



## Balance of Power

Erik Underwood, T.V. Paul

LAST MODIFIED: 15 JANUARY 2020

DOI: 10.1093/OBO/9780199796953-0202

### Introduction

Balance of power is one of the most discussed and contested theoretical and policy concepts in international relations. It is in fact the bedrock of realism of all varieties, in particular classical and structural, and it is the most significant variable in systemic theories of international stability. The idea of balancing power has been popular since 17th-century Europe, although it was around in some fashion in ancient Greek, Indian, and Chinese statecraft. Beginning with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, it took a prominent role in legal and political thought, with legal theorists and policymakers seeing the concept as central to considerations of international law and strategy. The fact that balance of power has found enduring relevance to scholars and policymakers throughout the ages suggests that the theory is one whose value should be carefully considered. The theory holds that when power is balanced among competing states, peace is obtained, but disequilibrium in power means a strong state can attack a weaker state and rob the latter of its security and independence. The goal of balance of power is to prevent any power from becoming too strong, first by deterring aggression, but if that fails, by ensuring that the aggressor does not significantly alter the balance of power. For realists, balance of power is born in the crucible of international anarchy. It is either a tool that states manually use to keep the power and aggressive behavior of other states in check, or a state of affairs generated by power competition among states. According to realism, states fear other states, and international anarchy creates a self-help system where one's own strength and ability to find allies with similar interests are the only means to achieve security.

### Definitions and Meaning

Haas 1953 offers some eight meanings and definitions of balance of power, showing how difficult it is to define the concept. While empirically the balance of power often refers to a description of the relative military balance between states, in international-relations theory the most commonly accepted definitions refer to an equilibrium of power between states that preserves stability and peace. Morgenthau 2006 defines a balance of power as "stability in a system composed of a number of autonomous forces. Whenever the equilibrium is disturbed either by an outside force or by a change in one or the other elements composing the system, the system shows a tendency to re-establish either the original or a new equilibrium." For Waltz 1979 the balance of power refers to an equilibrium of power in the international system that states, as the units in the system, will achieve through their individual efforts at self-preservation. To structural and neorealists the question is not whether a balance of power will be achieved, but what distribution of power will be obtained under it. Power distributions are defined either as multipolar, with three or more great powers; bipolar, with two great powers; and unipolar, with power concentrated in one great power. It is also important to distinguish between a balance of power and balancing, the latter referring to efforts or strategies seeking to constrain the power of others, sometimes for the purpose of seeking a balance of power. For Rosecrance 2003 there is a set of stringent criteria to identify balancing by a state: it must be motivated by defensive and not offensive purposes, when seeking allies it must join the weaker coalition, and it must be willing to defend its allies and restore the balance of power when threatened. For Mearsheimer 2014, balancing is something that self-interested states engage in to check the power-maximizing ambitions of their peers. The author defines balancing as where "threatened states seriously commit themselves to containing their dangerous opponent." Alternatively, Walt 1987 argues that states do not balance purely against power; they balance against threat, and power is just one element that generates threat.

Haas, Ernst B. "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?" *World Politics* 5.4 (1953): 442–477.

In this classic article, in the context of the onset of the Cold War, Haas discusses the various ways in which scholars of his time understood balance of power in terms of (1) the distribution of power, (2) equilibrium, (3) hegemony, (4) stability and peace, (5) instability and war, (6) power politics in general, and (7) a universal law of history, as well as (8) a system and guide to policymaking.

**Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2014.**

In this book, Mearsheimer develops his theory of offensive realism, arguing that because states can never be certain of the intentions of other states, looking only to their power to determine their intentions, states must maximize their power, with each seeking to become a regional hegemon. Here every state is a potential aggressor and must be balanced.

**Morgenthau, Hans J. *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*. Boston: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006.**

In this classical text, Morgenthau develops a theory of international politics that, among a wide variety of subjects, covers balance of power. For Morgenthau, states seek power because of an innate desire of humans for power and prestige, and power has many elements, including not just material but also ideational elements of national character and morale.

**Paul, T. V., James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds. *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.**

This collection of essays contains theoretical explanations, criticisms, and regional and global applications of balance-of-power theory and policy. It also contains valuable citations and ideas as well as changing notions of balance of power in the contemporary world.

**Rosecrance, Richard. "Is There a Balance of Power?" In *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*. Edited by J. A. Vasquez and C. Elman. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.**

In this book chapter, Rosecrance critiques definitions of balance of power which he argues define the concept too broadly. He provides a narrower definition to try to more accurately capture empirical cases: a state must be motivated by defensive purposes, when balancing through alliances it must join the weaker coalition, and it must be willing to defend those allies and the balance of power.

**Walt, Stephen. *The Origins of Alliances*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987.**

In contrast to Kenneth Waltz's structural realism and offensive realists such as Mearsheimer, Walt argues that states balance against threat. Aggregate and offensive power are seen as generators of threat, but geographical proximity influences the ability to project power, and states are concerned over whether other states possess aggressive intentions. Each of these decides whether a state sees a threat, and balances against that threat.

**Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.**

In this seminal text, Waltz develops the theory of structural realism, which sees anarchy as the key driver of conflict, since with no higher power, states must rely on self-help. He develops a theory of balance of power, arguing that states will automatically form balances of power against more-powerful states, and that the main variation that will occur will be between bipolar (power concentrated in two great powers) or multipolar systems (power concentrated three or more great powers), with the former more stable.

---

## Balance-of-Power Mechanisms

There are two key mechanisms in the traditional conception of balance of power: the first is hard balancing, in which states balance other states through internal arms buildup and external alignment. According to Waltz 1979, internal balancing refers to the buildup of military

capabilities and the industrial capacity of the state—in other words, its material capabilities—in order to match the capabilities of another state. The second mechanism, external balancing, refers to the forming of military alliances with other states in order to counteract the power and influence of adversarial states or coalitions. This sometimes also includes efforts to divide or create a wedge among enemy alliances; in other words, external balancing by weakening the enemy alliance rather than strengthening one's own. Other mechanisms include preventive war, in which a state may seek to maintain the balance of power by attacking before their adversary has a chance to upset it. Balance of power, it is argued, operates by preventing conflict through deterrence, or by ensuring that should conflict occur, the aggressor will not be able to conquer the balancers. For more on deterrence theory, see Schelling 1980 and Jervis 1979. When the definition of balance of power is expanded to include soft balancing, nonmilitary instruments of balancing can be added. According to Paul 2018 (cited under Newer Interpretations: The Soft-Balancing Debate), institutions, limited ententes, and economic sanctions can also be used to balance against a threatening power.

**Jervis, Robert. "Deterrence Theory Revisited." *World Politics* 31.2 (1979): 289–324.**

Those interested in deterrence theory should consult this article by Jervis, among other works of his. He discusses the logic behind deterrence theory and the history of its intellectual development.

**Schelling, Thomas C. *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980.**

This book is a classic of deterrence theory that should be consulted by anyone interested in understanding the underlying logic of deterrence. Schelling provides the game theory logic behind the operation of deterrence.

**Waltz, Kenneth N. *Theory of International Politics*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979.**

When developing structural realism, Waltz develops a theory of balance of power, where states automatically create a balance of power in the system through internal balancing, by increasing the size and quality of their military as well as by expanding their economic and, particularly, industrial base, and external balancing, by finding allies with similar interests that also seek to balance the stronger power(s).

---

## Balance of Power as Manual or Automatic

Scholars debate whether the balance of power is maintained through the deliberate efforts by statesmen, as a strategy, or if it operates as a law of political behavior. To Jean-Jacques Rousseau, balance of power "continues to support itself without the aid of any special intervention; if it were to break for a moment on one side, it would soon restore itself on another"; see Hoffman and Fidler 1991. Waltz 1979 (cited under Balance-of-Power Mechanisms) uses this as a part of the author's theory of structural realism. In contrast, scholars such as Nicholas Spykman (Spykman 1942) consider the balance of power to be manually maintained by the efforts of states, since they must actively work to maintain the balance, and should they fall short, then the balance will be broken and their independence will be in peril. He sees balance of power as having a subjective element; states prefer that the balance be in their favor, rather than in equilibrium. Examining the history of balance of power during the heyday of balance of power, Schroeder 1996 (cited under Criticisms) takes a similar view, that balance of power was more a normative view of politics under an international order, and that states manually sought to achieve a balance of power in their favor. According to Bridge and Bullen 2005, balance of power is manual, as exemplified by British efforts to maintain the balance of power in Europe during the 19th century. For more on the differences between manual and automatic balancing, see Elman 2003.

**Bridge, F. R., and Roger Bullen. *The Great Powers and the European States System, 1814–1914*. 2d ed. London: Routledge, 2005.**

Bridge and Bullen see power balancing as a manual process, arguing that the British used balance of power as a strategy to ensure their naval supremacy in the 19th century.

**Elman, Colin. "Introduction: Appraising Balance of Power Theory." In *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate*. Edited by John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, 1–22. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003.**

In this chapter, Elman discusses the difference between manual and automatic balancing, making a good reference point for interested readers.

**Hoffman, Stanley, and David P. Fidler, eds. *Rousseau on International Relations*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.**

This volume provides an assortment of texts by Rousseau, who was one of the first political theorists to develop the concept of balance of power and subscribe to the view that balancing occurs as a lawlike phenomenon. His theorizing of balance of power is pursued furthest in the *Abstract and Judgement of Saint-Pierre's Project for Perpetual Peace* as well as in his *State of War*, both in this volume.

**Spykman, Nicholas John. *America's Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1942.**

In this classic on balance of power, Spykman sees balances of power as arising from "the active intervention of man," with balances being subjective. He sees states as seeking balances in their favor.

---

## Balance of Power in International Law

Prior to the end of the First World War, balance of power took a prominent role in international law. It is generally thought that the Peace of Westphalia (1648) was the treaty that began to take an implicit legal form of balance of power, and the Peace Treaty of Utrecht (1713) more explicitly. During the 18th and 19th centuries, European international lawyers of the time engaged in a debate over the legal validity of the concept of the balance of power. Vagts and Vagts 1979 maps out the history of legal thought on balance of power and shows how, following the French Revolution, the rise of liberal thought led to the contestation of balance of power as a legal concept, with conservative legal thinkers such as Friedrich Gentz and Karl von Rotteck defending the concept, and liberal thinkers such as Heinrich Bernard Oppenheim and Johann Ludwig Klueber seeing it as having no place in international law. With the rise of nationalism, balance of power once again saw its place in international law reconsidered. British legal theorists (e.g., Bentham and Larrabee 1962, Phillimore 1854, and Oppenheim 1955) saw balance of power as having a prominent role in international law. In contrast, after German unification under Bismarck, German legal theorists were much more reluctant to give balance of power a prominent role in international law (e.g., Treitschke 1963). Balance of power also took a prominent role in the legal thinking of French, Russian, and Italian legal understanding, but it was in the United States where a legal tradition opposed to balance of power took form, seen for example in Wheaton, et al. 1936. This American tradition took a more prominent position after the First World War, with the League of Nations and the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928 attempting to use collective security to replace balance of power. With the adoption of the UN Charter, arguably little room has been left for balance of power as a legal concept, although Hurd 2017 argues that the ban on war has been permissive for great powers by allowing wars for self-defense, and thus power balancing, while taking a less prominent role in international law, can often be justified.

**Bentham, Jeremy, and Harold Atkins Larrabee. *The Handbook of Political Fallacies*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962.**

A prominent English philosopher and jurist of his time, Bentham is known to have opposed balance of power as a concept for domestic law but saw it as acceptable in international law.

**Hurd, Ian. "The Permissive Power of the Ban on War." *European Journal of International Security* 2.1 (2017): 1–18.**

In this article, Hurd discusses the ban on war in the UN Charter and argues that the ban actually legitimizes and authorizes war pursued in the name of security, and as a result he argues that the ban is permissive especially for the powerful.

**Oppenheim, Lawrence. *International law: A Treatise*. 8th ed. Edited by Hersch Lauterpacht. London: Longmans, Green, 1955.**

A major British legal theorist of the 19th and early 20th centuries, Oppenheim in this treatise argues that balance of power is necessary for the very operation of international law.

**Phillimore, Robert. *Commentaries upon International Law*. Philadelphia: T. & J. W. Johnson, 1854.**

In this work, Phillimore argues that balance-of-power strategies, in the form of defending the weaker power when they are attacked by aggressive powers, is recognized in international law and treaties.

**Treitschke, Heinrich von. *Politics*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963.**

In this volume, Treitschke shows the mixed German view of his time on balance of power in international law, opposing it on nationalistic grounds but seeing it necessary for international order at some level.

**Vagts, Alfred, and Detlev F. Vagts. "The Balance of Power in International Law: A History of an Idea." *American Journal of International Law* 73.4 (1979): 555–580.**

Vagts and Vagts provide a useful summary of the history of balance of power in international law and the legal debates that took place in Europe.

**Wheaton, Henry, Richard Henry Dana, and George Grafton Wilson. *Elements of International Law*. London: Clarendon, 1936.**

Wheaton in this volume argues against any fixed legal concept of balance of power, instead seeing it as an inconsistent political concept.

---

## Balance of Power in History

Balance of power is believed to have a long historical pedigree. It was Thucydides (Thucydides 1998) who contended that Athens' increasing power caused Sparta to initiate the Peloponnesian war. To him, had there been no shift in the balance of power, there would have been no incentive for war. Balance of power in the Greco-Roman world is a topic that Sheehan 1996 elaborates on further. Hui 1995 discusses the role that balance of power played in ancient China, while Mitra and Liebig 2016 sees the concept as part of ancient Indian statecraft and philosophy. In early modern times, the Italian city-states engaged in balance-of-power politics. They were deemed to have practiced balance of power as an art and a science. In the Enlightenment era of European history, balance of power became a dominant approach to maintaining European stability. From the Peace of Westphalia to the French Revolution in 1792, traditional hard balancing formed a key component of the foreign policies of monarchs, but the stakes were limited since all powers tacitly accepted the status quo. For the British, as Bridge and Bullen 2005 (cited under Balance of Power as Manual or Automatic) argues, maintaining the balance of power in Europe through offshore balancing was a keystone of their grand strategy. The Treaty of Utrecht made explicit reference to balance of power in diplomatic entries. With the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, conceptions about alliances changed and conservative fears turned balance of power into a tool to prevent resurgent French imperialism and the outbreak of revolutions. During this period, the balance of power was maintained through the Concert of Europe, where European great powers agreed that territorial changes could be made only with their unanimous consent. In 1870 Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck began a new phase in balance-of-power politics by using complex alliance systems; this involved allying with various great powers while also playing them against each other. However, by the end of the century this system also broke down; military alliances in Europe began to form into two opposing power blocs, laying the foundations for World War 1. However, the extent to which balance-of-power politics occurred historically has been debated, with various authors critical of the extent to which balance of power was pursued outside Europe; see Kaufman, et al. 2007. Schroeder 1994 and Schroeder 1996 are also critical, seeing balance of power as described by international relations theory as only rarely occurring in history.

**Hui, Victoria Tin-bor. *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995.**

This book by Hui offers a history that shows the role that balance of power played in ancient China, especially during the Qin dynasty, and provides a good starting point for anyone interested in the subject.

**Kaufman, Stuart, Richard Little, and William Wohlforth, eds. *Balance of Power in History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.**

There exists skepticism as to the extent that balance of power was employed as a strategy outside post-Westphalia Europe. This view holds that most regions were under the control of empires; thus, hegemony or preponderance, rather than balance of power, was the primary form of international order outside Europe. In this edited volume, the contributors discuss balance of power or absence of it in diverse parts of the world in different eras.

**Mitra, Subrata K., and Michael Liebig. *Kautilya's Arthashastra*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos, 2016.**

Mitra and Liebig provide a brief discussion of the role of balance of power in ancient India and discuss the philosophy and strategies outlined by Kautilya in his *Arthashastra* and his "mandala theory," which has some resonance to balance of power.

**Schroeder, Paul. "Historical Reality vs. Neo-realist Theory." *International Security* 19.1 (1994): 108–148.**

In this article, Schroeder provides a sharp criticism of balance of power as presented by Kenneth Waltz's structural realism. He argues that the predictions of structural realism do not match the historical record, that balancing was rare, and that states regularly employed other strategies to survive.

**Schroeder, Paul W. *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.**

In this book, Schroeder provides a history of what is commonly known as the classic period of balance of power. This is a must-read for anyone discussing this period of power balancing.

**Sheehan, Michael. *The Balance of Power: History and Theory*. London: Routledge, 1996.**

This book provides a good overview of the role of balance of power in history and, in particular, the ancient Greco-Roman world.

**Thucydides. *The Peloponnesian War*. Edited and translated by Steven Lattimore. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998.**

In this classic ancient text, Thucydides provides a history of much of the Peloponnesian War between the Greek city-states of Athens and Sparta and their allies, starting in 431 BCE. He discusses the process leading up to the war, and describes it primarily as resulting from Athens' growing power.

---

## Balance of Power in the First Half of the 20th Century

There are those who believe that the two bloodiest wars in history were caused by the absence of proper balancing. Schweller 2006 considers "under-balancing" to be the cause of the world wars. Others consider the lack of collective security as the source. Often neglected is the timing of balancing. Are some states not susceptible to balancing? Could Hitler be balanced? Some see the First World War as a failure of balance-of-power theory. For Stephen Van Evera (Van Evera 1984), balance of power was undermined by the cult of the offensive and a belief in quick wars. In Wohlforth 1987, German beliefs in a power transition where Russian power would eclipse Germany were the catalyst for war. For more on balance of power and World War I, see Levy and Vasquez 2014. Alexandroff and Rosecrance 1977

argues that balancing could have occurred and Hitler could have been deterred had proper actions been taken to confront Germany. In Snyder 1991, domestic politics and nationalistic myths of empire caused the wars. Other studies, such as Lobell 2018, see the events leading to the war as consistent with balance-of-power theory; balance of power did not deter Hitler, but it allowed him to be defeated. Paul 1994 and Russett 1967 examine why the Japanese were not deterred from attacking Pearl Harbor in 1941 despite America's overwhelming power. The Great Depression and the humiliation of Germany through the Treaty of Versailles have also been seen to be factors contributing to the war. Thus, intolerable political conditions could encourage rising powers to challenge established powers, presenting a reason for why balance of power need not always prevent wars.

**Alexandroff, Alan, and Richard Rosecrance. "Deterrence in 1939." *World Politics* 29.3 (1977): 404–424.**

In this article the authors conduct a historical overview of the period leading up to Hitler's invasion of France, through the lens of deterrence theory. They argue that at various points in time there were opportunities for the Allies to deter Germany, but these were not taken.

**Levy, Jack S., and John A. Vasquez, eds. *The Outbreak of the First World War: Structure, Politics, and Decision-Making*. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014.**

In this multidisciplinary edited volume, the contributors provide a variety of perspectives on what the causes of the First World War were. This book is a good place to start for those interested in the role of balance of power in causing the First World War.

**Lobell, Steven E. "A Granular Theory of Balancing." *International Studies Quarterly* 62.3 (2018): 593–605.**

In this article Lobell develops a theory of granular balancing, where rather than balancing against aggregate power they balance only against those capabilities that threaten them. The author argues that in the case of World War II, Britain appropriately balanced against the German, Italian, and Japanese capabilities that most threatened them.

**Paul, T. V. *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*. Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994.**

Paul examines the puzzling question of why the weak start asymmetric wars with stronger powers, and, by examining several cases from the 20th century, how time pressures combined with a belief on the part of the weaker power that short-term advantages such as strategy and tactics, weapon systems, and alliance configurations can lead to war.

**Russett, Bruce M. "Pearl Harbor: Deterrence Theory and Decision Theory." *Journal of Peace Research* 4.2 (1967): 89–105.**

In this classic article, Russett examines the factors that led to the failure of the US to deter Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, and hence how American balancing efforts failed to deter conflict.

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

Schweller adopts a neoclassical realist approach in this volume, providing an explanation for why states sometimes fail to adequately balance a threatening power, looking at the role of domestic actors, and examining Britain's appeasement of Germany in the interwar period, as well as French and British policy toward Germany prior to 1914.

**Snyder, Jack. *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991.**

This volume by Snyder should be consulted by those interested in the role of domestic politics in causing the world wars. He examines the role of domestic coalitions and nationalist myths of empire in causing imperialist wars of expansion.

**Van Evera, Stephen. "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War." *International Security* 9.1 (1984): 58–107.**

In this article, Van Evera provides a defensive realist explanation of the causes of World War I, arguing that a mistaken belief in offensive military doctrines led leaders to employ aggressive strategies that heightened the chances of war initiation.

**Wohlforth, William C. "The Perception of Power: Russia in the Pre-1914 Balance." *World Politics* 39.3 (1987): 353–381.**

Argues that perceptions of power, not power itself, drive conflict, and provides an insightful analysis of the role of misperceptions and divergent perceptions of power among European leaders in the July Crisis of 1914, and its effect on the German decision to go to war.

---

## Balance of Power during the Cold War

The Cold War was the heyday of balance of power both in theory and in practice. In this era, balance of power became heavily linked to the nuclear arms race and mutual deterrence, and, as Gaddis 1982 and Mastanduno 1985 discuss, containment became a primary strategy for both superpowers. Both the United States and the USSR, although providing the impression of maintaining a balance of power, often attempted to obtain an advantage, fearing the other would overtake them, a phenomenon that Leffler 1992 analyzes in the context of the opening stages of the conflict. This in turn led both to a conventional arms race and a nuclear arms race, and arms control agreements became a means to stabilize deterrence. For more on this, see George, et al. 1988. The superpowers courted allies from nonaligned countries as parts of strategies of containment and fought proxy wars in various regions, such as Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan. This period saw conventional deterrence evolve into nuclear deterrence, and the focus of balance-of-power strategies became deterrence. Jervis 1990 discusses the concept of mutual assured destruction, which is based on the notion of balance of power, although this relationship is not always fully explicated. Balance of power during the Cold War proceeded in stages. The first stage lasted from the end of World War II until the detonation of the first nuclear bomb by the Soviet Union in 1949, by this time the United States and the USSR were seeking to balance each other through internal arms buildup, and allied blocs in the forms of NATO and the Warsaw Pact. As Larson 1985 argues, the two superpowers quickly turned from viewing each other as allies to hostile powers. The initial US arms buildup was mostly nuclear, but the Kennedy administration adopted a strategy of flexible response, using a combination of conventional and nuclear weapons to deter the Soviet Union. The Soviet alliance with Communist China began to fray in this period and, as discussed in Kirby, et al. 2005, in the 1970s rapprochement between China and the United States represented a shift in the balance of power in America's favor. The 1970s also saw a period of detente between the United States and the Soviet Union through the signing of arms control treaties, which stabilized the balance of power. For more on this, see Garthoff 1994. In the 1980s, the relationship was destabilized again in what is sometimes called the Second Cold War, with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Reagan administration's efforts to contain the USSR, but then the Cold War ended as Mikhail Gorbachev sought de-escalation through his policies of glasnost and perestroika, and as the Soviet Union began to collapse.

**Gaddis, John Lewis. *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982.**

Gaddis, a preeminent historian on the Cold War, comprehensively examines the role of strategies of containment in American national-security policy during the Cold War.

**Garthoff, Raymond L. *Détente and Confrontation: American-Soviet Relations from Nixon to Reagan*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1994.**

In this work, Garthoff provides an analysis of US-Soviet relations between 1969 until 1980 from the perspectives of the Americans and the Soviets; this book should be consulted by those interested in balance of power and the role of detente during this period of the Cold War.

**George, Alexander L., Philip J. Farley, and Alexander Dallin, eds. *U.S.-Soviet Security Cooperation: Achievements, Failures, Lessons*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.**

In this edited volume, the contributors discuss efforts by the Americans and Soviets to pursue arms control agreements in the search for stable deterrence and a balance of power. It provides a useful overview of the topic for those interested in the role of arms control in the Cold War.

**Jervis, Robert. *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990.**

This seminal work should be consulted by those interested in the theoretical implications of nuclear weapons for balance of power, and the role of nuclear deterrence in the Cold War. Jervis contends that nuclear weapons have fundamentally transformed balance of power and deterrence by making wars between nuclear powers mutually unwinnable.

**Kirby, William C., Robert S. Ross, and Gong Li, eds. *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations: An International History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005.**

This edited volume provides a comprehensive history of the normalization of the US-China relationship. It should be consulted by those seeking to understand US efforts to respond to the Sino-Soviet split and alter the balance of power during the Cold War.

**Larson, Deborah. *Origins of Containment: A Psychological Explanation*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985.**

Coming from the perspective of psychology, in this volume Larson demonstrates that cognitive-psychological theories can provide significant insights into how the Cold War emerged.

**Leffler, Melvin P. *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992.**

This book should be consulted by those seeking to understand efforts to balance the Soviet Union during the early Cold War. Leffler analyzes how in the opening years of the Cold War, Truman and senior American officials pursued a containment strategy toward the Soviet Union that meant seeking a preponderance of power.

**Mastanduno, Michael. "Strategies of Economic Containment: US Trade Relations with the Soviet Union." *World Politics* 37.4 (1985): 503–531.**

This article provides an analysis useful for those interested in the economic aspects of US containment policies; Mastanduno examines how economic embargoes might weaken the military capabilities of rival states, and the effectiveness of US sanctions on the Soviet Union in this regard.

---

## Balance of Power in the Post–Cold War Era

In the post–Cold War era, balance of power became a topic of contention, with the US emerging as the most dominant power. This nearly unipolar era was manifested by the United States holding overwhelming superiority in every category of weapons while also engaging in unilateral military ventures such as Iraq. To many proponents and critics of balance of power, such as Lebow 1994 and Legro and Moravcsik 1999, the post–Cold War period presented a challenge to balance-of-power theory. A group of realists, beginning with Gideon Rose (Rose 1998), sought to address these challenges by developing neoclassical realism, adapting neorealist balance of power by including nonsystemic variables to explain anomalies. On the other hand, proponents such as John Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer 1990) and Kenneth Waltz (Waltz 2000) dismissed the criticisms, since they expected the Western alliance systems to break up, and a new balance of power to be formed against the United States. However, other studies, such as Paul 2005 (cited under Newer Interpretations: The Soft-Balancing Debate), point to attempts to restrain the United States by using informal alignments and institutional mechanisms such as the UN forum as elements of soft balancing in the new era. Others now point to efforts by Russia and China to militarily balance the United States, but critics highlight the lack of alliances and the limited arms buildups. For critics, the post–Cold War period proves balance-of-

power theory to be outdated; for example, Russett and Oneal 2001 (cited under Alternatives to Balance of Power in History) contends that economic interdependence and international institutions make war between great powers too costly to pursue, and power balancing an unnecessary means for restraining aggressors. Others, such as Wendt 1992, point to ideas and culture in the international system that shape state identities, and argue that the changing identities and social relations of the United States and the Soviet Union led to the end of the Cold War. Some also theorize that rather than balancing, states are adopting hedging strategies, choosing to limit commitment to alliances with the United States and its rivals as a result of political uncertainty. However, with the rise of China and its rapidly growing military and economic capabilities, efforts by the United States and its allies to balance China, and economically, events appear to be providing some credence to balance-of-power theory.

**Lebow, Richard Ned. "The Long Peace, the End of the Cold War, and the Failure of Realism." *International Organization* 48.2 (1994): 249–277.**

In this article, Lebow joined many critics of realism from the 1990s in challenging the relevance of the paradigm, claiming that it is unable to explain the fall of the Soviet Union and its aftermath. In place of realism, Lebow provides an institutionalist account for how the system is transforming.

**Legro, Jeffrey W., and Andrew Moravcsik. "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24.2 (1999): 5–55.**

Legro and Moravcsik provide a perspective on the implications of the end of the Cold War on international relations from the liberal paradigm, arguing that in the post-Cold War world, realism is no longer relevant and that realists have been forced to abandon the fundamental precepts of realism in their efforts to adapt.

**Mearsheimer, John J. "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War." *International Security* 15.1 (1990): 5–56.**

This article by Mearsheimer was indictive of the views of many realists of the time, who argued that with the collapse of the Soviet Union and thus the absence of a major threat for NATO to balance against, balance-of-power politics would return to Europe.

**Rose, Gideon. "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy." *World Politics* 51.1 (1998): 144–172.**

During the 1990s, realism was challenged by many cases where foreign policy did not conform to neorealist expectations. In this article, Rose introduces neoclassical realist theory, which combines neorealist assumptions regarding the distribution of power in the international system with considerations of how the intervening variables of domestic politics and decision-maker perceptions both constrain states and affect how accurately they read and respond to external threats.

**Waltz, Kenneth N. "Structural Realism after the Cold War." *International Security* 25.1 (2000): 5–41.**

In this article, Waltz seeks to respond to criticisms of the relevance of realist theory after the end of the Cold War, arguing that the collapse of the Soviet Union was not indicative of a transformation of the international system but instead a shift of polarity within the system.

**Wendt, Alexander. "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization* 46.2 (1992): 391–425.**

This seminal text in social-constructivist theory was a response to the perceived inadequacy of existing paradigms in explaining events with the end of the Cold War, and represents a major criticism of realist theory.

---

## Alternatives to Balance of Power in History

While power balancing has been a dominant dynamic throughout history, at times leaders have sought to escape it. Such efforts include the Concert of Europe, where, after the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, the great powers of Europe sought to prevent future conflicts by ensuring unanimous agreement among great powers on any territorial expansion within Europe, and that all great powers would respect each others' status. The American founding fathers sought to escape European balance-of-power politics and for over a century the United States pursued a policy of isolationism; see Washington's Farewell Address 1796. With the creation of the League of Nations and the end of the Second World War, as the United States and its allies sought to construct a postwar international order, many leaders involved sought to escape balance-of-power politics. Ikenberry 2019 argues that the United States, as a victorious hegemonic power, on both occasions attempted to restrain itself and escape an international order based on balance of power, and replace it with a constitution-like institutional order. While history shows that these efforts failed, arguably the European Union has formed what Adler and Barnett 1998 calls a pluralistic security community, where states expect that change will occur peacefully, and do not seek to balance against each other. According to Russett and Oneal 2001, international organizations, economic interdependence, and democratic peace now act to mitigate balance of power, while Russett 1993 argues that more states than ever before are liberal democracies, and liberal democracies are unlikely to fight wars with each other, and hence they are less likely to see each other as threats to balance against.

**Adler, Immanuel, and Michael Barnett, eds. *Security Communities*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998.**

Adler and Barnett provide an important constructivist alternative to balance-of-power theory and argue that in pluralistic security communities, where states share reasonable expectations of peaceful change existing, states do not plan for war with each other, and hence, these communities are free from balance-of-power politics.

**Ikenberry, G. John. *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars*. New Edition. Vol. 161. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019.**

This is a major work in the institutionalist, or neoliberal school of international relations theory. Ikenberry argues that after major wars the winners of the war are able to rebuild the international institutions that make up the international order, but that the nature of the resulting institutions will depend largely on the domestic political system of the victors.

**Russett, Bruce. *Grasping the Democratic Peace*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.**

In this seminal text on democratic peace theory, Russett argues that an empirical phenomenon now exists where democracies do not go to war with each other. He argues that this is due to normative and institutional mechanisms that make war with other democracies undesirable for policymakers.

**Russett, Bruce, and John R. Oneal. *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence and International Organizations*. New York: Norton, 2001.**

This work by Russett and Oneal is a central text in the literature on international organizations, democratic peace, and economic interdependence. To the authors, the combination of these three variables makes conflict unlikely and balancing unnecessary in the post-Cold War world.

**Washington, George. "Washington's Farewell Address 1796." Avalon Project.**

In George Washington's Farewell Address speech in 1796, he called on Americans to adopt a policy of isolation and avoid becoming entangled in the great power politics of Europe, beginning a tradition in American foreign policy that would last over a century.

---

## Newer Interpretations: The Soft-Balancing Debate

With the end of the Cold War and the puzzle that the absence of military, or hard balancing in the post–Cold War period, has presented for balance-of-power theory, a new theory of balancing, called soft balancing, has been proposed as an alternative to neorealist theories of balancing. In 2005 a special issue of the *International Security* journal was released on the subject with some scholars (see Pape 2005 and Paul 2005) arguing in favor of soft balancing, while others (see Lieber and Alexander 2005) opposed this broader interpretation, claiming that ad hoc diplomacy cannot be treated as balance of power. Paul 2018 develops soft-balancing theory further, arguing that states restrain “the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain.” To Paul, soft balancing then is not ad hoc diplomacy, but a plethora of purposeful, specific policy instruments that can be observed as they are implemented. Paul argues that this strategy has historically formed a part of balances of power; it was a core element of the Concert of Europe and the League of Nations, and during the Cold War, soft balancing was used by developing states through the Nonaligned movement. Soft balancing was also attempted by France, Russia, and China against the United States in response to the invasion of Iraq, and one of the dominant approaches toward China and Russia by many regional states in Southeast Asia as well as others such as India and Japan, who have combined soft balancing with limited hard balancing. Some states may even be soft bandwagoning. Paul also offers a definition of “hard balancing” on the basis of matching military buildup and formal alignments, and “limited hard balancing” on the basis of asymmetrical arms buildup and strategic partnerships short of active formal military alliances.

**Lieber, Keir A., and Gerard Alexander. “Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back.” *International Security* 30.1 (2005): 109–139.**

Lieber and Alexander provide a critique of soft-balancing theory, arguing that it is indistinguishable from normal diplomatic activity; this is a good place to start when examining the arguments against soft balancing.

**Pape, Robert A. “Soft Balancing against the United States.” *International Security* 30.1 (2005): 7–45.**

As part of an *International Security* issue on the topic, Pape challenges the view that the United States is unrestrained by balancers, arguing that states have sought to soft-balance the United States in response to unipolarity.

**Paul, T. V. “Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy.” *International Security* 30.1 (2005): 46–71.**

In this insightful article as part of a larger issue on the subject, Paul argues for the concept of soft balancing by examining efforts by some US allies as well as Russia and China to constrain US actions over Kosovo in 1999 and the Iraq War in 2003 through institutional means.

**Paul, T. V. *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.**

In this book, Paul develops a comprehensive and generalized theory of soft balancing, responding to the criticisms raised against previous articulations of the theory and demonstrating that the theory can apply historically even to periods where hard balancing was dominant, and that in the current globalized period it accounts for some of the shortcomings of traditional balance-of-power theory. He applies this theory historically, from the formation of the Concert of Europe in 1914 up to the early-21st-century globalized era of rising powers.

**Saltzman, Ilai Z. “Soft Balancing as Foreign Policy: Assessing American Strategy toward Japan in the Interwar Period.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8.2 (2012): 131–150.**

As a part of the debate on soft balancing, Saltzman responds to critics of the theory in this article by applying it to the relationship between the United States and Japan in the interwar period.

---

## Criticisms

Balance-of-power theory has for centuries evoked much criticism. First, it is argued that a balance of power can never be achieved, and even if it can, it is argued that there is no way to know if a balance is achieved. There is uncertainty as to whether balance of power leads to peace or war. Some studies, such as Schroeder 1996, argue that balance of power can cause wars rather than peace. Others attribute the two world wars to breakdowns in balance of power. Liberal scholars and thinkers such as Woodrow Wilson believed that it was balance of power that led to the disastrous war in 1914. In response, balance-of-power theorists tend to argue that they are talking about stability and not peace or the total absence of war; as such, sometimes war is necessary to restore the balance. It is also unclear if balance of power is an outcome or a process. As Elman 2003 (cited under Balance of Power as Manual or Automatic) discusses, there are questions of whether it is obtained automatically or through human agency. Moreover, as Levy and Thompson 2010 debates, it is uncertain whether it works mostly at continental or maritime levels. Scholars such as Jack Levy (Levy 2004) also question whether balance of power is a European phenomenon or universal; see also Kaufman, et al. 2007 (cited under Balance of Power in History). Some studies, such as Schroeder 1994, argue that balancing is only one of the behavioral strategies of states, even during the heydays of balance of power. Other strategies included bandwagoning, buck-passing, appeasement, hiding, and transcending. More-nuanced critics argue that it is a preponderance of power by a hegemonic power and not a balance of power that promotes peace. For these theorists, power preponderance is a facilitator of peace, while power parity is a driver of war. The power transition theory of A. F. K. Organski and the hegemonic-theory argument of Robert Gilpin are premised on this logic. Organski and Kugler 1980 argues that states will be deterred not by a balance of power, which they may feel provides a chance of victory and challenge, but by a preponderance of power; thus the most dangerous time is when power is in transition between parity and preponderance between two states. Alternatively, Gilpin 1981 argues that war also results from a transition from preponderance and parity, because a rising power becomes dissatisfied with the status quo that the hegemon created, causing them to challenge the hegemon, as a part of their effort to create a new order that favors their interests.

**Gilpin, Robert. *War and Change in World Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981.**

In this classical work, Gilpin develops hegemonic war theory and argues that hegemonic wars result from dissatisfaction by a rising power with the international order the hegemon created; in particular, dissatisfaction with the level of prestige it has been provided. For Gilpin, parity in power, rather than preventing conflict, leaves the hegemon open to challenge.

**Kugler, Jacek, and Douglas Lemke, eds. *Parity and War*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.**

In this edited volume, the various chapters provide a comprehensive discussion of the possible effects of power parity in the international system on conflict, from the perspectives both of power transition theorists, and critics of the theory.

**Levy, Jack. "What Do Great Powers Balance against and When?" In *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Edited by T. V. Paul, James Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, 29–51. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.**

In this chapter, Levy analyzes various conceptual issues with balance-of-power theory, discusses the debate among theorists over what balance of power is, and highlights the criticisms of balance-of-power theory, including its Eurocentric bias.

**Levy, Jack S, and William R Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35.1 (2010): 7–43.**

Levy and Thompson provide their own approach to balance of power, critiquing mainstream approaches for failing to account for the different levels of threat that land power presents versus sea power, the former of which can be used for conquest and the latter of which can be used for economic dominance but not conquest. Hence, they argue that states do not balance against maritime powers but do against continental powers.

**Organski, A. F. K., and Jacek Kugler. *The War Ledger*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.**

This book develops Organski's theory of power transition, where they see parity is a necessary condition for war, that preponderance leads to peace, and that when a rising power approaches parity a window of opportunity opens up for the rising power to challenge the power it is surpassing or for the established power to conduct preemptive war.

**Schroeder, Paul. "Historical Reality Vs. Neo-Realist Theory." *International Security* 19.1 (1994): 108–148.**

In this article, Schroeder provides a sharp criticism of balance of power as presented by Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, he argues that the predictions of structural realism do not match the historical record, that balancing was rare, and that states regularly employed other strategies to survive.

**Schroeder, Paul W. *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.**

In this volume, Schroeder provides a historical criticism of balance of power; for him, in history, balance of power formed an international order that prescribed a set of norms and rules on how to conduct international politics, which involved seeking imbalances of power in one's own favor and which often was the cause of war.

**Tammen, Ronald L., Jacek Kugler, Douglas Lemke, et al. *Power Transitions: Strategy for the 21st Century*. New York: Chatham House, 2000.**

In this book the authors examine and develop power transition theory conceptually by applying it to issues such as nuclear deterrence and proliferation, international political economy, hierarchies at the regional level, and alliances.

---

## The Future of Balance of Power

The future of balance of power as a concept and as a policy approach is in question. Widespread globalization has generated uncertainty about what balance of power will look like in the 21st century. Those such as John Mearsheimer (Mearsheimer 2018) who believe in rising powers contesting established powers, or vice versa (e.g., Allison 2017), tend to believe that war is likely and that the balance of power is needed to avert it. Meanwhile, China has been attempting to create an international order that works in its favor by resurrecting the Silk Road through the project christened as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and a tributary state approach to obtain a sort of hegemony in Asia-Pacific. Will it succeed? Or will others who believe in the liberal international order successfully prevent it? The traditional realpolitik approach of Donald Trump has emphasized the creation of a strong US military and economy, or internal balancing, while deemphasizing external balancing, using existing alliances such as NATO. To Trump, US allies have engaged in free riding and devoted little to common defense. However, the US still supports its alliances with Japan, South Korea, etc. This may be a temporary phase, since the alliances may once again become crucial if China and Russia form an alliance in response to the increased threat they perceive from the United States. The militarization of space, the modernization of nuclear weapons, the use of asymmetric strategies and weapons (including cyberspace), and the widespread use of social media all suggest that balance of power will face new challenges both as a theory and as a policy in the decades to come. However, the rise and decline of powers as a phenomenon will still call for some form of balancing and international-relations theory and scholarship, and the policy world will still pay attention to this concept even if they do not always follow its traditional dictums. For more on this topic, see Kissinger 2014.

**Allison, Graham. *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2017.**

In this much-discussed book, Allison shows that power transition wars had been the norm rather than the exception in much of international history. Changing balance-of-power considerations can cause declining powers to start a war, such as how Sparta felt the need to stop Athens from becoming too strong, as described in Thucydides's *Peloponnesian War*. He exhorts reducing the ambitions both of China and the United States as a way to avoid war.

**Kissinger, Henry. *World Order*. New York: Penguin, 2014.**

This book examines the emerging balance of power and world order in its broad manifestations. Kissinger offers interesting advice to policymakers on how to preserve balance of power in the 21st century.

**Mearsheimer, John. *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018.**

In this book, Mearsheimer argues that a policy based on liberal hegemony will fail and the United States will face balancing coalitions. Sound policies based on balance of power and not hegemony are necessary to preserve peace.

[back to top](#)

Copyright © 2020. All rights reserved.