

HEGEMONIC THREATS AND GREAT-POWER BALANCING IN EUROPE, 1495–1999

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The central proposition of balance-of-power theory (albeit one that has never been tested systematically) is that great powers balance against hegemonic threats. This article argues that this proposition applies to hegemonic concentrations of land-based military power in autonomous continental systems, but not necessarily to hegemonic concentrations of sea power in maritime systems. With a focus on continental systems, this article develops and tests several hypotheses linking military concentration, capability changes, and alliance responses for the European system from 1495 to 1999. Judging from existing data on army concentrations and a new database of great-power alliances since 1495, European great powers have demonstrated a strong propensity to balance when one state has acquired a third or more of the total military capabilities in the system, but not at lower concentrations of power; higher concentrations of power usually lead to larger balancing coalitions. Great powers do not always balance, however, so balancing is a probabilistic tendency rather than an “iron law” of behavior.

THE BALANCE of power is a venerable concept in the study of international relations. David Hume regarded it as a scientific law, Kenneth Waltz argued that “if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance of power is it,” and Robert Jervis claimed that “balance of power is the best known, and perhaps the best, theory in international politics.”¹ There are many variations of balance-of-power theory and considerable disagreement about the meaning of its key concepts and even about what the theory purports to explain, but the central proposition of nearly all balance-of-power theories is that states tend to balance against threats of hegemony over the system. Indeed, this has been one of the most

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1. David Hume, “Of the Balance of Power,” in *Balance of Power*, ed. Paul Seabury (San Francisco: Chandler, 1965 [1752]), 32–36; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1979), 117; and Robert Jervis, *System Effects* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 131.

widely held propositions in the field of international relations, although it has recently faced some serious challenges. The balancing hypothesis has enormous importance for contemporary policy as well as for theory and history, as evidenced by recent debates about likely responses to American hegemony.²

Despite the importance of this age-old balancing proposition, scholars have yet to test it systematically against the historical evidence, in part because of the very ambiguity of the theory and the failure to operationalize it in a way that permits falsification. Most alliance behavior can be interpreted as somebody balancing against some kind of power or some kind of threat. Unless one specifies theoretically who balances against whom, in response to concentrations of what kinds of power or what kinds of threats, and in what kinds of systems, and unless one operationalizes the balancing concept in a way that allows us to identify balancing when and only when we see it, it is impossible to construct a valid empirical test of balancing propositions.³ The aim of this article is to formulate a testable version of the balancing hypothesis and examine its empirical accuracy during the last five centuries

2. On conceptual ambiguities in balance-of-power theory, see Ernst B. Haas, "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda," *World Politics* 5, no. 2 (April 1953): 442–77; Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962); and Jack S. Levy, "Balances and Balancing: Concepts, Propositions, and Research Design," in *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*, ed. John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall, 2003), 128–53. On recent challenges to the theory see Paul W. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (summer 1994): 108–48; Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security* 19, no. 1 (summer 1994): 72–107; and John A. Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm and Degenerate versus Progressive Research Programs: An Appraisal of Neotraditional Research on Waltz's Balancing Proposition," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 899–912. On soft balancing and other responses to American hegemony, see G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); T. V. Paul, "Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance," in *Balance of Power Revisited: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 1–25; and Robert A. Pape, "Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2004.

3. A few examples will be helpful. Many weak states allied with Napoleonic France and then with Nazi Germany. Does this falsify the balancing hypothesis and suggest that states often bandwagon rather than balance? Or does it reflect a more limited balancing proposition that applies to great powers and not to weaker states? In the period prior to the First World War, the United Kingdom failed to make any commitment to intervene against Germany in the event of war. Does this contradict the balancing hypothesis, or does the subsequent British intervention in the war provide support for the hypothesis? Similarly, does British and French behavior in the 1930s—appeasement followed by military intervention—falsify or confirm the balancing hypothesis? Finally, the great powers did not balance against Great Britain, the leading power in the world in the nineteenth century, or against the United States after the Second World War or even after its rise to hegemonic status after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Does the absence of balancing in these cases falsify the balancing hypothesis, or does it reflect the conditional balancing proposition that great powers balance against potential land-based hegemonies but not necessarily against global hegemonies or maritime powers?

of the European experience. This is the first systematic empirical test of the proposition that states balance against hegemonic threats.⁴

Following Waltz's structural reformulation of realist theory, scholars have made several efforts to refine the balancing proposition. In a modification of the long-held notion (reinforced by Waltz) that states balance against the strongest power in the system, Stephen Walt argued that states balance instead against the greatest threats to their interests, with threats defined as some combination of perceived intentions, ideology, and distance, as well as aggregate capabilities.⁵ Theoretical debates between balance-of-power theory and balance-of-threat theory were joined by historical case studies that explored whether states balance against power (or threat), bandwagon with it, or free ride and "pass the buck."⁶ Paul Schroeder broadened the categories and demonstrated that states often bandwagon, hide, or "transcend" rather than balance, and Randall Schweller argued that whereas status quo states balance to preserve their security, revisionist states often bandwagon with the strong in order to secure economic gains and otherwise expand their influence.⁷ Others argued that states often fight powerful aggressors in response to a direct attack, and that such instances of self-defense do not constitute balancing.⁸

These recent studies of balancing have made important contributions by refining the concept of balancing, introducing new analytic distinctions, and providing a number of illuminating historical illustrations and more detailed

4. Scholars have analyzed the relationship between the distribution of power in the system and the likelihood of war during the last two centuries, but explaining war is not equivalent to explaining balancing behavior. See J. David Singer, Stuart A. Bremer, and John Stuckey, "Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965," in *Peace, War, and Numbers*, ed. Bruce Russett (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1972), 19–48; and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Risk, Power Distributions, and the Likelihood of War," *International Studies Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (December 1981): 541–68.

5. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; and Stephen M. Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

6. Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, "Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity," *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (spring 1990): 137–69; Robert G. Kaufman, "To Balance or to Bandwagon? Alignment Decisions in 1930s Europe," *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (spring 1992): 417–47; Eric J. Labs, "Do Weak States Bandwagon?" *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (spring 1992): 383–416; Stephen M. Walt, "Alliance, Threats, and U.S. Grand Strategy: A Reply to Kaufman and Labs," *Security Studies* 1, no. 3 (spring 1992): 448–82; and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001).

7. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neo-Realist Theory"; and Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit." State leaders, particularly those in weak states, also seek alliances in order to gain economic resources that they can use for domestic purposes. See Michael N. Barnett and Jack S. Levy, "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962–1973," *International Organization* 45, no. 3 (summer 1991): 369–95.

8. Schroeder, "Historical Reality vs. Neorealist Theory"; Richard Rosecrance and Chih-Cheng Lo, "Balancing, Stability, and War: The Mysterious Case of the Napoleonic International System," *International Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (December 1996): 479–500; and Vasquez, "The Realist Paradigm."

case studies. Still, many difficult conceptual issues remain and the historical examples are contradictory, so these studies do not constitute, individually or collectively, anything approaching a rigorous and systematic empirical test of the proposition that states regularly balance against hegemonic threats. Recent statistical studies have introduced a more systematic methodology, but they have focused on alliance behavior in general rather than on the distinctive question of counter-hegemonic balancing.⁹ Whether or not states balance, and against what, is still a highly contested question in the field.

The aim of this study is to provide a preliminary test of the proposition that states balance against extreme concentrations of power. This requires that we first eliminate many of the remaining conceptual ambiguities, specify the balancing proposition so that it yields more precise and testable propositions, identify the scope conditions that limit the universality of those propositions, and deal with endogeneity problems and other potential threats to valid inference.

The general proposition of this article is that in any autonomous, continental, multistate system, the leading powers in the system tend to balance against any state that threatens to dominate by amassing a disproportionate concentration of military power.¹⁰ This proposition will be tested for the modern European system for the last five centuries. This test is based in part on our view of the implicit great-power and Eurocentric biases in most formulations of balance-of-power theory and the fundamental distinction between continental land-based systems and maritime systems. This study finds that European great powers have demonstrated a strong propensity to balance when one state has acquired a third or more of the total military capabilities in the system, but not at lower concentrations of power, and that higher concentrations of power usually lead to larger balancing coalitions. Great powers do not always balance, however; thus balancing is a probabilistic tendency

9. Kevin Sweeney and Paul Fritz, "Jumping on the Bandwagon: An Interest-Based Explanation for Great Power Alliances," *Journal of Politics* 66, no. 2 (May 2004): 428–49; and Erik Gartzke and Kristian S. Gleditsch, "Balancing, Bandwagoning, Bargaining, and War," unpublished paper.

10. This proposition goes back at least to Polybius, who argued, "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." Cited in Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 199. Similarly, Vattel stated that "the well-known principle of the balance of power" refers to "an arrangement of affairs so that no State shall be in a position to have absolute mastery and dominate over others," and referred to "the method" of "forming alliances in order to make a stand against a very powerful sovereign and prevent him from dominating," Emmerich de Vattel, "The Law of Nations" (Extract)," in *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914: Selected European Writings*, ed. Moorhead Wright (London: Dent, 1975 [1758]), 72.

rather the “iron law” of behavior that some balance-of-power theorists have claimed.¹¹

The “autonomous” qualifier is included in order to exclude systems in which the security of states might be significantly affected by the behavior of external great powers, which might substitute for balancing behavior within the system. This condition is a critical one for balance-of-power theory because of the centrality of the anarchy assumption. Although the European great-power system was an autonomous international system from 1495 up through 1945, the same cannot be said of most regional systems operating in the shadows of external great powers. Balance-of-power and balance-of-threat theorists sometimes apply the balancing proposition to regional systems, but the fact that key assumptions of the theory, particularly anarchy and the absence of any enforcement mechanism in the system, are not fully satisfied in such systems requires caution in applying the theory.¹²

We are not claiming that balancing occurs only in Europe, but instead that the modern European system is the best case for balance-of-power theory and for the balancing proposition in particular. In addition, Europe is the only system for which all balance-of-power theorists agree that great powers have systematically balanced against hegemonic threats. Most proponents of balance-of-power theory argue that balancing occurs outside of Europe, but they disagree on which other systems exhibit balancing behavior, and how regularly. Thus while there are many variations of balance-of-power theory, this article will be testing a core hypothesis (and perhaps the only hypothesis) that is common to them all.

For these reasons, Europe provides a “most likely test” for the basic balancing proposition and for balance-of-power theory more generally.¹³ If systematic patterns of balancing cannot be found in modern Europe, it is not clear where they could be found. Thus negative findings would raise serious

11. Hume (“Of the Balance of Power,” 33), for example, suggested that “every prevailing power was sure to meet with a confederacy against it.” Many advocates of an “automatic” version of balance-of-power theory (as described by Claude, *Power and International Relations*, 43–47) attribute law-like status to the balancing hypothesis.

12. Walt, *Origins of Alliances*. If a regional state facing a strong threat in the region were to ally with an external great power rather than join another regional state in a balancing coalition, we would not be able to conclude that this behavior runs contrary to the balancing proposition of balance-of-power theory. With regard to the European system, after 1898 the United States had the capability to play a key role in the system, but it chose not to play such a role, and the European great powers gave little weight to the United States in their strategic calculations.

13. Moreover, since nearly all critics of balance-of-power theory agree that the theory does in fact predict balancing in Europe, both proponents and critics would in principle accept this test as legitimate. This is a necessary first step to bringing empirical evidence to bear on unresolved theoretical debates.

questions about the general validity of hypotheses about balancing. Confirmation of the balancing hypothesis for the European system, on the other hand, although informative about that historically important system, would provide less leverage for generalizing to other systems in the absence of comparative historical research.¹⁴

BALANCES AND BALANCING

DESPITE THE many variations of balance-of-power theory, its proponents agree on many things.¹⁵ They share the fundamental realist assumptions that the key actors in the system are states (or other territorially based actors) that act rationally to maximize security or power in an anarchic international system. They also agree that extreme concentrations of power, or hegemonies, rarely if ever form in anarchic multistate systems, and that the avoidance of hegemony is a primary instrumental security goal of states.¹⁶ Although balance-of-power theorists may disagree about how states respond to low-level threats or accumulations of power, nearly all of them agree that concentrations of power that would put one state in a position to dominate over the rest usually trigger blocking coalitions by the leading states in the system.¹⁷ Both balance-of-power theory and balance-of-threat theory converge on this proposition, at least for continental systems, because if a state is strong enough to threaten hegemony over the system it will usually be the greatest single threat to the interests of any other great power.¹⁸ This focus on hegemonic threats rather

14. On most likely/least likely research designs, see Jack S. Levy, "Qualitative Methods in International Relations," in *Millennium Reflections on International Studies*, ed. Michael Brecher and Frank P. Harvey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 432–54.

15. This section builds on Levy, "Balances and Balancing"; and Jack S. Levy, "What Do Great Powers Balance against and When?" in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, 29–51.

16. Although most balance-of-power theories are realist, not all realist theories posit balanced outcomes and balancing behavior, as illustrated by Gilpin's hegemonic transition theory and Organski and Kugler's power transition theory (which also contains some nonrealist elements). See Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and A.F.K. Organski and Jacek Kugler, *The War Ledger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

17. Stated differently, the predictions of balance-of-power theory are clearest when hegemony is feasible. See R. Harrison Wagner, "What Was Bipolarity?" *International Organization* 47, no. 1 (winter 1993): 77–106; and William C. Wohlforth, "Measuring Power—and the Power of Theories," in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, 250–65.

18. There are exceptions. One can imagine a disproportionately powerful but distant state, with greater defensive than offensive capabilities and few outwardly belligerent intentions, posing only a modest threat to some great powers in the system. (Note, however, that this article's focus on continental systems excludes distant maritime powers.) These situations are relatively rare, but the authors have attempted to control for distance in Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Do States Ally against Leading Powers or Rivals (or Both)?" paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Montreal, March 2004.

than lesser threats suggests that balancing goes beyond self-defense against an imminent threat to include a concern for the public good of avoiding hegemony.¹⁹

Thus we have two key propositions: (1) hegemonies rarely if ever form in multistate systems, and (2) threats of hegemony generate great-power balancing coalitions. These two propositions are often blurred, but they are analytically distinct. The first is a descriptive proposition about international outcomes, and the second is a causal proposition about state behavior.

One can find in balance-of-power theory numerous possible causal paths leading to the absence of hegemony. Three in particular stand out: (1) potential hegemons anticipate that expansionist behavior or military buildups will lead to the formation of a military coalition against them, and they consequently refrain from aggressive behavior; (2) potential hegemons begin to expand or aggressively build up their armaments but pull back after being confronted by a balancing coalition or an unwinnable arms race; or (3) potential hegemons pursue expansionist policies or military buildups and are defeated in war by a blocking coalition.²⁰

It is important to note that the first two paths result in peace but the third does not. Thus the outbreak of war, even major war or frequent wars, is not necessarily disconfirming evidence for balance-of-power theory or the balancing hypothesis.²¹ Balancing hypotheses predict balanced outcomes

19. Richard Rosecrance, "Is There a Balance of Power?" in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, 157–59.

20. There are other paths to nonhegemonic outcomes. One, associated with utopian and perhaps some versions of liberal international theory, is that states have no interest in hegemony even if they face no constraints and if hegemony were feasible. Other paths, more consistent with realist theory, involve some combination of the overreaching of leading states, successful self-defense by others acting alone, military technology strongly favoring the defense, and other diseconomies of scale in territorial organization. See Rosecrance, "Is There a Balance of Power?" 161; and Colin Elman, "Appraising Balance of Power Theory," in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*, 1–22.

21. The "power parity" hypothesis, which predicts that equality between two states leads to peace, and the "power preponderance" hypothesis, which predicts that preponderance promotes peace, are dyadic-level propositions that are analytically distinct from system-level balance-of-power theory. From a bargaining perspective, the power-parity and power-preponderance hypotheses are each theoretically indeterminate. On the power-parity and power-preponderance hypotheses, see Jacek Kugler and Douglas Lemke, eds., *Parity and War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). On bargaining, see James D. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (summer 1994): 379–414. For attempts to specify the theoretical conditions under which system-level distributions of power lead to peace or to war, see Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and David Lalman, *War and Reason* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); R. Harrison Wagner, "Peace, War, and the Balance of Power," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 3 (September 1994): 593–607; Kelly Kadera, *The Power-Conflict Story: A Dynamic Model of Interstate Rivalry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001); and William Reed, "Information, Power, and War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 4 (November 2003): 633–41.

(defined as the absence of hegemony) and balancing strategies, but not necessarily peace.²²

The above-stated propositions that hegemonies do not form and that threats of hegemony lead to balancing behavior are framed as universals, and in fact most theories of the balance of power and balancing are stated in such unconditional terms. Few propositions in international relations are universally valid, however, and most theories are delimited by certain scope conditions. A properly specified balance-of-power theory is no exception. The unconditional hypothesis that hegemonic concentrations of power do not form in multistate systems is contradicted by Britain's economic and naval dominance in the nineteenth century and by American economic and military dominance after the end of the cold war.²³ The unconditional propositions that states balance against dominant states is contradicted by the absence of significant balancing in the British and American cases, and also by the countless situations in which small states have not balanced against hegemonic neighbors, including Napoleonic France in the early nineteenth century and both the United States in the Western Hemisphere and the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe after the Second World War.

Balancing propositions are plausible only under more restrictive conditions. It is particularly important to specify the system over which hegemony is threatened, the basis of power in that system, and the identity of the states hypothesized to engage in balancing behavior. It makes a difference, for example, whether we are talking about a European system of great powers with large armies, or a world system of global powers with substantial wealth and strong navies.

22. There is an important exception to this characterization of the balancing proposition as including both nonhegemonic outcomes and balancing strategies. Waltz (*Theory of International Politics*, 118) argued that his neorealist theory predicts only outcomes, not state strategies or foreign policies, and suggested in addition that the process does not necessarily involve rational calculation. He argued that balances of power always occur but left open the question of how they occur, suggesting that nonhegemonic outcomes do not necessarily require deliberate balancing behavior by states. Waltz has not always been consistent on this matter, however, and has often spoken about balancing strategies as well as nonhegemonic outcomes. See, for example, Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 4 (December 1997): 913–17.

The view expressed here is that the balancing mechanism is sufficiently plausible that it is incumbent on balance-of-power theorists who are agnostic about the balancing mechanism to specify the alternative causal paths leading to balanced outcomes. Most balance-of-power theorists focus on balancing strategies as well as balanced outcomes, however, and the treatment of the literature in this article is based on that fact while at the same time recognizing that Waltz is an important exception.

23. On American dominance, see Bruce Russett, "The Mysterious Case of Vanishing Hegemony," *International Organization* 39, no. 2 (spring 1985): 207–31; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "Power, Globalization, and the End of the Cold War: Reevaluating a Landmark Case for Ideas," *International Security* 25, no. 3 (winter 2000–2001): 5–53.

In one sense the failure of balance-of-power theorists to be explicit about these parameters is a significant omission. In another sense, however, those parameters are implicit in much of the balance-of-power theorizing in the West. The concepts of balance and balancing can be found in the ancient world (in the writings of Kautilya and Polybius, among others), but they became much more prominent in the Italian Renaissance and were further developed by David Hume, Emmerich de Vattel, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and other European writers.²⁴ The European conception of the balance of power was systematized and passed on by Hans Morgenthau, Edward Gulick, Inis Claude, Jr., and Ludwig Dehio, and it is central in the writings of such contemporary realist thinkers as Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, and John Mearsheimer.²⁵ The argument here is that, with few exceptions, there is a strong great-power, land-power, and Eurocentric bias in most of these formulations of balance-of-power theory in Western international thought.

Diplomatic historians have generally followed Leopold von Ranke in treating European history as the history of great-power politics, and this great-power bias has pervaded most of the balance-of-power literature—or at least it did until the end of the cold war.²⁶ In addition, most of the balance-of-power literature is written by Europeans (especially the British) and Americans

24. It is important to note that basic propositions about balancing were in place before the origins of the system (modern Europe) on which we are testing those propositions. On the importance of Italian Renaissance contributions to the development of balance-of-power theory, see Francesco Guicciardini, *The History of Italy*, trans. Sidney Alexander (New York: Macmillan, 1969 [1561]); Herbert Butterfield, "The Balance of Power," in *Essays in the Theory of International Politics*, ed. Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 132–48; Moorhead Wright, *Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power, 1486–1914* (London: Dent, 1975); and Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History and Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996).

25. Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 4th ed. (New York: Knopf, 1967); Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1955); Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Ludwig Dehio, *The Precarious Balance: Four Centuries of the European Power Struggle* (New York: Random House, 1962); Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Walt, *Origins of Alliances*; and Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

26. Leopold von Ranke, "The Great Powers," in Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. Georg G. Iggers and Konrad von Moltke (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973 [1833]), 65–101; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 72–73; and Inis L. Claude, Jr., "The Balance of Power Revisited," *Review of International Studies* 15, no. 2 (April 1989): 78. Among the more specific manifestations of the Eurocentric bias is the concept of a "balancer" or "holder of the balance," which, while generalizable in principle, is nearly always equated with Britain's role in maintaining an equilibrium of power on the European continent; the principles of territorial compensation and partition, which serve the interests of the great powers at the expense of weaker states; and the idea that an open "colonial frontier" was stabilizing because it provided an area into which European great powers could expand their power at the expense of the weak without directly threatening each other's vital interests. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, chap. 14; Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*, chap. 1; and Stanley Hoffmann, "Balance of Power," *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 1 (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 506–10.

(whose security outlook focused primarily on Europe until the late twentieth century) and is grounded in the European experience extending back to Westphalia (1648) and to the late-fifteenth-century Italian city-state system.²⁷ The primarily British origin of Western balance-of-power theory is significant in itself, because British leaders have traditionally defined their interests in terms of a balance of power on the European continent, not a balance of power in the global system. Britain, in its prime, always wanted a balance of power in Europe and British dominance on the seas.²⁸

This implicit Eurocentric bias contributes to a focus on land-based military power as the primary basis of power in the system. The concentrations of power that states most fear are those that most directly and immediately threaten their territorial integrity. For continental great powers, the greatest threats are posed by other continental states with large armies that can invade and occupy, not from maritime states with economic empires and large navies. Maritime powers have smaller armies and less capacity to threaten the territorial integrity of states, a capacity that is further reduced by a loss-of-strength gradient over distance and over water.²⁹ Maritime power is based on economic strength as well as naval capability. This creates fewer incentives to encroach on the territory of others because the economic dominance of markets generally does not require direct political control of land and people.³⁰ Thus economic hegemony is less threatening than territorial hegemony, and great powers are far more likely to balance against concentrations of land power than against concentrations of sea power.³¹

It is not surprising, therefore, that balance-of-power theorists talk about balancing coalitions against the Habsburgs under Charles V in the early sixteenth century, Philip II at the end of the sixteenth century, and the combined strength of Spain and Austria in the Thirty Years' War; against France under Louis XIV and then Napoleon; and against Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm II

27. Garrett Mattingly, *Renaissance Diplomacy* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1955).

28. As Sheehan (*The Balance of Power*, 115) argued, "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, was part of a peculiarly European solution to the problems afflicting the European imagination."

29. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

30. This is reflected in the concept of the "imperialism of free trade." See Robert E. Robinson and John A. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).

31. The distinction between continental systems and maritime systems is more fully developed in Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, "Balancing at Sea," paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, September 2003.

and then Adolf Hitler.³² Few balance-of-power theorists mention balancing against Dutch economic primacy in the seventeenth century, Pax Britannica in the nineteenth century, or Pax Americana in the twentieth century, because those global economic hegemonies rarely if ever generated balancing behavior.³³ The dominant role of leading economic and maritime powers is central to leadership long-cycle theory and to many formulations of power-transition theory, but not to balance-of-power theory.³⁴

Thus this article's two key balance-of-power propositions—that hegemonies do not form and that hegemonic threats lead to balancing coalitions—are not universally valid but are instead subject to scope conditions: they apply in principle to autonomous continental systems and to the great powers within those systems, where power and hegemony are defined in terms of land-based military power. The balance-of-power literature is overwhelmingly Western and based on the European experience, so the European system constitutes the best case for balance-of-power theory. Since sustained hegemonies have not formed in the European system during the last five centuries, this article will focus on balancing strategies rather than non-hegemonic outcomes. The key proposition to be tested here is that high concentrations of military power that might permit any one state to dominate over the European system lead other great powers to balance against it. The next section will specify the operational implications of this proposition and describe the research design constructed to test them.

RESEARCH DESIGN

ANY EMPIRICAL study, quantitative or qualitative, must address the issue of case selection. One methodological problem with nearly all existing empirical applications of balance-of-power theory, most of which are illustrative

32. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power*; Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*; Claude, *Power and International Relations*; Dehio, *The Precarious Balance*; Raymond Aron, *Peace and War*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City: Doubleday, 1973); and Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

33. Waltz is an important exception. He has spoken in more universal terms about balances in the international system as a whole, and in the early 1990s predicted balancing against the United States. See Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," 914; and Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security* 17, no. 2 (fall 1993): 44–79. Note that the absence of balancing against the United States during the cold war was one of the puzzles driving Walt's construction of balance-of-threat theory in *Origins of Alliances*.

34. On leadership long-cycle theory see Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle, 1490–1990* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994). On power transition theory see Gilpin, *War and Change*; and Organski and Kugler, *The War Ledger*.

and anecdotal in nature, is that they focus on major wars and ask whether during those wars states have balanced against the strongest and most threatening state or whether they have bandwagoned with that state.³⁵ The problem is not primarily that these studies are limited to a single case or a small number of cases—an approach that can be quite useful if the cases are carefully selected to provide maximum leverage on the theoretical question under investigation—but rather that they are insensitive to potential problems of endogeneity and that they rely on a biased selection of cases.

This problem can be seen by revisiting the three causal paths to non-hegemonic outcomes in balance-of-power theory: restraint by a potential aggressor based on the anticipation that aggression will trigger a balancing coalition; initial expansion but containment without war; and aggressive expansion that triggers a blocking coalition and the military defeat of an aggressor. Balancing plays a key causal role in each path but is generally unobserved in the first path. An empirical study that focuses only on the wars that occur, or on the coalitions that actually form, cannot capture unobserved balancing.

The neglect of unobserved balancing leads to potentially serious inferential biases. Potential aggressors are more likely to initiate war when they anticipate that potential adversaries will not balance, so an examination of only wars will reveal a fair amount of non-balancing and therefore will systematically underestimate the causal impact of balancing. Any empirical study of balancing must incorporate unobserved as well as observed balancing by looking at periods of nonwar as well as war, because the absence of war might be due to the anticipation of balancing by the potential aggressor.³⁶

35. This focus is evident in the essays in the 1997 *American Political Science Review* symposium on balancing, reprinted in Vasquez and Elman, *Realism and the Balancing of Power*.

36. Admittedly, it is easier to suggest the possible causal impact of unobserved balancing than to demonstrate empirically that the anticipation of balancing, rather than another causal mechanism, is at work. (See n. 20 for alternative explanations for nonhegemonic outcomes.) These causal dynamics can be explored more fully in individual cases. Two plausible cases of unobserved balancing are Russia's failure to play a more assertive role in the Turkish crises in the late 1820s and 1830s, and the Soviet Union's restraint during the cold war. Russia's restraint in the early nineteenth century is often traced to its fear of provoking a counter-balancing coalition, just as Soviet restraint is often traced to the deterrent effects of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Schroeder, however, challenges this interpretation of Russian behavior in the nineteenth century, and scholars continue to debate Soviet intentions during the cold war. On Russia in the early nineteenth century, see Matthew Rendall, "Restraint or Self-Restraint of Russia: Nicholas I, the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi, and the Vienna System, 1832–1841," *International History Review* 24, no.1 (March 2002): 37–63; and Paul W. Schroeder, "Containment Nineteenth Century Style: How Russia Was Restrained," in Paul W. Schroeder, *Systems, Stability, and Statecraft: Essays on the International History of Modern Europe*, ed. David Wetzel, Robert Jervis, and Jack S. Levy (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 121–33. On Soviet behavior during the cold war see John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

The literature on balancing has not been sufficiently sensitive to this aspect of case selection. It is significant, for example, that the standard examples of balancing to which scholars most often refer all involve wartime leaders—Charles V, Philip II, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Kaiser Wilhelm II, and Hitler. An unbiased analysis of balancing must use cases selected on the independent variable—the conditions that give rise to balancing.

HYPOTHESES

Most versions of balance-of-power theory advance the following hypotheses:

- (H1) Great powers tend to balance against the most powerful state in the system; and
- (H2) Tendencies toward balancing are stronger if the most powerful state in the system is significantly increasing in strength.

We expect H1 and H2 to be disconfirmed by the evidence. We expect regularized patterns of balancing not against any leading state in the system, even a leading state that is increasing in strength, independently of the magnitude of its relative power, but only against a leading state that controls a disproportionate share of the resources in the system.³⁷ Such a state usually poses the greatest threat to most of the other great powers, at least within continental systems, whereas a state possessing a more modest advantage often does not pose as great a threat. Thus we expect that great-power balancing is significantly more likely against the former than the latter, and greater still if a strong leading state is significantly increasing in strength. We also expect that extremely high concentrations of power are more likely than more modest concentrations to lead to larger balancing coalitions. These expectations lead to our next three hypotheses:

- (H3) Balancing is significantly more likely against a leading state that controls a disproportionate share of the resources in the system—and that consequently threatens to dominate the system—than against a leading state in a weaker relative position;
- (H4) A larger balancing coalition is more likely to form against a leading state that controls a disproportionate share of the resources in the system than against a leading state in a weaker relative position; and

37. One caveat here is that situations involving increasing capabilities will combine information on both strong and weak leading states. If strong leading states are more likely to increase their capabilities than are weaker leading states, we might find empirical support for hypothesis 2.

(H5) The combination of a leading state's very high concentration of military capabilities and a significant increase in those capabilities is particularly likely to generate a counterbalancing alliance.

We have conceptualized balancing in terms of alliance formation in response to concentrations of military power. This is known as "external balancing," as opposed to "internal balancing," which refers to a strategy of enhancing one's own military capabilities or the economic foundations of military potential.³⁸ Internal balancing is a separate question that deserves separate treatment, although testing such a proposition is unlikely to be easy.³⁹ By restricting balancing to alliance formation in response to concentrations of power, we are constructing a conservative test of the balancing proposition, because we exclude some behavior that others would classify as balancing.

This set of five hypotheses is not exhaustive; it is only a starting point in our investigation of great-power balancing behavior. If there is some evidence in support of these hypothesized tendencies toward balancing, we will refine our analysis further in subsequent studies by constructing and testing additional propositions about who balances, against whom, and under what conditions, and about when great powers bandwagon rather than balance. Such analyses will also control for other variables such as threat and geographical distance, but such controls would be both premature and too elaborate to conduct at this time.⁴⁰ We will also explore whether great powers respond

38. On external and internal balancing, see Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. On theoretical grounds, we expect external balancing to predominate over internal balancing in multipolarity (Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*), which has been significantly more common than bipolarity in the European system over the last 500 years.

39. One problem is how to distinguish arms buildups as a balancing strategy from arms buildups resulting from bureaucratic politics and the vested interests of the military or from domestic pressures; or how to distinguish strategies to increase economic productivity and wealth in order to enhance military potential from similar strategies intended to promote social welfare or private interest, or from the natural growth of the economy. Another problem is a tendency for each successive leading land power to ratchet up the competitive level of standing armed forces, which complicates the task of distinguishing between trend and internal balancing. On the last point see William R. Thompson and Karen Rasler, "War, the Military Revolution(s) Controversy, and Army Expansion: A Test of Two Explanations of Historical Influences in European State Making," *Comparative Political Studies* 32, no. 1 (February 1999): 3–31.

40. Testing between the balancing-against-power hypothesis and the balancing-against-threat hypothesis is important in principle, but the focus in this article on extreme concentrations of power as a surrogate indicator for hegemonic threat, as well as the focus on the European system and the exclusion of dominant maritime powers, is not conducive to empirically distinguishing between these two hypotheses.

Controlling for regime type is also possible in principle, presumably to capture whether balancing is shaped more by the democratic or nondemocratic nature of the target than by its military strength. Given the focus here on continental systems, however, there is little variation in regime type of the leading state if regime type is measured dichotomously. The only democratic leaders among European land powers during the last 500 years are France

differently to concentrations of maritime power as opposed to land-based military power.⁴¹

MEASUREMENT

We begin the analysis at the origins of the modern European great-power system in 1494–95, and we end the analysis in 1999. The European great powers include the Ottoman Empire (1495–1699), Spain (1495–1808), Austria (1495–1918), France (1495–), England/Great Britain/the United Kingdom (1495–), the Netherlands (1609–1713), Sweden (1617–1721), Russia (1721–), Prussia/Germany (1740–), and Italy (1861–1943).⁴²

This set of European great powers is unproblematic until 1945. European subsystems can be identified both before and after 1945, but the roles played by European actors are different in the two systems. Prior to 1945, Europe, especially western Europe, was the central region or dominant subsystem in world politics. By the end of the Second World War, this regional primacy had come to an end with the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union and with the decline in the relative status of the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. What did not change, however, was the fundamental political problem that plagued Europe since 1495: how to prevent one actor from achieving hegemony over the system.⁴³ Thus we can ask the same question after 1945 as before: did leading European states balance against potential hegemonic threats from extreme concentrations of power on the continent,

in 1877–1909 and 1925–34 and Russia in 1991–99. See Keith Jagers and Ted Robert Gurr, “Transitions to Democracy: Tracking Democracy’s Third Wave with the Polity III Data,” *Journal of Peace Research* 32, no. 4 (1995): 469–82. With so few periods of democratic leaders, hypotheses on the impact of regime type on balancing might be better explored through case-study methods.

It might also be useful to control for technology, perhaps to capture hypotheses about the impact of technological asymmetries on the balancing process. Our focus on the European great powers goes a long way toward controlling for technological asymmetries, however, particularly given the rapid diffusion of military technology throughout the European great-power system during the last five centuries.

41. Levy and Thompson, “Balancing at Sea.”

42. The list of great powers is adopted from Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983). Spain and Austria were joined under the rule of Charles V from 1519 to 1556, and the “United Habsburgs” are treated here as a single great power during that period. “Russia” includes the Soviet Union from 1917 to 1991. “Prussia/Germany” includes the Federal Republic of Germany from 1945 to 1989.

43. This is reflected not only in the NATO alliance of the leading European states against the Soviet Union as the strongest land-based military power on the continent (and not against the United States as the leading global power), but also in the widely repeated comment that the aim of NATO was “to keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

while recognizing that the larger world system in which Europe is embedded had changed in important ways?⁴⁴

The identification of the most powerful state, its relative capability position, and increases in strength all require the measurement of military capabilities. We measure hegemonic threats in terms of the degree of concentration of military capabilities. Ideally, it would be useful to have an indicator of all instances in which the leading European state had expansionist ambitions, or, more precisely, when others perceived it as posing such a threat. The measurement of these indicators during the last five centuries, for peacetime as well as wartime, would be a formidable task. Since our hypotheses focus on threats of hegemony over the European system, where balance-of-power theory and balance-of-threat theory converge, a measure of the degree of concentration of military power in the hands of a single state serves as a useful measure of hegemonic threats.

The most widely used indicators of military strength over the last half-millennium, by the actors themselves as well as by scholars, are population size, wealth, and armies.⁴⁵ Longitudinal information is available on population and armies. Little systematic data on wealth is available, however, once we go back in time beyond the reach of gross national product calculations. Given the predominately agrarian nature of the early modern European economy, estimations of relative wealth before the Industrial Revolution would be fairly difficult. More important, states' balance-of-power calculations were usually driven by short-term time horizons, while economic strength mattered more in the intermediate or long term, which is reflected by the fact that some of the wealthiest states went bankrupt on a number of occasions with only temporary lapses in their military activity.⁴⁶ Thus the absence of indicators

44. While the United Kingdom, France, and West Germany may not have been global powers throughout most of the post-1945 period, they were the leading powers in the European system (along with the Soviet Union and the United States). West Germany is included because the future of Germany was the central issue in the cold war, within the West as well as between West and East, and because the West German army was the foundation of NATO's conventional defense in Europe. See Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Although the United States was critical in many respects to NATO, alliances among European states preceded the formation of NATO. In addition, it would violate the regional orientation of this article to include the United States as a European land power (and hence as a target for counter-hegemonic balancing on land). This analysis does, however, look separately at the pre-1945 system, in order to ascertain the extent to which our findings are dependent on the inclusion of the 1945–99 era. As it turns out, and as is noted in the text, only the outcome of hypothesis 2 is affected by using the longer time period.

45. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*.

46. The wealthiest European state in the sixteenth century, Spain, owed its sinews of war capability more to American silver than to its indigenous wool cash crop. On the other hand, the

of wealth is not a serious limitation in the estimate of capabilities relating to balancing propositions.

Although population estimates are readily available for all of the major European states over the last 500 years, there is only limited variation in the relative population sizes of the European great powers, and consequently this indicator cannot possibly tap the substantial variation in the relative power of states over time. Furthermore, population indicators cannot account for the great-power status of states with relatively small populations, such as the United Provinces of the Netherlands, which successfully competed for substantial periods of time with states such as Spain and France that had populations many times larger. Population size mattered, but it was a secondary attribute of relative power.

That leaves us with armies. As states gradually weaned themselves from reliance on mercenaries, standing armies expanded in conjunction with new forms of warfare, the rise of the modern state, and the pressures of the increasingly competitive European system.⁴⁷ Unlike population, the size and influence of armies varied significantly across states. Smaller, poorer, and less ambitious states tended to have smaller armies than did larger, wealthier, and more ambitious states, and efforts to expand territorial control in Europe were usually accompanied by an increase in army size. The most prominent European hegemonic aspirants usually created the largest armies of their times (and region) in order to fulfill their expansionist goals.⁴⁸ Thus relative army size is a useful and valid indicator of the distribution of power within continental Europe during the last five centuries.

Army size data, available in the form of five-year averages, are taken from the work of Karen Rasler and William Thompson, with several modifications.⁴⁹ First, the data were updated to include the last five years of the twentieth century. Second, an Ottoman army series was estimated for the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in order to supplement the Rasler-Thompson data.⁵⁰

agrarian wealth of France was especially difficult to mobilize for state purposes. See Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, *War and State Making: The Shaping of the Global Powers* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 90–97.

47. On the role of mercenaries see Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). On the interaction between military technology, political organization, army size, and war in the rise of the early modern state, see Michael Roberts, “The Military Revolution, 1560–1660,” in *The Military Revolution Debate: Readings on the Military Transformation of Early Modern Europe*, ed. Clifford J. Rogers (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 13–35; and Thompson and Rasler, “War, the Military Revolution(s) Controversy, and Army Expansion.”

48. An important exception is twentieth-century Germany.

49. Rasler and Thompson, *The Great Powers and Global Struggle*.

50. Estimating Ottoman army size is problematic in several respects. The literature offers little numerical information. Murphey provides a limited number of data points over 200 years,

Third, adjustments were made for Russia, given that for the last two centuries the Russian army has been disproportionately large relative to its influence in the European system.⁵¹ Therefore a discount factor has been introduced for the Russian army size to more accurately reflect Russian influence in the system.⁵²

Table 1 identifies the leading land powers in the European system based on these coding rules. It does not include the magnitude of the lead state's superiority, but it does indicate when the lead state controlled more than 33

from which we extrapolated our series assuming, rather heroically, that there were no major changes between points. The early modern Ottoman army was also quite heterogeneous. It had a standing core that could be expanded quite impressively in terms of numbers by calling up cavalry levies from landed estates. These cavalry were less than fully disciplined, however, and could be used only for a few months at a time when their services were not needed for harvesting. A third problem is that eastern Europe was only one of the theaters in which the Ottoman army fought. The Persian frontier and the general Fertile Crescent area imposed their demands on Ottoman troop strength. For these reasons, we have limited our estimation to numbers referring to the Ottoman standing core army and have made no effort to count the potential cavalry auxiliaries that would come and go as circumstances dictated. Although this coding rule is conservative, it provides a more appropriate basis for estimating Ottoman army size in the European context than one that taps the maximum size of the Ottoman army throughout Europe, southwestern Asia, and North Africa. In some years, cavalry auxiliaries could double the size of the Ottoman army for short periods of time. See Rhoads Murphey, *Ottoman Warfare, 1500–1700* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999).

51. The disproportionate size of Russian armies derives largely from the fact that they, like the earlier Ottoman armies, were distant from the key battlefields in western Europe. As the Russian empire expanded throughout Eurasia, its need for garrison troops also expanded. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the army even expanded beyond the ability of the Russian state to provide it with arms and food. The Russian armies that fought primarily in central Europe were usually no larger than those of their European rivals. They were also very slow to mobilize. As a result, European leaders generally discounted Russian army strength. See William C. Fuller, Jr., *Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600–1914* (New York: Free Press, 1998); and William C. Wohlforth, "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance," *World Politics* 39, no. 3 (April 1987): 353–81.

52. One problem is that any discount scheme would have to be quite large at times and certainly not constant over the three centuries of Russia's involvement in the modern European great-power system. Our solution is to use Russian army sizes for computing European totals but not to accept the strong Russian army share as an indicator of "most powerful" status prior to 1945. (We also experimented with a consistent 50 percent discount of Russian army size, but found that this approach did not alter any of our findings.) One consequence is that we often accept the state with the second highest relative share as the army leader in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Another is that some of the leads maintained by the number-two power will not be fully comparable with earlier, pre-Russian leads. An example is the French score in the first decade of the 1800s. Without Russia in the mix, the French share would have been 0.516. With Russia, France's lead is recorded as a 0.38 share (still above our threshold). While this element of noncomparability is regrettable, we have decided to accept it as one of the compromises necessary to measure the distribution of capabilities and to operationalize the balancing question. The alternative is to designate Russia as the leading European land power for the past 200 years—a position that simply lacks any face validity. Since the Russian "distortion" problem tends to flatten leads achieved after the early eighteenth century, it should weaken support for (and thus constitute a bias against) our balancing propositions.

Table 1
LEADING EUROPEAN LAND POWERS, 1495–1999

Years	Leading Land Power	Years	Leading Land Power
1495–99	France	1820–24	France
1500–1504	England	1825–29	Russia
1505–19	France	1830–34	Austria
1520–24	Ottoman Empire	1835–39	France
1525–1609	Habsburg/Spain (1525–69; 1575–1609)	1840–44	Russia
1610–19	Ottoman Empire (1610–19)	1845–49	Austria
1620–44	Spain (1620–29)	1850–54	Russia
1645–59	France	1855–64	France
1660–69	Ottoman Empire	1865–69	Austria
1670–1714	France (1675–1714)	1870–74	Germany
1715–29	Austria (1715–19)	1875–1909	France
1730–64	France (1730–54)	1910–14	Germany (1910–14)
1765–74	Austria	1915–24	Russia (1920–24)
1775–79	Russia	1925–34	France (1925–29)
1780–89	Austria	1935–44	Germany (1935–44)
1790–1814	France (1790–1814)	1945–99	Russia (1945–99)
1815–19	Russia (1815–19)		

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

percent of the military resources in the system (a key threshold, as will be explained below).

As the table indicates, the first three centuries of the system were characterized by periods of very strong concentrations of land-based military power in the hands of the Habsburgs/Spain (mid-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries) and France (late seventeenth century and early nineteenth century). These periods were punctuated by periods in which other states (England, the Ottoman Empire, Austria) appeared as leading powers, in part because the previous leader had been exhausted or demobilized, either temporarily or permanently. The period between Napoleon and 1945 was characterized by a different pattern: an absence of clear numerical predominance. Thus some measure of leading status is needed that works across both early and later patterns to discriminate between a moderate leading status and one that is more likely to trigger perceptions of hegemonic threat and counterbalancing behavior.

One possible threshold—a 50 percent share of the capabilities in the system—is a nice focal point but is not very useful for our purposes.⁵³ First, only rarely does a great power reach this level of relative military power. If the strength of the large Russian armies of the twentieth century is discounted, the only great power to have surpassed a 50 percent capability share was the Habsburgs from about 1560 to 1640. This is too narrow a period for a test of balancing propositions. Second, our hypothesized trigger for balancing is not hegemony but rather perceptions of potential threats of hegemony, and these are often generated by concentrations of power short of the 50 percent threshold.

Although any threshold below 50 percent is somewhat arbitrary, we prefer a single threshold that will be useful in the context of the fluctuating number of great powers in the European system over time, rather than different thresholds for different numbers of great powers. A 33 percent capability share works well for this purpose. Only in a three-actor system would a 33 percent share be unremarkable, but there have always been more than three great powers in the system (at least until 1945). The number of great powers has at times dropped as low as four, but only during a few years in the mid-1500s and mid-1940s, and even then a 33 percent threshold constituted a capability share nearly 50 percent higher than the average for the other great powers in the system. In a large pool of 6 or 7 powers, the possession of one-third of the capability pool on land could represent a quite formidable concentration of power. Thus, a 33 percent threshold serves our threshold purposes reasonably well.

Hypotheses H2 and H5 refer to significant increases in military power, which we define as a change of 10 percent or greater, based on the change in a state's absolute capability base and not changes in its relative share. A 10 percent increase in relative capabilities would be too high a threshold for establishing minimal significance.

Some other operational caveats are in order. We make no claim that army size would be a good predictor of relative power outside the European region, particularly if there are significant asymmetries in technology. The army size indicator emphasizes the quantitative dimension while ignoring the qualitative dimension. Big armies can be poorly trained, armed, organized, and led. Small armies can possess more *élan*, superior tactics, and longer pikes or faster-loading rifles. The absence of standardized information on the relative

53. Many formal models imply that a capability share exceeding 50 percent essentially constitutes hegemony. For example, Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose state, "If any single country controls a majority of the resources available to all countries in the system, then that country will eliminate all other and expropriate all the available resources." Emerson M.S. Niou, Peter C. Ordeshook, and Gregory F. Rose, *The Balance of Power: Stability in International Systems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 76.

quality of European armies over 500 years forces us to sidestep this important dimension, but it also stands as a basic limitation on the interpretation of army size in subsequent analyses. Still, army size nicely captures Frederick the Great's comment that "God is always with the strongest battalions."⁵⁴ Army size is one of the few indicators in international politics that possesses a roughly similar meaning throughout the past half-millennium. It also seems particularly appropriate for a focus on regional politics and territorial expansion—both of which required military manpower in the sixteenth century as much as in the twentieth century. In addition, technological asymmetries that might weaken the utility of the army size indicator are minimized by our focus on the European great-power system, which has been characterized by relatively rapid technological diffusion.⁵⁵

Our dependent variable is the presence or absence of a formal (written) military alliance that required one state to intervene militarily in support of another in the event that the latter one is attacked. Given our interest in balancing against the dominant state, we limit our attention to those "targeted alliances" that identify the dominant state in the system as the specific threat.⁵⁶ Although not all formal alliance treaties are honored, and although some unwritten agreements nonetheless reflect a serious intention to invoke the alliance in the event of attack, the former are much better than the latter as general indicators of likely commitment over a large number of cases, in part because a formal, written commitment involves a "costly signal" of a state's willingness to honor the treaty.⁵⁷ Recent evidence suggests that states lived up to their alliance commitments 75 percent of the time in the last two centuries.⁵⁸

A focus on written alliance treaties excludes some cases of alignments that were never formalized but that contributed to joint responses against an aggressor. Although such cases are relatively rare, their omission from the category of balancing introduces a downward bias in the calculated frequency of balancing and also in the average size of balancing coalitions. This is another

54. Cited in Frank W. Wayman, J. David Singer, and Gary Goertz, "Capabilities, Military Allocations, and Success in Militarized Disputes," *International Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 4 (December 1983): 513.

55. William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

56. On targeted alliances see, for instance, Thomas C. Walker, "Hitting the Target: Alliances, Specific Threats, and the Spiral to War," paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Chicago, February 2001. We extract target information from historical interpretations of the purpose of each alliance, as opposed to requiring the formal identification of a target in the text of an alliance treaty.

57. James D. Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 63–83.

58. Brett Ashley Leeds, Andrew G. Long, and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, "Reevaluating Alliance Reliability: Specific Threats, Specific Promises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44 (2000): 686–99.

respect in which our coding rules constitute a conservative bias in our test of balancing propositions, as is our exclusion of military interventions that did not involve a formal, written treaty.

To construct an inventory of formal alliances for the last five centuries we used several previously constructed data sets and 29 general or specific diplomatic histories.⁵⁹ The multiple-source focus is necessary given the absence of agreement across these sources as to the specifics of various alliances or even their existence.⁶⁰ We consulted multiple sources until we concluded that further sources were unlikely to yield new information.

The most serious problem concerned the duration of alliances in early-modern Europe, given the tendency of diplomatic historians to give far more attention to the formation of alliances than to their termination. We have information on the duration of many of these alliances and can fairly assume that other alliances terminated with the occurrence of a war, but in the remaining cases early in the system we adopted the following rule of thumb: in the absence of information about the termination of alliances, we assumed that alliances lasted only for the year in which they were created.⁶¹

These procedures led to the identification of 223 alliances,⁶² though this number is sensitive to exactly how one counts subsequent joiners and renewals, which we handled on a case-by-case basis. The alliances that are relevant for our hypotheses are those that are targeted explicitly against the leading military power; once alliances that do not specify a target are excluded, we are left with 84 relevant targeted alliances.⁶²

Although there is undoubtedly some measurement error in the data, balancing here is defined narrowly in terms of alliances and more narrowly still in terms of written alliance treaties specifying as a target the system's most powerful state, so most of the biases in the data work against the confirmation of balancing hypotheses for the European system.

59. Melvin Small and J. David Singer, "Formal Alliances, 1816–1965: An Extension of the Basic Data," *Journal of Peace Research* 3 (1969): 257–82; Jack S. Levy, "Alliance Formation and War Behavior: An Analysis of the Great Powers, 1494–1975," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 25, no. 4 (December 1981): 581–613; Correlates of War Alliance List 1993; Douglas M. Gibler, "An Extension of the Correlates of War Formal Alliance Data Set, 1648–1815," *International Interactions* 25, no. 1 (1999): 1–28; and Leeds, Long, and Mitchell, "Reevaluating Alliance Reliability." A complete list of historical sources is available from the authors.

60. The problem is not so much disagreement about whether specific alliances existed but whether a specific diplomatic historian chooses to mention various alliances. Multiple sources permit a wider net to be cast in an effort to overcome these selection biases in the historical sources.

61. Information about duration improves steadily over time, so this coding rule is not problematic from the sixteenth century onward.

62. Alliance documents often do not specify a target, but this information can usually be extracted from pertinent diplomatic histories without a great deal of disagreement about the identity (or identities) of the target(s).

Our unit of analysis is the individual great power and its alliance behavior (alliance/no alliance) in response to concentrations of power, aggregated by half-decade.⁶³ An alternative approach would be a system-level focus that asked whether or not an alliance occurred in a given half-decade. One problem with this approach, however, is that it would not control for the variation in the number of great powers from era to era. Presumably, if all else remained the same, the larger the number of great powers, the more likely that some balancing coalition would have formed.⁶⁴ A second problem is that the system-level approach would count one bilateral balancing alliance as the equivalent of either several bilateral alliances or one large coalition. Presumably, balancing is stronger in the latter two scenarios than in the first. By focusing on individual great powers and their alliance behavior, we gain a more discriminating measure of balancing behavior.

DATA ANALYSIS

THE FIRST TWO hypotheses (H1 and H2) reflect the common argument that great powers tend to balance against the strongest state in the system, particularly if that lead state is increasing in strength, irrespective of the magnitude of its superiority. We do not expect to find much support for these hypotheses, because we expect pronounced systematic tendencies to balance only if the lead state is in a strong enough position to threaten to dominate over others.

Information relevant to balancing against the lead state, irrespective of the magnitude of its advantage, can be obtained by calculating the marginal frequencies in Table 2.⁶⁵ Great-power alliances have formed against the lead state in 190 cases out of a possible total of 445, or about 43 percent of the time, in contrast to 255 instances of no alliance response (57 percent). This finding leads us to reject H1, confirming our expectations of no strong patterns of balancing against just any leading state.

63. The army data are available in five-year averages, which precludes the use of a shorter period. A ten-year interval might allow for some lag between the perceived need to balance and the actual creation of an alliance, but it also encompasses a rather long period of time during which wars can begin and end and alliance partners can switch sides. The shortest time period possible seems preferable in terms of evading the potential for distortion associated with assigning a representative score to a temporal unit in which markedly different types of behavior can be observed. We code any five-year period in which a relevant alliance is initiated or ongoing as pertinent to our balancing measurement.

64. This tendency might be weakened by the greater incentives to free ride in larger systems.

65. These marginal frequencies, which are not included in the table itself, represent the sum (across columns) of responses and nonresponses to leading states that control more than and less than 33 percent of the capabilities in the system, which is equivalent to responses to the lead state regardless of the magnitude of its advantage.

Table 2
CAPABILITY CONCENTRATION AND ALLIANCE RESPONSE AGAINST THE LEADING
POWER, 1495–1999

	Weaker relative position (less than 33%)	Stronger relative position (33% or greater)
No alliance response	151 (.702)	104 (.452)
Alliance response	64 (.298)	126 (.548)
<u>N = 445</u>	215 (1.000)	230 (1.000)

$$\chi^2 = 28.42; p = .000$$

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

Table 3
CAPABILITY CHANGE AND ALLIANCE RESPONSE AGAINST THE LEADING POWER,
1495–1999

	Capability change of less than 10%	Capability change of 10% or more
No alliance response	148 (.590)	107 (.552)
Alliance response	103 (.410)	87 (.448)
<u>N = 445</u>	251 (1.000)	194 (1.000)

$$\chi^2 = 0.65; p = .420$$

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

For an analysis of H2 we turn to Table 3, which compares alliance formation and nonformation associated with changes in the lead state’s capability; the comparison is between changes of less than 10 percent in the lead state’s capability with changes of 10 percent or more in the capabilities of all leading states, regardless of their relative strength. We find that great powers form alliances against a lead state that is growing in relative strength more often than when its relative capability remains static, but that this relationship is not statistically significant. This finding would appear to disconfirm H2. If the analysis is restricted to the 1495–1944 period, however, the relationship is stronger and statistically significant (see Table 4). Thus, we should be slow to reject H2.⁶⁶

66. The rationale for restricting the analysis to the pre-1945 period is that the NATO alliance against the Soviet Union in the post-1945 period represents a significant modification of the European regional landscape, and that its potential distorting effect should be examined in a long-term longitudinal analysis.

Table 4
CAPABILITY CHANGE AND ALLIANCE RESPONSE AGAINST THE LEADING POWER,
1495–1944

	Capability change of less than 10%	Capability change of 10% or more
No alliance response	148 (.664)	107 (.557)
Alliance response	75 (.336)	88 (.442)
<u>N = 415</u>	223	192

$\chi^2 = 4.93; p = .026$

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

These initial findings, some of which contradict the traditional balance-of-power literature, provide a useful baseline for analyzing our three primary hypotheses, which emphasize balancing against leading states that pose hegemonic threats based on a high concentration of land-based military power in the system. H3 suggests that balancing is more likely if the leading state is so strong that it threatens to achieve a position of hegemony over the system. Table 2 contrasts alliance responses to leading states possessing a third or more of the military capabilities in the system with responses to leading states possessing less than a third of the capabilities in the system. We find a strong and statistically significant tendency for states with stronger relative positions to provoke an alliance reaction, compared to states with weaker relative positions. To the extent that control of a third or more of the capabilities in the system serves as a good indicator of a hegemonic threat to the system, our findings provide strong support for the proposition that great powers tend to balance against hegemonic threats but not against lesser threats.⁶⁷ At the same time, however, our findings suggest that this tendency to balance against hegemonic threats is very much a probabilistic rather than a deterministic relationship.

This finding is all the more significant if judged in the context of great-power alliance formation in general, not just targeted alliance formation against the most powerful state in the system. This draws on information that is not presented in Table 2. If we switch our dependent variable from targeted alliances/non-alliances against the lead state to great-power alliances against any great power, we find no statistically significant relationship between power

67. Similarly, Fritz and Sweeney find that the relative military capabilities of the adversary are the best predictor of the likelihood of balancing in the 1816–1992 period. Paul Fritz and Kevin Sweeney, “The (de)Limitations of Balance of Power Theory,” *International Interactions* 30, no. 4 (October–December 2004): 285–308.

Table 5
CAPABILITY CONCENTRATION AND COALITION SIZE, 1495–1999

Number of major powers Allying against the lead power	Weaker relative position (less than 33%)	Stronger relative position (33% or greater)
0	22 (.489)	14 (.250)
2	11 (.244)	15 (.267)
3	9 (.200)	17 (.304)
4	0 (.000)	7 (.125)
5	3 (.089)	3 (.054)
Total	45 (1.000)	56 (1.000)

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

concentration at the 33 percent or higher level and alliance making in general. European great powers have been no more likely to ally in periods in which one state controls over a third of the capabilities in the system (68 percent) than in periods without such a dominant actor (70 percent). This suggests that our analysis in Table 3 is indeed capturing balancing against a leading state with hegemonic potential rather than other kinds of alliance formation, such as those driven by traditional bilateral rivalries.

H4 taps another dimension of balancing behavior: the size of the balancing coalition, defined here in terms of the number of great powers in the alliance. Most balance-of-power theories imply that hegemonic threats deriving from high concentrations of power should generate not only a counterbalancing coalition, but a coalition involving several great powers rather than just two. Multilateral coalitions are significant for another reason, as well: the more states joining an alliance, the more plausible it is to infer that they were driven by considerations of balancing for the collective good of avoiding hegemony as opposed to more limited parochial goals and particularized threats to those goals. Table 5 summarizes the relevant information on the prediction of H4 that wider coalitions are more likely to be formed against leading states with a high capability share than against those with weaker and presumably less threatening leading powers.

There are two ways to evaluate Table 5, but both lead to the same conclusion. If one includes the cells for no alliance response, 48 percent of responses to dominant leaders (with 33 percent capability share or more) involved coalitions of three or more actors, in comparison to 27 percent for the responses to nondominant leaders. Focusing only on the cases in which actors actually responded (that is, dropping the zero cell), the ratio between situations in

Table 6
CAPABILITY CONCENTRATION, CAPABILITY CHANGE, AND ALLIANCE RESPONSE
AGAINST THE LEADING POWER, 1495–1999

	Weaker relative position (less than 33%) and/or less than 10% capability increase	Stronger relative position (33% or greater) and 10% or greater capability increase
No alliance response	232 (.614)	23 (.343)
Alliance Response	146 (.386)	44 (.657)
<u>N = 445</u>	378 (1.000)	67 (1.000)

$\chi^2 = 17.02; p = .000$

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

which a dominant leader was present as opposed to absent is still 64 percent to 52 percent. Thus high concentrations of power not only encourage alliance responses, they also trigger the wider coalitions that are predicted by balance-of-power theory.⁶⁸

While Table 5 confirms the hypothesized tendency toward balancing, it also reinforces the point that the propensity to balance is far from automatic. The number of great powers in the European system has ranged from four to seven, while the average size of a balancing coalition, given that a coalition forms (excluding the zero row in the middle column), is 3.0. Thus while a balancing coalition usually forms in response to a high concentration of capabilities, only some but not all great powers join that coalition; the others stand aside, and some even bandwagon with the dominant state.⁶⁹

Balance-of-power theory implies that high concentrations of power will be perceived as particularly threatening if the dominant power is growing in strength, as reflected in H5. Table 6 pairs the 33 percent or greater position with the 10 percent increase in capabilities and shows that in situations in which

68. Some readers may see the fifth row of Table 5 as anomalous, since the number of instances of the widest coalitions is the same regardless of capability concentration. There are, however, two ways of interpreting this outcome. First, when the two categories of “4” and “5” alliance responses are collapsed into “4 or more,” the apparent anomaly disappears. Second, two of the three cases in the “5” alliance responses column that are associated with less than 33 percent capability concentration involve leading land powers in decline (Spain, 1630–34) or ascent (France, 1670–74). In both cases, the leading land power had either exceeded the threshold shortly before or was about to do so.

69. Since we coded for alliance or no alliance against the targeted state, our present analysis does not discriminate between bystanding and bandwagoning. We examine bandwagoning propensities in Jack S. Levy and William R. Thompson, “Do Great Powers Balance against Leading Powers or Rivals (or Both)?”

Table 7
CAPABILITY CONCENTRATION AND ALLIANCE RESPONSE, CONTROLLING FOR
CAPABILITY CHANGE, 1495–1999

	Capability change of less than 10%		Capability change of 10% or more		
	Weaker relative position (less than 33%)	Stronger relative position (33% or greater)	Weaker relative position (less than 33%)	Stronger relative position (33% or greater)	
No alliance response	79 (.648)	69 (.535)	72 (.774)	35 (.347)	
Alliance response	43 (.352)	60 (.465)	21 (.226)	65 (.643)	
<u>N = 251</u>	122 (1.000)	129 (1.000)	N = 194	93 (1.0000)	101 (1.000)
	$\chi^2 = 3.29$; $p = .07$		$\chi^2 = 35.801$; $p = .00$		

Note: The years in which the state exceeded 33 percent of capability shares are indicated in parentheses in the “leading land power” column.

very strong states are becoming even stronger, great powers form balancing alliances two times out of three. This provides substantial and statistically significant support for H5. Still, we should note that the stronger effect of the two derives from the level of capabilities rather than their rate of increase. Table 7 shows that a stronger capability concentration predicts an alliance response even when capability changes are less significant. Combining the two indices of structural situations likely to lead to increased threat perception, however, does clearly improve the predictability (from 46.5 percent to 64.3 percent) of an alliance response.

These results taken as a whole suggest that high concentrations of military power tend to generate balancing behavior, that situations in which such powerful states are becoming still stronger are even more likely to trigger balancing coalitions, and that higher concentrations of power trigger larger balancing coalitions. These findings provide strong support for the general argument that in the last five centuries of the modern European system, great powers tended to balance against hegemonic threats. This argument must be qualified, however, because the evidence demonstrates that hegemonic threats are not a sufficient condition for great-power balancing. We observe regularized patterns of great-power balancing, but those patterns are not as strong as some balance-of-power theorists suggest, either in the frequency of

balancing or the size of great-power balancing coalitions. As we have noted, the tendency toward balancing reflects a probabilistic relationship rather than law-like behavior.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL IMPLICATIONS

THIS ARTICLE has argued that, despite the ambiguities in balance-of-power theory, there is one core proposition that nearly all balance-of-power theorists would accept: the threat of domination by the leading land power in continental systems induces other great powers to form counterbalancing alliances against the dominant state. We have tested this proposition for the European system over the past 500 years. For our independent variable, we have operationalized land-based military strength in terms of army size, and hegemonic threat in terms of the possession by any single state of 33 percent or more of the capabilities in the system. Our dependent variable is balancing behavior, defined as the formation/nonformation of formal military alliances directed against the leading army power, aggregated by five-year period. Our research design follows a “most likely case” logic, which suggests that negative findings would provide substantial leverage for generalizing beyond our data to other systems, whereas positive findings would provide less leverage for drawing more general inferences about balancing in any international system. Within that design, we argue that our test is conservative because our operational indicators define balancing rather narrowly (by excluding some behavior that others would classify as balancing), which should work against the balancing hypothesis.

Before testing our primary propositions, we examined the argument—common to many but not all balance-of-power theorists—that states tend to balance against the most powerful state in the system. This argument is almost certainly false as stated, given the many small states who prefer to hide or bandwagon with the strongest state rather than balance against it, and given the absence of systematic balancing against the leading states in maritime systems. A more plausible reformulation of the balancing proposition, based on our argument about the implicit scope conditions associated with balance-of-power theory, is that great powers tend to balance against the most powerful state in any continental multistate system dominated by land-based military power.

Contrary to much of the literature, however, we do not expect great powers to balance systematically against the leading state in the system, independently of the magnitude of its advantage. We argue that it is hegemonic threats, not lesser threats, that tend to generate balancing coalitions, and that such threats

generally arise only from states that possess a significant advantage in military capabilities relative to their competitors. Such states generally pose the greatest threats to other great powers, and consequently balance-of-power theory and balance-of-threat theory converge in their predictions when hegemonic threats are present.

Our findings support our expectations to some extent by disconfirming our first hypothesis, which posits that great powers tend to balance against the strongest state in the system, regardless of its margin of superiority. Great-power alliances form against the most powerful state in the system only about 43 percent of the time. Our second hypothesis, which focuses on the effects of significant increases in military capabilities of the leading state in the system, generates mixed results. If we focus on the entire five-century period, we get nonsignificant results that permit the rejection of the hypothesis. If we limit the analysis to the pre-1945 era, however, we get a statistically significant positive relationship.

Nevertheless, our principal hypotheses, which emphasize balancing against leading states that pose a hegemonic threat based on a high concentration of land-based military power, which we operationalize as 33 percent or more of the total capability in the system, find ample support from the data. Once the leading state came to control a third of the capabilities in the system, a balancing coalition of other great powers formed 55 percent of the time during the past five centuries, as predicted in our third hypothesis. While this is nearly twice the rate of balancing against weaker lead states (30 percent), it falls far short of the axiomatic tendency for balancing that some have suggested.

We also find support for our fourth hypothesis, which captures the idea that hegemonic threats should lead not only to the formation of balancing alliances, but to large alliances involving several great powers. High concentrations of power are more likely than lower concentrations of power to be followed by larger balancing coalitions involving three or more great powers. We also find that when high concentrations of power (33 percent or more) are combined with increasing concentrations of power (with a 10 percent threshold), a great-power alliance against the leading state follows nearly two-thirds of the time, strongly confirming our fifth hypothesis.

These results raise a number of questions for further research, some regarding the dynamics of balancing in the European system and some regarding the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other systems. One set of basic questions emerges from our findings that, although great powers have a tendency to balance by forming alliances against any state possessing a disproportionate share of the military capabilities in the system, they do not always balance, and the size of their balancing coalitions often falls considerably short

of the number of potential great-power balancers in the system. Under what conditions do great powers balance, and under what conditions do they stand aside or even bandwagon with the leading state? Can variations in behavior be explained in terms of the geography of the system, the presence of key rivalries in the system, or by potential balancers' simultaneous involvement in other wars? Can collective-action theory provide a satisfactory explanation of these variations in balancing behavior?

Another set of questions concerns the timing of balancing. At what point do great powers balance against concentrations of power and hegemonic threats? In this study we have not distinguished between the formation of balancing coalitions in peacetime and the formation of coalitions in wartime. Do great powers respond to concentrations of power by forming counterbalancing coalitions in peacetime, or does it usually take aggressive behavior or the outbreak of war to emphasize the seriousness of the threat, overcome wishful thinking that downplays hostile intentions, and override problems of collective action and incentives to free ride on others' balancing? We know that balancing occurs without war and that such balancing, or at least the anticipation of it, may have a causal impact on the absence of war. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization provides a clear example of balancing in peacetime, and arguably a case of balancing that deters war. When balancing is associated with war, however, does balancing tend to occur prior to war or after the outbreak of war, and what are the causal mechanisms driving these patterns? Stated differently, do states balance in anticipation of a war that they perceive is likely or that they hope to deter, or do they balance in response to war?⁷⁰

Another basic question that arises from this study, and one that requires much further research, is the extent to which our findings can be generalized to other systems. We have emphasized that our formulation of the balancing proposition in terms of great-power balancing against hegemonic threats in Europe represents a most likely case for the balancing proposition. This creates an asymmetry in the logic of inference from our negative and positive findings. We have found, first of all, little support for the common (but not universally accepted) proposition that great powers tend to balance against the strongest military power in the system. If this proposition does not apply in Europe, which is the best case for balance-of-power theory and the balancing proposition in particular, then we can have little confidence that the proposition holds elsewhere, where conditions are less favorable. Further research is still warranted (in fact, it is desirable), and we certainly expect that many

70. Any study exploring this phenomenon would have to deal with the conceptual issue of whether responding to direct attack is analytically distinct from balancing. See n. 8.

instances of balancing against the strongest state in the system will be uncovered, but we do not expect to find systematic patterns of balancing against the strongest states in other systems unless those states amass a significantly greater proportion of the military capabilities in the system.

The logic of inference for our more positive findings is different. Whereas disconfirming evidence from most likely tests provides some confidence that the hypotheses in question cannot be generalized to other systems, the same cannot be said for the findings that confirm our other hypotheses. The empirical support for our propositions about balancing against hegemonic threats or high concentrations of power, while valid for the historically important case of Europe, give us less leverage for generalizing to other systems. These findings increase our confidence that our hypotheses are valid in other autonomous continental systems, but only modestly. This makes additional comparative empirical research on other systems absolutely imperative.

Nevertheless, the logic of our theoretical argument does have certain implications for where, outside of Europe, balancing should be most likely and where it should be least likely, and these considerations can help guide future research. We have argued, on theoretical grounds, that balancing coalitions in response to concentrations of power are most likely to form in autonomous continental systems, and least likely to form in response to concentrations of power in maritime systems or any global system in which power is based on a combination of economic strength and military power of global reach.

We have examined balancing strategies rather than balanced outcomes because our focus is on Europe and because strategies but not outcomes (defined as hegemony/non-hegemony) have varied over the last five centuries of the modern European system. The multistate system in Europe has been fairly stable in that a sustained European hegemony has not formed since Rome, but the same is not true of all other multistate systems, where systemwide empires have occasionally emerged. One is the emergence of a hegemonic empire under the Qin dynasty by 221 BC after the collapse of the Chinese multi-state system, and another is the subsequent emergence of the Han dynasty in China. Still another case is the emergence of a centralized empire under Assyria in the eighth century BC.⁷¹

While scholars are just beginning to examine these non-European systems through the analytic lenses of international relations theory, we need much more work on such systems if we are to fully understand the conditions under

71. Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and William C. Wohlforth and Stuart Kaufman, "Balancing and Balancing Failure in Biblical Times," unpublished paper.

which balances form and break down, and the role of balancing behavior in the process. We also need to understand exactly how frequently hegemonies emerge in multistate systems and to identify the conditions under which they emerge and the causal mechanisms that drive the process. Such an inquiry, which requires careful comparative historical research, will lead back to the important question of whether the European international system is fairly typical of the dynamics of international systems or whether it is an anomaly. The answer to this question will have an important bearing on the broader relevance of our theories of international relations, which have been disproportionately influenced by the European experience. We have argued that balance-of-power theory contains implicit Eurocentric biases. Perhaps the most significant of these is the implicit assumption that hegemonies rarely if ever arise in multistate systems.