great Powers,” in Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (eds.), *The Theory and Practice of History* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973; originally published 1833), 65–101; Taylor, *Struggle for Mastery in Europe*, xix. On formal balance of power theories, see Emerson Niu, Peter Ordeshook, and Gregory Rose, *The Balance of Power* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Wagner, “Peace, War, and the Balance of Power”; Robert Powell, “Stability and the Distribution of Power,” *World Politics* 48 (January 1996): 239–67.

29. Morton A. Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics* (New York: Wiley, 1957), 23. Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power*, chap. 3.

30. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, is an exception and defines stability as the persistence of key structural features of the system.

31. Sheehan, *Balance of Power*, 115.

32. Wright, *Study of War*, chap. 20; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, chap. 14; Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power*, chap. 1; Hoffmann, “Balance of Power,” 507.

33. Charles I became Charles V when he was elected Holy Roman Emperor.

34. Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power*; Dehio, *The Precarious Balance*; Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*; Raymond Aron, *Peace and War*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday-Anchor, 1973); Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987); Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 207–08; Kenneth N. Waltz, “Evaluating Theories,” *American Political Science Review* 91 (December 1997): 913–17.

35. Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Organski, *World Politics*; William R. Thompson, *On Global War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

36. Jonathan Israel, *Dutch Primacy in the World Trade, 1585–1740* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989); Levy, “Theories of General War,” 368.

37. John A. Vasquez, *The War Puzzle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Paul K. Huth, *Standing Your Guard: Territorial Disputes and International Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); Paul R. Hensel, “Territory: Theory and Evidence on Geography and Conflict,” in John A. Vasquez (ed.), *What Do We Know About War?* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 57–84.

38. John Gallagher and Ronald Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade,” *Economic History Review* 6, 2nd series, 1953: 1–25.

39. Roger Bullen, “France and Europe, 1815–48: The Problem of Defeat and Recovery,” in Alan Sked (ed.), *Europe’s Balance of Power, 1815–48* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 122–45; Wright, *Study of War*, 759; Spykman cited in Haas, “Balance of Power,” 321.

40. The Duc de Choiseul, quoted in Sheehan, *Balance of Power*, 115.

41. Karl R. Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (New York: Harper Touchback, 1959).

42. It is true that the emergence of unrivaled American unipolar hegemony has been associated with various forms of resistance, but we cannot classify this resistance as traditional great-power balancing behavior. We have seen terrorist acts against both the American homeland and its interests abroad, but these acts have been initiated by weaker actors, not by other leading powers. True, other leading powers, including America’s closest allies, have not cooperated with the United States on a number of key issues, including the 2003 war in Iraq; but this kind of “soft balancing” falls in a different category than defensive military alliances or massive arms buildups, which are central to traditional balance of power theory. On soft balancing see T. V. Paul’s introductory chapter to the present volume; and Robert Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, March 17–20, 2004.

43. For a useful first step in this direction see Ikenberry, “Strategic Reactions to American Global Predominance.”

44. Walt, *Origins of Alliances*; Eric J. Labs, “Do Weak States Bandwagon?” *Security Studies* 1 (Spring 1992): 383–416. On the application of power transition theory to regional systems, see Douglas Lemke, *Regions of War and Peace* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).