# Review Articles
# THE BALANCE OF POWER IN THE BALANCE

By DANIEL H. NEXON*

Victoria Tin-bor Hui. 2005. *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 308 pp.

Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth, eds. 2007. *The Balance of Power in World History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 288 pp.

T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann, eds. 2004. *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 400 pp.

Randall L. Schweller. 2006. *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 200 pp.

**B**ALANCE of power theory faces difficult times. Revived and recast in 1979 with the publication of Kenneth Waltz's *Theory of International Politics*, it soon confronted myriad theoretical and empirical challenges.[1] Waltz's structural-realist account of the balance of power quickly emerged as a focal point of the so-called paradigm wars between a shifting collection of schools of international relations.[2] Realists argued over whether balancing strategies actually predominate in world politics or, instead, whether states prove more likely to bandwagon—to side with the strong against the weak—than balance of power theory predicts.[3] The end of the cold war led some to proclaim the collapse of balance of power theory.[4] The mid-1990s saw the emergence of an intense debate over whether balance of power theory and realism in general constituted a "degenerative" research program.[5]

[1] Waltz 1979.
[2] See, for example, Keohane 1986; Wendt 1987.
[3] See Schweller 1994; Walt 1987.
[4] See Petrova 2003.
[5] See Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Vasquez and Elman 2003.

In the early 1990s, moreover, many scholars deployed balance of power logics to argue that the end of cold war bipolarity would result in a new multipolar distribution of power.[6] But with very little evidence to suggest the rise of traditional balancing against the United States, even a number of realists now question key aspects of balance of power theory.[7] Sophisticated agent-based models, meanwhile, suggest major flaws in the logic of the theory.[8]

Indeed, power transition theory and hegemonic order theory enjoy increasing appeal among analysts of international security and grand strategy.[9] In an article-length treatment of their edited volume, William Wohlforth and his collaborators contend that their "findings concerning both systemic outcomes and state behavior directly contradict the core balance-of-power hypothesis that balancing behavior prevents systemic hegemony" and "fatally undermines the widespread belief that balancing is a universal empirical law in multi-state systems and the equally pervasive tendency to assign explanatory precedence to balance-of-power theory."[10] Yet others call not for an abandonment of balance of power theory but for an expansion of the concept of balancing through such categories as soft balancing and asymmetric balancing.[11]

The four books considered here capture well the stakes of the current debates over balancing and the balance of power. These debates strike at the heart of a major branch of realist theory, have repercussions for international relations theory in general, and may require a major reassessment of key assumptions in contemporary discussions of American grand strategy and the future of world politics. For the purposes of this review essay, they pose a major question: should we abandon balance of power theory or seek to amend it in light of recent challenges? They also raise crucial conceptual concerns: how should we define and operationalize concepts such as "balancing," "the balance of power," and "balance of power theory" in the first place? I seek in this article to offer at least provisional answers to these questions and concerns, as well as to reflect more broadly on their implications for the future of realist theory.

I begin in Section I with brief overviews of the four books. In Section II I elaborate a distinction between three kinds of related theories:

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[6] For examples of predictions of post–cold war multipolarity, see Layne 1993; Mearsheimer 1990; Waltz 1993.

[7] See Ikenberry 2002a; Wohlforth 1999

[8] Cederman 1994.

[9] See Ikenberry 2001; Schweller and Wohlforth 2000.

[10] Wohlforth, Little, Kaufman, Kang, Jones, Hui, Eckstein, Deudney, and Brenner 2007, 156.

[11] Pape 2003; Pape 2005; Paul 2005

*balance of power theory*, *theories of power balances*, and *theories of balancing*. This tripartite categorization, although not particularly radical, remains largely implicit in the works considered here. It also helps make sense of the current controversies surrounding the balance of power. In Section III I address a debate that runs through all of these works—how to define "balancing." In Section IV I discuss the most significant challenges to balance of power theory advanced in these works. And finally I turn, in Section V, the conclusion, toward the question of whether and, if so, how we should salvage balance of power theory.

The works under review suggest two major strategies: (1) expanding the concept of balancing and (2) articulating a weak form of balance of power theory. Taken together, they recommend against a complete abandonment of the theory. Nonetheless, the challenges to the theory and the implications of expanding our conception of balancing suggest major changes in the status of balancing and the balance of power in the field. We need to contemplate what realism amounts to in the absence of balance of power theory and to firmly decouple theories of power balances and balancing from realism.

## I. Summary of Works Reviewed

*Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21ˢᵗ Century* (*BoP:T&P*) is indicative of the crisis facing balance of power theory. The volume represents less a coherent inquiry into the theory than a series of variations on a theme: given accumulating problems for traditional balance of power theories, where do we go from here, particularly in assessing the contemporary international system? While the contributors agree that balance of power theory faces difficulties, they disagree on most other matters. Paul wants to expand the notion of balancing to include soft and asymmetric variants (*BoP:T&P*, 2–4, 14–17). Levy attacks a number of biases of universal balance of power theory and argues that balancing coalitions generally fail to "form against leading maritime powers" such as Britain and the United States (*BoP:T&P*, 45). Lemke affirms power transition theory while criticizing John Mearsheimer's theory of "offensive realism" (*BoP:T&P*, 29–51). Brawley presents a modified theory of balancing that adds variables concerning the "rate of transformation of wealth to power" and the "availability of allies" (*BoP:T&P*, 85–88). Contributions by Layne, Wirtz, and Rhodes assess the balance of power in light of "new security challenges," while Art, Wohlforth, Miller, Ross, Thomas, and Barletta and Trinkunas evalu-

ate evidence from regions such as Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America.

*The Balance of Power in World History* (*BoPinWH*), by contrast, presents a sustained broadside against balance of power theory. Its contributors—Wohlforth, Kaufman, Little, Eckstein, Brenner, Hui, Deudney, Jones, and Kang—survey a range of international systems, from the ancient Middle East to East Asia between 1300 CE and 1900 CE. They argue that while one can detect evidence of balance of power dynamics, other factors, most notably shifts in the administrative capacity of would-be and existing hegemons, the expansion of systems to include new units, the existence of strong particularistic identities among polities, and the fact of international societal norms, account for variation between anarchical and hierarchical orders in world politics (*BoPinWH*, 244–46).

In *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (*W&SF*), Victoria Tin-bor Hui, whose findings also appear in an abridged form in the aforementioned volume, offers a breathtaking comparison between early modern Europe (1495–1815) and Warring States China (656–221 BCE). She argues that the structure of international politics results from the dynamic interplay of state forms and strategies; power-political competition involves the interaction between "logics of balancing" and "logics of domination." Hui contends that self-strengthening reforms and power-maximizing tactics, such as divide-and-conquer gambits, can overcome balancing dynamics, as they did in the Qin creation of universal empire in ancient China. The establishment of a balance of power in early modern Europe, moreover, owed more to the relative weakness of state institutions—their embrace of "self-weakening expedients," such as the sale of administrative offices and a reliance on loans to finance military activity, that reduced their extractive capacity—than to the putative balancing pressures created by anarchical orders.

Schweller's *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (*UT*) presents a more sympathetic treatment of balance of power theory. Schweller rejects the proposition that the balance of power represents a law of nature, but he, like many other neoclassical realists, accepts that anarchy produces incentives for states to pay attention to relative power. He argues that state responses to the distribution of power and changes in it stem primarily from domestic political processes. The diversion of resources for military purposes constitutes a costly policy for states and their leaders; states' mobilization capacity

varies widely and thus generates differences in their ability to convert resources into military power. States may underbalance, balance, over-balance, or eschew balancing altogether.

Schweller contends that four factors shape these outcomes: the degree of "elite consensus . . . about the nature and extent of the threat" posed by another polity, the degree of "elite cohesion" within domestic society, the degree of "social cohesion" within a state, and the "degree of regime vulnerability" to domestic challenges—which involves the legitimacy of a regime (*UT*, 11–13).

According to Schweller, the configuration of these variables produces a number of different processes that, in turn, lead to a range of balancing behaviors. For example, "the rise of an external threat" may trigger "social fragmentation" in "incoherent states" and thus produce cascading conflicts at the elite and societal level that aggregate into underbalancing (*UT*, 63). But the basic logic holds that states are most likely to balance effectively when they score high on elite consensus, elite cohesion, social cohesion, and regime stability; in other words, when they approach the ideal-typical unitary states often associated with neorealist theory. He tests his predictions through an analysis of interwar France and Britain, France from 1877 to 1913 and the "small power" conflict from 1864 to 1870 involving Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil.

## II. BALANCING, POWER BALANCES, AND BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

Over fifty years ago Ernst Haas identified a number of different—and incompatible—uses of the term "balance of power."[12] Recent work on the subject suggests that, despite decades of attempts to give greater analytical precision to the phrases "balancing" and "balance of power," there has not been much progress. As Jack Levy argues, "While the balance of power concept is one of the most prominent ideas in the theory and practice of international relations, it is also one of the most ambiguous and intractable ones" (*BoP:T&P*, 29).[13]

In some respects, the conceptual challenges presented by the balance of power concept are less intractable than many international relations scholars suggest. Almost all of the works considered here adopt similar understandings of the balance of power as a systemic condition:

[12] Haas 1953.
[13] See also *UT*, 9.

one of a power equilibrium among states, with power equilibrium defined largely in terms of military capabilities. The opposite of systemic balances of power involves a range of concentrated power equilibria, from unipolar distributions of power, to hegemonic systems in which a single, preeminent power establishes rules of the game for international conduct, to universal empires that effectively eliminate the autonomy of subordinate political communities (*BoP:T&P*, 2; *BoPinWH*, 4–5).

Similarly, most scholars agree that balance of power theory is defined by a core wager: that systemic balances of power represent some kind of natural tendency of international politics. In consequence, balance of power theory implies that states will behave in ways that check or even undermine the concentration of military capabilities in the hands of a single political community (*BoPinWH*, 3–5; *UT*, 4–6; *W&SF*, 24–26). But this consensus breaks down in the face of attempts to define balancing.

The existence of multiple types of related theories often complicates discussions of the balance of power in contemporary international relations theory. Levy notes that "there is no single balance of power theory, but instead a variety of balance of power theories" that involve "discrete hypotheses that have yet to be integrated into a well-developed theory" (*BoP:T&P*, 31). Leading scholars slice and dice cognate theories in a variety of ways, but, as I noted at the outset, we actually confront three subgenres of theories related to the balance of power: balance of power theory, theories of power balances, and theories of balancing. These classes of theories intersect with one another in ways illustrated by Figure 1.

Note that (1) balance of power theories always supply theories of power balances and at least partial theories of balancing; (2) theories of power balances often, but do not always, contain theories of balancing; and (3) theories of balancing frequently imply theories of power balances, but we can treat particular claims about how, when, and why states adopt balancing policies as independent from explanations for the formation of systemic power balances.

## Balance of Power Theory

Proponents of balance of power theory argue that some combination of mechanisms endemic to world politics creates pressures for the formation of recurrent balances of power in international systems.[14] Such mechanisms might lie at the level of individual decision makers, such
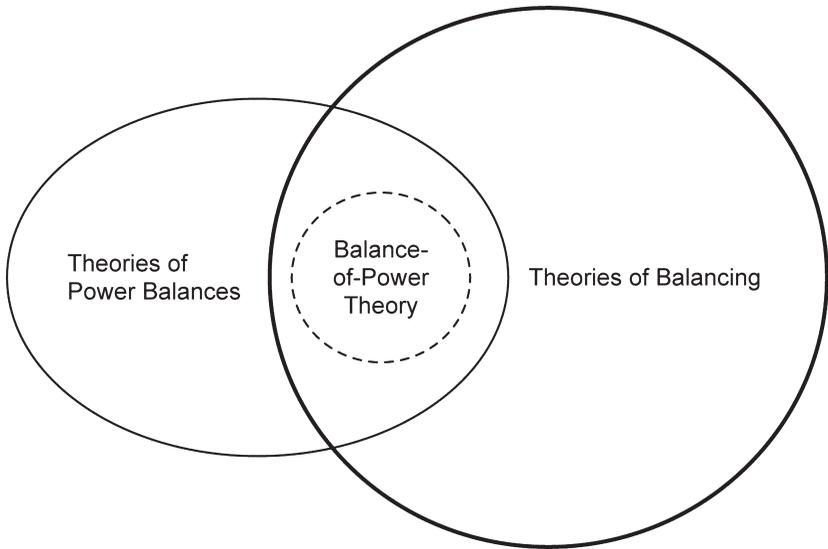
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[14] Ikenberry 2002b, 7–8.

FIGURE 1
CONCEPTUAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CATEGORIES OF THEORIES RELATED TO
BALANCING AND THE BALANCE OF POWER

as a human tendency to pursue power for its own sake, or in the international environment itself. Although a few "human nature" accounts of the balance of power persist in international relations theory, they occupy a marginal position in these debates and require little elaboration here.[15]

Structural realists locate the dynamics that contribute to systemic balances of power in the anarchical structure of world politics. These processes, or balance of power mechanisms, involve familiar components of Waltz's theory. Anarchical orders are governed by principles of self-help: "Units in the condition of anarchy—be they people, corporations, states or whatever—must rely on the means they can make for themselves."[16] Since self-help systems require states to place power-political concerns before other considerations, anarchy primes states to pay attention to changes in relative capabilities. Those that fail to respond to this imperative will fall by the wayside through conquest, through informal subordination, or by becoming weak and insignificant actors on the international stage. Processes of mimicry and emulation

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[15] See Bell and MacDonald 2001; Thayer 2000.
[16] Waltz 1979, 88; see also *UT*, 103.

work to reinforce these tendencies: states and their leadership confront strong incentives to adopt the practices of successful actors.[17]

Defining balance of power theory in this way suggests a departure from some of the more common ways of qualifying it. The most important differences among balance of power theories concern not, for example, whether they are conditional or unconditional (Levy, *BoP:T&P*, 37–44). Rather, all balance of power theories hold that relevant mechanisms and processes are *unconditional*—in other words, invariant across time and space.[18] They differ, at least in principle, not only on the nature of the processes and mechanisms themselves but, more relevant for our purposes, also on the relative strength of those mechanisms and processes in producing outcomes.

We can conceptualize balance of power theories as falling along a continuum. The *strongest* forms of balance of power theory hold that balance of power mechanisms preclude the formation of international hierarchies. By contrast, the *weakest* balance of power theory holds that balance of power mechanisms need not concatenate to produce systemic power balances; nevertheless, such mechanisms remain significant factors in determining international political outcomes. Most contemporary articulations of balance of power theory fall somewhere in between, although they tend to cluster on the left-hand side of the continuum; in other words, they view systemic balances of power as *likely* or *predominate* outcomes in international politics.

Waltz's variant of balance of power theory occupies a somewhat ambiguous position on this continuum. Waltz sometimes describes his argument in ways that locate it as a rather strong variant of balance of power theory. Consider Waltz's claim that the present unipolar system is unlikely to last and that we are seeing the early phases of an "all-but-inevitable movement from unipolarity to multipolarity."[19] At the same time, Waltz insists that international structures and their associated mechanisms merely "shape and shove" units in the direction of balance of power dynamics.[20] International structural mechanisms provide only a partial explanation for the specific foreign policies pursued by states; they account for why, "through all the changes of boundaries, of social, economic, and political form, of economic and military activ-

[17] Waltz 1979, 116–22. See also Gilpin 1981, 85–87; Goddard and Nexon 2005, 22–29.

[18] Causal mechanisms, as part of the character of the natural and/or social world, vary in how they translate into outcomes; they always exist, however, wherever we find associated natural or social conditions. Independent variables, by contrast, are defined by their presence or absence from particular conjunctions. On the invariant character of mechanisms, see Mahoney 2004; Wight 2006.

[19] Waltz 2000, 32.

[20] Waltz 1979, 38–93. See also Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993, 135–36.

ity, the substance and style of international politics remain strikingly constant."[21]

Waltz, therefore, presents a moderately strong balance of power theory, one that allows actors to choose to ignore structural imperatives but that nonetheless expects a tendency toward systemic balances of power.[22] Thus, attempts to discredit the theory on the grounds that many realists invoke unit-level factors—such as domestic political structures, economic arrangements, and governing ideologies—to explain specific outcomes rest on a misreading of Waltz.[23] Structural realism is, at least in broad strokes, consistent with the neoclassical realist "middle ground between pure structural theorists" and those that deny the importance of international structures in influencing outcomes.[24]

Defining balance of power theory in this way raises some interesting issues. First, even though Waltz presents a *relatively* strong version of balance of power theory, he allows for the possibility that other factors will overcome balance of power mechanisms.[25] Second, just as those influenced by structural realism sometimes uphold the general parameters of the theory while jettisoning Waltz's specific claims about bipolar stability, we can, in principle, recast it as a weaker form of balance of power theory than the one Waltz presents. Third, if we slide structural realism far enough toward the weak side of the continuum, its claims become indistinguishable from those of most variants of contemporary realism.

## Theories of Power Balances

Theories of power balances seek to explain the emergence of systemic balances of power, generally understood in terms of military capabilities.[26] Every balance of power theory contains a theory of power balances: such theories purport to explain the formation of balancing equilibria. But a theory of power balances need not embrace the claim that international politics tend toward systemic balances of power. A theory of power balances might, for example, suggest that systemic bal-

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[21] Waltz 1986, 329.
[22] Elman and Elman 1995, 191; Goddard and Nexon 2005, 22–25.
[23] Cf. Legro and Moravcsik 1999.
[24] Rose 1998, 152.
[25] Goddard and Nexon 2005, 28–29, 30–31.
[26] In principle, a subset of "theories of power balances" deal with dyadic or other "local" balances of power, that is, when two states or more states enjoy a rough balance of capabilities with one another, but that balance does not imply an equilibria of power in that particular international system. I do not discus such theories here; it requires little additional reasoning to make sense of their relationship to balance of power theory, theories of balancing, and systemic power balances.

ances of power rarely obtain in international politics. Or it might claim that systemic balances of power, although relatively frequent, emerge through dynamics unrelated to any generalized balance of power mechanism.

Differentiating between balance of power theory and theories of power balances focuses our attention on a number of important considerations. Levy argues that balance of power theories almost invariably begin with realist assumptions (*BoP:T&P*, 31), but theories of power balances need not be realist in character. "English school theorists," notes Richard Little, "also identify an institutionalized balance of power that formed first in European international society and is much more effective than a systemic balance at reproducing anarchy" (*BoPinWH*, 48). The balance of power, in fact, descends more from liberal political theory than from realist alternatives.[27] In principle, one could construct any number of social-constructionist theories that explain systemic power balances as resulting from specific configurations of norms, practices, and ideologies (*BoPinWH*, 6–18).

Hegemonic order and power transition accounts also contain theories of power balances (and of balancing) but comprise, at best, extremely weak balance of power theories. Both suggest that systemic balances of power should obtain only under restricted conditions. First, differences in relative growth rates might create a rough equilibrium between major powers. Second, major shifts in administrative, military, social, or economic technologies might shift relative capabilities and thereby create a systemic balance of power. Third, dissatisfaction with the current orders allocation of status, material benefits, or other goods might lead states to enhance their capabilities to challenge a predominate power while accelerating processes of hegemonic overextension (Lemke, *BoP:T&P*, 55–58).[28]

Aspects of both theories suggest that status quo powers—those satisfied with the current order—will not challenge a preeminent power and thus will not bring about a period of temporary systemic balance. But the existence of revisionist states may not be necessary for the emergence of systemic power balances. Even if potential challengers adopt strategies of accommodation with a hegemonic power, their greater underlying resources—or ability to translate those resources into economic performance—may push the distribution of power toward greater equilibrium.[29] Leaders face a number of incentives to maintain or expand

[27] Boucoyannis 2007.
[28] See also Gilpin 1981; Ikenberry 2001; Organski 1958.
[29] Gilpin 1981, 156–85.

their relative allocation of resources to military capabilities *independent* of assessments of external threats, let alone their orientation toward preeminent powers.[30]

THEORIES OF BALANCING

Theories of balancing seek to explain the conditions that lead states to adopt balancing strategies, that is, which states balance and how they balance (Paul, *BoP:T&P*, 2; Wohlforth et al., *BoPinWH*, 9–10).[31] Such theories may suggest that actors rarely adopt balancing policies and therefore challenge stronger variants of balance of power theory.[32] Even theories that posit the ubiquity of balancing strategies need not imply that these strategies aggregate into systemic power balances. If, as Stephen Walt famously argues, states balance threats rather than power, then benign hegemons may not face countervailing coalitions or widespread internal balancing against their preeminent position.[33] Theories of balancing are logically distinct from both balance of power theories and theories of power balances.

Theories of balancing, like theories of power balances, need not be realist in character. Actors might pursue balancing strategies for ideological, normative, or symbolic reasons. Just as English School theorists understand the balance of power as a social institution, other international relations scholars associate specific decisions to engage in balancing behavior with leaders who internalize balancing as a normative obligation of statecraft, as a strategic response to domestic political challenges to their legitimacy, or as driven by threats generated by ideological differences more than by relative capabilities (for example, Barletta and Trinkunas, *BoP:T&P*).[34] Others might explain balancing strategies as responses to demands from particular interest groups or as a means of holding together heterogeneous political coalitions.[35] But all of this begs the question of what constitutes balancing, a topic to which I now turn.

## III. WHAT IS BALANCING?

Here we find marked divergences in contemporary realist writings on the balance of power. Schweller adopts a traditional view of balanc-

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[30] Brooks and Wohlforth 2005a, 79–81; Lieber and Alexander 2005, 121–23.

[31] I thank one of the reviewers for suggesting this formulation.

[32] Schweller 1994.

[33] Walt 1987. See also Ikenberry 2001. Wohlforth's earlier work on the stability of unipolarity, for instance, argued from the perspective of both balance of power theory and theories of power balances. See Wohlforth 1999.

[34] See also, e.g., Legro 2007; Owen 2005.

[35] See, e.g., Narziny 2003; Snyder 1991.

ing: "Balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or the political and military domination of the state by a foreign power or coalition." Therefore, "balancing exists *only when* the stakes concern some form of political subjugation or, more directly, the seizure of territory, either one's homeland or vital interests abroad. . . . [B]alancing *requires* that states target their military hardware at each other in preparation for a potential war" (*UT*, 9, emphasis added).

Wohlforth, Kaufman, and Little further distinguish between dyadic and systemic orientations of balancing. Balancing may be oriented toward deterring any threatening actor, or it may be oriented toward preventing the emergence—or undermining the position—of a hegemonic power (*BoPinWH*, 9). As Paul argues, "The purpose of balancing" in traditional balance of power theory "is to prevent a rising power from assuming hegemony, and if and when that prevention succeeds, a balance of power is expected to be present" (*BoP:T&P*, 2).

But Paul, along with Robert Pape, rejects such stringent understandings of balancing. Paul's introduction reaffirms their claim that, because "the ultimate purpose of any balancing strategy is to reduce or match the capabilities of a powerful state or a threatening actor," balancing behavior includes a broad portfolio of strategies. Paul therefore draws a distinction between three classes of balancing: hard balancing, soft balancing, and asymmetric balancing (*BoP:T&P*, 3).

Asymmetric balancing includes the efforts by states "to balance and contain indirect threats" from groups lacking the "ability to challenge . . . states using conventional military capabilities or strategies." It also involves "efforts by subnational actors and their state sponsors to challenge and weaken established states using asymmetric means such as terrorism" (*BoP:T&P*, 3, also 16–17). Compare Steven David's theory of omnibalancing, which holds that weak regimes confront trade-offs between balancing against domestic and external threats and that this trade-off explains their alliance policies better than theories that only examine their external relations.[36]

While hard balancing refers to the traditional notion of balancing reflected in Schweller's definition, soft balancing

> involves tacit balancing short of formal alliances. It occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms buildup, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration

[36] David 1991.

in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening. (*BoP:T&P*, 3)

Wohlforth, Kaufman, and Little avoid taking a direct stance on the soft balancing debate. Their inquiry concerns traditional balancing and balance of power theory. But they do give the critics of attempts to broaden the definition of balancing the last word on the matter. They note that expanding the concept of balancing beyond attempts to enhance military capabilities "represents what . . . Sartori dubbed 'concept misformation' or 'concept stretching—essentially, stretching a term to refer to a phenomenon entirely distinct from the one it previously meant." And they point out that

> [f]rom the critics' point of view, the underlying logical error is to conflate balance-of-power theory's analytical insight (balancing tends to occur) with a particular descriptive position (that must be happening now). Balance-of-power terminology is particularly prone to such concept stretching because the term was already so elastic and diverse in meaning, but such stretching creates the risk of turning the concept into what . . . Richard Cobden labeled it almost two centuries ago: "a chimera: It is not a fallacy, a mistake, an imposture—it has an undescribed, indescribable, incomprehensible nothing." (*BoPinWH*, 3)

Indeed, when scholars conjoin more expansive definitions of balancing to strong balance of power theories or even to some specific theories of power balances, they risk moving the goalposts in ways designed to validate the predictions of balance of power theory. This objection loses much of its force once we distinguish between balance of power theory and theories of balancing. Claims about what counts as balancing, when used for the purpose of constructing theories of balancing, are logically independent from arguments that international power-political competition tends to produce systemic balances of military capabilities.

The key question therefore becomes whether conceptual or methodological concerns warrant restricting balancing to its putatively traditional meaning. Paul and Pape get the better of this debate. If actors engage in balancing when they seek to reduce their vulnerability to political subjugation—or loss of control over territory or vital interests—by either enhancing their own capabilities, pooling their capabilities, or reducing the capabilities of a threatening actor, then there is no compelling reason to exclude strategies that involve nonmilitary instruments. The case for including nonmilitary instruments becomes stronger once we recognize that power—even under the restrictive definition of an actor's ability to get another actor to do something she otherwise would

not do—involves a great deal more than military force.[37] Many regimes (or other actors) face more immediate threats to their survival—or other vital interests—than warfare with other states.[38] Direct military conflict, moreover, represents the most extreme means of resolving competition over assets. And actors sometimes lose their political autonomy without organized armies firing a shot or swinging a sword.

It follows that theories of balancing should involve a range of possible practices designed to rectify a security deficit rather than to maximize power for its own sake. Inquiring into why actors adopt various forms of traditional and nontraditional balancing and into the conditions under which those forms accomplish their objectives constitutes an important set of considerations for theories of balancing. Just as different conditions likely account for why actors adopt internal or external military balancing, regional or international system balancing (*BoP:T&P*, 5–7), and interventionist or offshore balancing,[39] we should continue to develop theories that specify why states opt for any number of combinations of military balancing, nonmilitary balancing, or both.

The major problem with the soft balancing concept is, in fact, one of analytical coherence. Current efforts to distinguish between hard and soft balancing conflate three diverse ways in which balancing behavior departs from that specified in traditional conceptions of balancing: (1) as attempts to enhance security through means *not overtly targeted as the capabilities of other actors*; (2) as strategies to reduce imbalances in military capabilities that rely on *instruments other than military mobilization or alliance formations*; and (3) as efforts to reduce imbalances in power and influence *beyond those directly involving military capabilities*.[40]

Paul describes, for example, "limited arms buildup" and "ad hoc cooperative" military "exercises" as examples of soft balancing when they involve "tacit non-offensive" efforts to "neutralize a rising or potentially threatening power" (*BoP:T&P*, 14). This sometimes reflects type 1 nontraditional balancing. He also includes the "use of international institutions to create ad hoc coalitions and limit the power of the

[37] Many scholars of international politics, as well as so-called classical realists, recognize that actors deploy propaganda, persuasion, and diplomatic skill to avoid loss of territory or political domination. See, e.g., Carr 1946; Morgenthau 1948. One of the most successful neologisms of the last few decades, "soft power," captures aspects of this insight. See Nye 1990. For a discussion of the coercive aspects of soft power influence, see Bially Mattern 2005. For a discussion of the varieties of power, see Barnett and Duvall 2005.

[38] For discussions of why regime (or leadership) security is often a more salient locus of analysis than unitary states, see Bueno de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow 2003. Such arguments supply additional reasons why asymmetric balancing, which I have not discussed in detail, constitutes a reasonable object of inquiry for theories of balancing.

[39] See, e.g., Layne 1997.

[40] For similar lines of argument, see Crawford 2008a, 38–40; Joffe 2002, 172–77.

threatening states" and points to how "Russia, France, and Germany cooperated with the UN Security Council to prevent the United States from initiating war against Iraq in 2002–2003" (*BoP:T&P*, 14). But if such efforts involved an attempt to increase the costs of U.S. power projection by withholding legitimacy and thus reducing the size of its "coalition of the willing" (as well as increasing the costs of the U.S. occupation of Iraq), then it reflects type 2 nontraditional balancing; that is, it aimed at reducing American military capabilities directly. If, by contrast, this effort involved an attempt to reduce the ability of the United States to achieve its policy preferences—to diminish its power and influence in the broader sense of the terms—then it constitutes an example of type 3 nontraditional balancing.[41]

The problems with current distinction between hard and soft balancing become more evident once we consider that all actors in international politics make strategic choices under conditions of uncertainty (or, more accurately, risk).[42] Consider two balancing strategies. First, that of a state engaged in a limited arms buildup designed to enhance its deterrent capacity without directly antagonizing the target of balancing. Second, that of a state implementing an intensive campaign of military mobilization that goes further toward rectifying its security deficit but also risks antagonizing its target or producing security-dilemma dynamics. The differences between them reflect matters of *degree* rather than of *kind*. Both constitute examples of behavior that we would normally code as traditional or hard balancing, albeit ones that stem from distinctive judgments about the costs and benefits of various levels of military mobilization.

Now, it may be that the former fails to make much of a difference in, for example, the *systemic* distribution of power, while the latter does. But this is a matter of interest for theories of power balances and balance of power theory, rather than for theories of balancing per se. Furthermore, such steps may reflect what Schweller terms "underbalancing" or simply involve an accurate assessment that the level of potential threat posed by other actors fails to warrant more significant diversion of resources to military capabilities.

Thus, rather than differentiating between hard and soft balancing, work on *theories of balancing* should include a wide range of policies that actors deploy to reduce security deficits; and scholars should pay attention to a variety of strategies of power-political competition. We

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[41] It could, of course, represent a combination of all three types. The point is that they are analytically distinct.
[42] Cf. Rathbun 2007.

can sketch a number of candidates for such different forms of balancing, that is, beyond the standard menu of arms buildups, military modernization, the exchange of territory in postwar settlements such as the Concert of Vienna, and the creation of formal and informal alliances designed to rectify military imbalances.[43] Moreover, many of these traditional forms of balancing may involve the use of nonmilitary instruments, whether economic or symbolic in character.

1. *Divide-and-balance* strategies seek to correct security deficits by directly targeting the ability of rivals to engage in collective mobilization. We should distinguish, at a minimum, two general forms of divide-and-balance policies. First, balancers might seek to convince an actor's allies (or potential allies) to defect from the cooperative arrangement, remain neutral, or switch allegiances.[44] In practice, such tactics involve a range of inducements, from providing specific assets to issuing coercive threats, or even rely on symbolic instruments such as appeals to identity, norms, or role expectations.[45] Even if, for example, a balancer merely enhances the exit options of a third party or reduces the legitimacy of a third party's compliance with alliance obligations, it might improve its security environment by decreasing a rival's bargaining leverage over an ally or client (Layne, *BoP:T&P*, 117–18). Second, balancers might encourage factions within a target to oppose its power-political policies or even actively resist its leadership. States have, for example, long supported dissidents and insurgents as a way of weakening potential threats. At the extreme, states may seek to replace a hostile regime with a friendly one.[46]

2. *Proxy balancing* refers to transfers of resources, particularly armaments, to third parties with the aim of limiting a state's power projection capabilities or rectifying a regional imbalance of power. Proxy balancing does not involve formal alliances and may not even carry with it any operational input into the use of transferred capabilities. In consequence, some instances of proxy balancing would not "count" as

[43] Note that expansion of a state's counterterrorism capabilities, including surveillance, constitutes a way of balancing against nonstate threats, as does pooling resources through international policing agreements with the purpose of limiting the capabilities of nonstate actors to threaten the security of relevant states. These activities may not have any implications for the interstate balance of power, but they deserve analysis in the context of more general theories of balancing.

[44] Crawford 2008a; Crawford 2008b.

[45] On legitimation strategies as instruments of power politics in general, and wedge strategies in particular, see Goddard 2008–9.

[46] Consider English support of the Dutch Rebels in the early phases of the Eighty Years War. At times, this support amounted to actual military intervention and formal alliance, but Elizabeth I also pursued policies of more limited support—military aid, the harboring of coastal raiders, and so forth—designed to prevent the outright victory of either the Spanish Habsburgs or their rebellious subjects. See Parker 1977.

a balancing coalition, insofar as the only action the balancer takes is to sell arms to a third party.[47]

3. *Balancing through public goods substitution*. States seeking to enhance their political autonomy and perhaps weaken the influence of another state in a region or issue-area may form arrangements to provide public goods equivalent to those offered by another state or coalition of states. Such balancing efforts might provide exit options to actual or potential clients of another state, reduce the ability of a state to meddle in other states' internal affairs, and otherwise reduce the costs of dependency upon the target of the balancing policy.

Actors may, of course, pursue divide-and-balance strategies through public goods substitution, but we should distinguish between, first, direct attempts to splinter a coalition and, second, balancing strategies that seek to reduce the general influence of their targets in a region or issue-area. The latter but not the former qualify as balancing through public goods substitution. For example, to the extent that democracy-promotion efforts by the United States and European actors constitute real—or merely perceived—threats to some autocratic regimes, those regimes have incentives to seek alternative arrangements to generate international public goods through bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.[48]

4. *Binding*. We might code binding policies as the flip side of divide-and-balance tactics—or as counters to Hui's divide-and-conquer stratagems. Binding strategies seek to constrain or enmesh targets in institutions, agreements, or forms of interdependency so as to weaken their ability to pursue autonomous policies.[49] If binding simply involves part of the process through which states form countervailing coalitions, then we probably lack a good reason for considering it a distinctive form of balancing. But when binding involves attempts by states facing a security deficit to reduce the autonomy of another actor, and hence the latter's capacity to engage in threatening or predatory behavior, then we should consider it a separate form of balancing behavior.[50]

Many of the objections to extending the concept of balancing beyond so-called traditional forms, as we have seen, lack sound foundations, particularly in the context of theories of balancing. The major remaining criticisms involve the technical difficulty of distinguishing

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[47] Bernier 2003.
[48] See McDermott 2007, 3.
[49] Deudney 2006; Deudney and Ikenberry 1999, 182–84; Ikenberry 2001, 40–41.
[50] In consequence, work on binding as balancing should also take into consideration binding processes found in nonbalancing contexts. See, e.g., Martin 1992.

between nontraditional balancing and international politics as usual.[51] But such objections also apply to *traditional* forms of internal and external balancing: theories of *any form* of balancing require some reference to the motivations and intentions of actors.[52]

Indeed, most of the processes associated with power politics—whether involving military, diplomatic, social, or economic components—involve balancing only in conjunction with their contexts and objectives. Hui's divide-and-conquer stratagems translate into divide-and-rule policies when oriented toward maintaining hierarchy, rather than creating it.[53] The same class of policies, when deployed by external or sea-based powers and oriented toward preventing the formation of regional hegemonies, fall under the rubric of offshore balancing. Binding may serve balancing goals or constitute a tool by which a great power controls its clients and weaker allies. And, as we have seen, internal military buildups need not have any relationship to balancing behavior.

It is always difficult to arrive at an accurate assessment of actors' true intentions. And, of course, subjective value judgments often intrude into even the best-intentioned scholarship. States that one side perceives as aggressive may justify their policies on the grounds that they are aimed at enhancing state security; their leadership may even believe the rationale. The point is driven home by Schweller's analysis of overbalancing. Thus, we should not conclude that it is impossible to "effectively distinguish between" nontraditional "balancing and routine diplomatic friction" and that the claims advanced by proponents of "soft balancing" are "non-falsifiable."[54] When states attempt to withhold legitimacy from another state's attempts at power projection, for example, they *may* be engaging in divide-and-balance strategies that seek to weaken support for that state's ability to deploy or pool resources. Technical problems in coding provide a justification for careful analysis and sophisticated measurement criteria, not for rejecting a concept entirely.

[51] Which is an odd criticism, actually. Should not realists argue that "politics as usual" and "power politics" are one and the same?

[52] See Brooks and Wohlforth 2005a, 79–82.

[53] On this distinction, see Nexon and Wright 2007, 261. For similar distinctions, but described as "wedge strategies," see also Crawford 2008a, 21–29, 41–42. Crawford notes, quite rightly, the parallels between offshore balancing and processes of divide and rule. Seen in this way, offshore balancing strategies appear a good deal less benign than some of their advocates imply.

[54] Lieber and Alexander 2005, 110.

## IV. THE END OF BALANCE OF POWER THEORY?

The four works considered here provide a strong warrant for the discipline to decouple theories of balancing from balance of power theory and even to adopt an expansive understanding of balancing. None of them provide much in the way of support for traditional balance of power theory. Together, they provide a potentially devastating brief against it.

Fortmann, Paul, and Wirtz conclude that available evidence suggests the absence of significant traditional balancing against the United States and that it will no longer do for balance of power theorists to proclaim, "just give the international system more time." They also contend, however, that "historically, when confronted with the rising and threatening power of a hegemon, eligible states often would form balancing coalitions to countervail, deter, and decrease the power and threatening behavior of that state" (*BoP:T&P*, 362–63, 364). The essays by Levy and Lemke in the same volume, however, raise serious doubts about how much weight we should place on the qualifier "often," let alone whether those attempts to form countervailing coalitions account for the creation of a systemic power balances.

Schweller's argument, if correct, suggests further problems for balance of power theory. If how states respond to relative power is largely a function of domestic environments, then we cannot explain systemic balances of power by invoking endemic features of world politics. Only when an international system contains a sufficient number of cohesive and domestically secure states should we expect their behaviors to aggregate into international power balances. Balance of power theory, properly understood, merely specifies a set of variables that, in conjunction, produce systemic balances of power. In other words, it is a theory of power balances, rather than a genuine balance of power theory.

Indeed, the weight of historical evidence found in both *The Balance of Power in World History* and *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* casts significant doubt on the comparative frequency, let alone the effectiveness, of counterbalancing efforts. In the ancient Middle Eastern system, the Greek city-state system, the Mediterranean system during the rise of Rome, ancient India, ancient China, pre-Columbian Meso-America and South America, and for six hundred years of East Asian history, balancing processes rarely blocked the emergence of a preeminent power or undermined it once it came into being. Although both works find balancing dynamics in their cases, these often failed in the face of the logics of domination.

First, both internal and external balancing requires costly collective mobilization. Leaders must convince domestic interests to sacrifice wealth—and even their lives—to defend their governing regime. Members of countervailing coalitions must manage mutual suspicions and conflicting interests to engage in joint action that might very well advantage some while disadvantaging others. Domination seekers, as both works demonstrate, are often well positioned to exploit these frictions by offering selective incentives to members of domestic and interstate coalitions or by sowing confusion about their expansionist intentions. The Qin, for example, routinely bribed and subverted key ministers in their rivals' governments (*W&SF*, 69). Domination seekers may also simply benefit, as did Persia and Rome, from enduring rivalries among their targets of predation, some of which may even prefer domination by the would-be hegemon over the risk of advantaging a hated rival (*BoPinWH*, 53–64, 75–82, 90–91) .

Second, some international systems develop norms of deference to powerful polities, or otherwise involve forms of political legitimation amenable to subordination to external political communities, that reduce the likelihood of opposition to an expanding or established hegemon. These norms deter collective action against hegemons and would-be hegemons and create patterns of collective mobilization that reinforce both expansion and extant political domination by a preeminent power (*BoPinWH*, 220–26).

Third, expansionist states often benefit from the economies of scale they enjoy relative to smaller rivals. Such advantages not infrequently translate into overwhelming power when augmented by advances in "administrative technologies," such as new forms of political and social control, that increase their extractive capacity relative to other polities, while also helping them to overcome the "loss of strength gradient" associated with territorial and political expansion (*W&SF*, 29–33, *BoPinWH*, 12–13, 245). But other polities, because of "narrow interests and institutional rigidities," often fail, contra balance of power theory, to emulate these "self-strengthening reforms implemented by a potential hegemon" (*BoPinWH*, 19). In essence, spikes in what, following Schweller, we might term the "collective-mobilization capacity" of some states allow them to enjoy asymmetric advantages over their targets' ability to mobilize internal resources or their combined resources, thus rendering countervailing coalitions, if they emerge at all, ineffective.

Thus, these studies provide extremely strong evidence that balancing equilibria often stem from dynamics other than those associated with balance of power theory, namely, those found in hegemonic order and

power transition theory, such as institutional or external (nonbalanc-ing) constraints on hegemonic expansion and internal failures in impe-rial and hegemonic political systems. So even when balancing occurs in tandem with systemic balances of power, we cannot infer that the former accounts for the latter. What objections, then, might balance of power theorists raise against these apparently devastating findings?

One major objection concerns the premodern character of most of the cases of systemic balancing failures. Balance of power theorists in the structural-realist vein might respond that the scope conditions of the theory are limited to nation-states differentiated by principles of sover-eign territoriality. Waltz's own definition of anarchy arguably smuggles in assumptions of, at the very least, state sovereignty: "each [unit] is the equal of all the others. None is entitled to command; none is required to obey. International systems are decentralized and anarchic."[55] Gilpin, for his part, identifies "the triumph of the nation-state as the principal actor in international relations" as one of the three factors that broke the "cycle of empires" characteristic of premodern systems.[56]

This line of reasoning might suggest that Waltz's critics are right: that nationalism and sovereignty increase the costs of conquest and that this logic, not balance of power mechanisms, helps explain any observed tendencies toward balance in the contemporary international system.[57] But it also might imply an amendment to balance of power theory itself: that it describes structural conditions that travel imper-fectly to other periods.

Such a defense, however, generates two problems for structural-real-ist balance of power theory. First, it, like Schweller's theory, transforms structural realism into a *theory of power balances*, that is, a specification of particular conditions that make systemic balances of power more likely, rather than a claim that balance of power processes operate across all systems without a common authority to make and enforce rules of conduct. Second, it suggests that the very factors that generate systemic power balances *either* reside in norms, identities, and social institutions *or* involve the character of the political communities that populate in-ternational systems. Neither interpretation sits all that well with the commitments of realist balance of power theorists; both fundamen-tally challenge the proposition that the nature of international politics inherently creates pressures for the formation of recurrent balances of power. Balance of power theorists, moreover, must still contend with

[55] Waltz 1979, 88.
[56] Gilpin 1981, 116
[57] See Kaufman 1997, 182–83.

Hui's arguments that ancient China involved similar principles of differentiation, collective identification, and interstate practice as those exhibited by the modern state system, yet Qin achieved universal domination (*BoPinWH*, 3–7).

Nevertheless, ancient China also experienced a period of roughly seven hundred years of balance (453–221 BCE), during which time much of Qin's accumulation of power occurred as it operated on the periphery of the state system's power-political struggles (*W&SF*, 54–99). Balance of power theorists might, indeed, take comfort in two aspects of these studies: that political communities do often attempt to balance in the face of unfavorable distributions of power, and that, by Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth's reckoning, "'balanced' multipolar and bipolar systems are" not unusual, if less common across world history, than "are 'unbalanced' unipolar and hegemonic systems" (*BoPinWH*, 231). Even though systems tend toward consolidation over time, balance of power theory's *prescriptive* recommendations seem to hold: if polities wish to maintain their autonomy, they should endeavor to balance in the face of unfavorable shifts in the distribution of power. This suggests a potentially more promising line of defense: one that focuses on relatively weak variants of balance of power theory.

If we understand structural realism as a claim about a set of international-structural mechanisms that, ceteris paribus, result in systemic balances of power, the question becomes whether the factors specified in recent critical studies are logically consistent with the expectations we might derive from these mechanisms. We should not, in fact, expect balance of power mechanisms to result in systemic balances when actors lack the combined capabilities to match those of a domination seeker. Such circumstances are most likely when one unit gains a decisive advantage over its rivals as a result of a political, economic, or technological innovation. If the rate of first-party advantage is significantly higher than the rate of diffusion and adoption by competitors, then Waltz's mechanisms of selection and emulation will be *insufficient* to prevent the formation of hierarchy.

We should also not expect balance of power mechanisms to produce effective counterbalancing against a domination seeker, for example, if (1) actors lack adequate information about the degree of threat that they face or (2) institutional, cognitive, or other factors prevent them from adequately updating their estimations of threat in light of new evidence. Indeed, some instances of the formation of hegemony and imperial hierarchy share a similar pattern. An actor who is outside an established system of interaction—or operates at its margins—conquers

or subordinates the system. It could be, for example, that the domination seeker may appear out of nowhere with a powerful army. Other actors simply lack the time or ability to overcome barriers to concerted resistance against the new arrival.[58]

Less extreme are cases in which the domination seeker is known to the other polities in the system but, because of its liminal status, its rivals do not enjoy good information about its true capabilities and intentions. In such situations, the existence of a well-developed regional balance of power system may actually facilitate unbalanced concentrations of power. External powers lack the historical inertia of regional actors' alliance behavior, leaving them with more room for maneuver than regional rivals have. Often, local polities view external powers as a less immediate threat than their intrasystem rivals; they may not even recognize the true extent of an external power's capabilities. These factors mean that the smooth functioning of a regional balance of power system can actually render states vulnerable to strategies of divide and rule and divide and conquer. In such cases, the problem is not that the balance of power mechanism fails to function but that actors' inability to update their perceptions effectively translates balance of power *mechanisms* into systemic balancing failures (cf. *BoPinWH*, 13–15).[59]

Such situations, one might argue, fail to pose inordinate problems for weaker variants of balance of power theory: balancing pressures operate in the system, but the conditions for their translation into a balancing equilibrium do not exist. Although, for example, the structural logic of "the theory expects emulation to increase with the probability of hegemony" (*BoPinWH*, 9), that logic also does not preclude (1) situations in which the advantage accrued by a domination seeker surpasses any reasonable countervailing developments resulting from emulation or (2) collective action problems rooted in unit-level structures or interaction dynamics prevent effective emulation by other polities. Again, if actors routinely find themselves punished for failing to emulate the practices of successful political communities through loss of autonomy, great power status, or elimination, then we find some *confirmation* of structural realism's causal claims and policy recommendations.[60]

In this context, a broader conception of balancing also makes a great deal of sense. Given that various factors shape the *translation* of balance of power mechanisms into political behavior, we face no prima facie reason to eschew specifying how those mechanisms combine with

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[58] See Buzan, Jones, and Little 1993; Cioffi-Revilla 1996.
[59] See also Cederman 1994.
[60] Cf. Monten 2006.

situational conditions to produce nontraditional strategies and instruments of balancing. We should, instead, avoid using such examples as evidence for stronger versions of balance of power theory, that is, ones that claim that balance of power mechanisms invariably, or even usually, translate into systemic balances of power.

Any decision to adopt a weak balance of power theory—to treat balance of power theory as a shorthand for a set of mechanisms that may or may not produce systemic balances of power—should, however, raise concerns about the fate of balance of power theory. Balance of power theorists must consider whether such a watered-down theory becomes indistinguishable from a general commitment to neorealism or, indeed, whether it suggests something other than realism altogether.

## V. Conclusions

Balance of power theory, at least in its stronger variants, cannot survive the combined weight of arguments and evidence presented in these four volumes. While a case exists for preserving a weak balance of power theory, such a theory ultimately works by decoupling the mechanisms specified by Waltz from his predictions about system-level outcomes. Indeed, even contemporary variants of hegemonic order theory, let alone neoclassical realism, hold that anarchy shapes and shoves units so as to make relative power and power transitions crucial factors in international relations. It is therefore not at all clear that realists can eliminate *weak* variants of balance of power theory without calling into question why realism enjoys any status as a general account of world politics.

By the same token, however, such recent work on the balance of power demonstrates that realists can no longer ignore mechanisms and processes—and even those located at the level of international structure—that concatenate with those specified by structural realism to produce a range of international outcomes. Hui's specification of mechanisms of domination that *interact* with logic of balance (*W&SF*, chap. 1), and Kaufman, Little, and Wohlforth's careful consideration of mechanisms and processes derived from many different theoretical perspectives provide roadmaps for how realists can pursue an eclectic approach to international relations that nonetheless leaves realist sensibilities intact.[61]

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[61] See Katzenstein and Okarawa 2001–2.

But we still face basic questions about the nature of realist theory. The first concerns the current revival of interest in classical realist theory. Ever since Richard Ashley favorably compared classical realism to its neorealist alternatives, constructivists and poststructural scholars have affirmed classical realism as a point of departure for a richer analysis of the workings of power in international politics.[62] Such arguments highlight the need for realists to recapture not only a richer understanding of power but also a general concern with traditional parameters of power politics, including diplomatic competition, the workings of domination, collusion among great powers, and the micropolitics of unequal relations such as those at stake in patron-client interactions. Some of these dynamics involve nontraditional balancing discussed, but many extend beyond the category of balancing altogether.[63]

The second stems from how these works focus our attention on the interaction, or even coconstitution, of unit-level collective mobilization and international collective mobilization dynamics. In doing so, they raise deeper issues for realist theory, ones that, in turn, matter for international relations theory writ large. Waltz's balance of power theory, at heart, depends on a simple formulation: collective action is difficult among units but relatively easy within them.[64] States, or their historical equivalents, emerge as the focal point for the provision of private and collective goods in general and for security in particular. As Schweller notes, balance of power theory's "assumption of 'constant mobilization capability' allows balance-of-power and other systemic theories to ignore the politics of extraction" and therefore to ignore how spatiotemporal variation in the collective mobilization capacity of political communities profoundly shapes balancing behavior, let alone international outcomes (*UT*, 13).

But this assumption also operates at the level of international structure. Hui's analysis suggests that international systems involve varying opportunity structures for collective action and that the structures of units shape pathways and proclivities for collective action at the international level. This raises major pitfall for realist theory. If the structural configuration associated with anarchy is variable, rather than constant, then realists cannot assume that the processes and mechanisms they associate with anarchy operate with constant strength, if at all, across putatively international systems. And it follows that we cannot explain systemic balancing failures with reference to constant collective action

[62] Ashley 1986. See also Jackson 2004; Williams 2005.
[63] See, for example, Jourde 2007.
[64] Keohane and Nye 1989, 23–25; Nexon and Wright 2007, 255–56.

problems at the international level. Indeed, analysis of collective action in noninternational settings suggests that there is no such thing as "the collective action problem." Collective mobilization dynamics—including the ease, trajectory, and sustainability of collective action—vary tremendously within and across different structural settings.[65]

Realists, therefore, must take seriously the historically variable contexts of international collective action. The volumes reviewed here represent a step in this direction, but much more work needs to be done in terms of (1) rethinking realism in light of analytically rigorous ways of tackling these variations; (2) incorporating insights about variations in international structural contexts, such as those associated with the new study of hierarchy and analysis of globalization, into realist theory; and (3) adjusting how international relations scholars conceptualize international structure in ways that allow us to identify the structural contexts in which realist dynamics emerge as particularly salient.[66] Indeed, these studies of the balance of power lend support to a basic proposition: that much of what we study—whether balancing, trade agreements, or other phenomena—concerns shifting processes of collective mobilization and the way that various pathways and proclivities for collective action intersect with agent-level decisions to produce outcomes in world politics.[67]

These considerations should not obscure more immediate implications for the field concerning the study of the balance of power. The works reviewed here carry an important lesson: the field is long overdue for a time when we firmly decouple the study of balancing and the balance of power from the broader debate about realism. Both phenomena deserve our attention as objects of analysis in their own right. As I discussed earlier, a number of extant and possible theories of balancing and of power balances start from other than realist premises. But we have yet to see, for example, a well-developed constructivist research agenda on balancing.[68] Given that, as skeptics of the existence of contemporary balancing note, leaders now find it useful to *legitimate* their policies with reference to balance of power considerations, we need much better understandings of, for example, the significance of balancing as rhetorical commonplace or normative orientation.[69]

[65] See Nexon 2009, chap. 2; Tilly 1978.
[66] See Cerny 1995; Lake 2003.
[67] See Adamson 2005.
[68] Most extant examples represent what might be termed "constructivist glosses" on balance of threat theory; that is, such work explores how ideas and ideologies shape perceptions of threat by state and substate actors.
[69] See Brooks and Wohlforth 2005a; Brooks and Wohlforth 2005b.

The field would also benefit from more research on the conceptual history of the balance of power—in both European and non-European contexts. Indeed, we lack much in the way of critical genealogies of the balance of power.[70] International relations scholars must bring a variety of different perspectives to the study of balancing and the balance of power because, as Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann quote Michael Sheehan: "For all its inconsistencies and ambiguities, the balance of power concept has been intellectually and politically significant in the development of the current international system and precisely because of that it remains significant and worthy of study" (*BoP:T&P*, 369).

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[70] But see Little 2007.

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