

RESPONSES TO U.S. PRIMACY:  
SOFT BALANCING OR UNIPOLAR POLITICS AS USUAL?

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Coordinated French, German and Russian opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq brought to the fore a question that has been a staple of scholarly and policy debate since the Soviet Union's fall: Are we on the cusp of a new balancing order? In the early and middle 1990s the issue in dispute was when to expect the return of multipolarity.<sup>1</sup> By the turn of the millennium the debate had moved on to how to explain the puzzling absence of a balancing coalition against the United States.<sup>2</sup> Now the question is whether we are already witnessing new and subtler forms of balancing behavior that are harbingers of much more consequential things to come.

The early focus on traditional "hard" balancing was a mistake, a growing number of analysts say, because under unipolarity countervailing power dynamics emerge first as "soft balancing."<sup>3</sup> T. V. Paul has provided the most rigorous definition of the concept:

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., John J Mearsheimer, "Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War." *International Security* 15 (1990): 5-56; , Christopher Layne. "The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great powers Will Arise." *International Security* 14, no. 4 (1993): 86-124.

<sup>2</sup>G. John Ikenberry, "Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the American Postwar Order." *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1998/99): 43-78. Charles A. Kupchan, "After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of Stable Multipolarity." *International Security* 23, no. 3 (1998): 40-79. Michael Mastanduno, "Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy After the Cold War," *International Security* 1998; William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World." *International Security* 21, no. 1 (1999): 1-36; Ethan B. Kapstein, and Michael Mastanduno, eds. *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies After the Cold War*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999; and Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See T.V. Paul, "The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory," in Paul and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Balance of Power Revisited: Theory and Practice in the Twentieth Century* (Stanford University Press, 2004); Josef Joffe, "Gulliver Unbound: Can America Rule the World?" Twentieth Annual John Boynton Lecture, Centre of Independent Studies, 5 August 2003 ([www.cis.org.au](http://www.cis.org.au)); Christopher Layne, "America as European Hegemon," *The*

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 a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms buildup, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration 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.<sup>4</sup>

For analysts who use the concept, soft balancing is a warning sign, telling us that real balance-of-power-dynamics are latent but subtly operative and ready to metastasize into hard balancing unless the United States acts with more circumspection. For them, the key is that soft balancing is not just issue-specific diplomatic wrangling but a reflection of the underlying systemic concentration of power in the United States. As Josef Joffe put it concerning French-German-Russian policy on Iraq: “What was their purpose? To save Saddam Hussein? No, of course not. It was to contain and constrain American power, now liberated from the ropes of bipolarity.”<sup>5</sup>

The rapidly growing popularity of the soft-balancing argument in scholarly circles also owes something to the fact that the balance-of-power metaphor is a staple of punditry both in the United States and abroad. Commentators hail each new coordination effort among major powers that excludes Washington is as an epoch-making “axis.” Indeed, the leaders of other major powers—notably the presidents of France, Russia and China—frequently invoke the balancing proposition themselves, arguing that their policies are intended to foster multipolarity.

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*National Interest* (Summer 2003); Robert Pape, “Welcome to the Era of ‘Soft Balancing,’” *Boston Globe* March 23, 2003, p. H1; Joseph S. Nye “The UN is Right for the Job: Rebuilding Iraq II,” *International Herald Tribune* 23 Mar 2004: 10. Other analysts who use essentially the same concept but do not specifically utilize the term soft balancing include: Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off Balance,’” in Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled*; Jack L. Snyder, “Imperial Temptation,” *National Interest* (Spring 2003); and Jeremy Pressman, “If Not Balancing, What? Forms of Resistance to American Hegemony,” BCSIA Discussion Paper 2004-02, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, March 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Paul “Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory,” p. 6 (copyedited draft).

<sup>5</sup> Joffe, “Gulliver Unbound.”

This confluence of theoretical expectations, journalistic commentary and political rhetoric lends credence to the soft balancing proposition and partly explains its popularity as an argument for restraint in U.S. foreign policy. Our purpose in this paper is to assess the soft balancing argument. We do so in four sections that address the stakes at issue, theory, research design and empirical analysis.

First, we clarify what is at stake in the soft balancing debate and why further analysis is needed. Second, we establish the core conceptual underpinnings that a theory of soft balancing must have in order to yield the specific soft balancing argument that is so often applied to the United States today: that unless the United States practices preemptive self-restraint now, future historians will record the opposition to the U.S.-British war in Iraq as an early baby-step along a path toward an ever more constraining and dangerous balance-of-power system. Third, we derive the observable implications of soft balancing—properties that distinguish it from kinds of behavior that might be considered routine in a unipolar system. Fourth, we analyze the post-Cold war episodes most often cited as soft balancing to determine to what extent they exhibit these properties.

Our bottom line is that while other states do seek periodically to constrain Washington, soft balancing is a poor explanation of this behavior. In our conclusion, we set forth the implications of this finding for policy, theory, and further research.

### **What's at Stake in the Soft Balancing Debate?**

All IR scholars agree that states sometimes undertake actions that either make it harder for the United States to further its foreign policy aims in the short-term or which run counter to its long-term preferences. The most prominent recent examples include: coordinated policy opposition to the United States in the UN Security Council before the 2003 Iraq war; efforts to enhance military capability through inter-state cooperation (as in the EU) or through arms purchases (as in China's purchases from Russia); the formation of informal (e.g., "Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis") or formal (e.g., Shanghai Cooperation Organization) inter-state groupings that exclude the United States; and providing assistance to adversaries of the U.S. that are seeking to enhance their military capacity (e.g. Russian assistance to Iranian nuclear efforts).

There is thus no dispute over the existence of the behavior that so many scholars attribute to soft balancing. The United States is not omnipotent and various opposing efforts have clearly complicated its ability to pursue its foreign policy interests effectively. The challenge is in assessing the general significance of this behavior. And meeting this challenge is important, for, if the soft balancing argument is right, one false move by Washington could tip the international system from its current equilibrium into a balancing world of escalating constraints on the United States. Beyond a certain point along this balancing path, proponents of the soft balancing concept suggest, it may be difficult if not impossible to reverse course and bring the other major powers back into a generally non-antagonistic stance vis-à-vis the United States.

While it is often difficult to distinguish systemic balancing from less significant behavior, it is especially challenging in a unipolar system. After all, the United States has long faced opposing policies, not just from its competitors but from its major allies as well. Consider, for example, what happened in the decade that followed the Cuban Missile Crisis: France defected from NATO's military command; the U.S. was unable to obtain cooperation from its major European allies on the conduct of the Vietnam War; Germany, Japan and other countries stubbornly resisted a devaluation of their currencies; and France sought to undermine the Bretton Woods system by purchasing large amounts of gold from the U.S. treasury. These actions all took place in the shadow of the Cold War, which provided a reference point for judging their significance. In the bipolar standoff, each superpower provided the other with a clear yardstick for measuring the implications and significance of policy changes by third states. As a result, it was apparent that while America and its major allies hardly had a relationship of perfect harmony, they were also far from having each other in the gunights of their security policy. In today's unipolar system, in contrast, no such comparable reference point exists. It remains clear enough when states are close to perfect U.S. allies, but when a state moves away from this status it is very hard to estimate exactly how far away it has traveled or where it is going. In turn, we lack an identifiable yardstick for assessing the negative consequences of various state policies.

The bottom line is that the US has long had to contend with opposing policies on various issues. It is therefore possible that what is new about the behavior analysts are calling soft balancing is not its severity, but its perceived prominence on the agenda. Perhaps what used to

be considered low politics now seems like high politics because the old high politics – the Cold War and the associated threat of nuclear war, arms races, and brinkmanship crises – was cleared off the international agenda in 1989-91. In this paper, we will set aside the question of whether the opposing policies the US faces today are objectively stronger than those it faced in the past. Obviously, no major state is now seeking to balance the US across all issue areas. Yet soft balancing proponents argue that we should not expect any wholesale effort to constrain US power to emerge in short order. The key issue we will focus on is whether a move is now underway in this direction that is rapidly accelerating in response to recently less restrained U.S. behavior.

What motivates the various efforts by the other major powers to oppose U.S. initiatives? Are they actually governed by a systemic balancing imperative? The core argument advanced by soft balancing proponents is that these policies are, in fact, driven by balance-of-power dynamics and that this problem has been greatly exacerbated by the recent foreign policy stance of the United States. Soft balancing is certainly a seductive explanation for this pattern of behavior: not only does it appear to be derived from a venerable theory that is at least in part systemic, but it also offers a seemingly powerful argument for preemptive restraint on the basis of its prediction that the costs of unrestrained or non-deferential U.S. policies can radically escalate after a certain tipping point. In this view, each aggressive act of unilateralism undermines the US reputation for benign intentions that was hard won over many decades and will serve progressively to enhance soft balancing until, at a certain moment, it morphs into hard balancing.

The champions of the soft balancing perspective uniformly oppose the recent “new unilateralist” turn in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>6</sup> While we agree with their general foreign policy recommendation—that the general disposition of the United States ought to be restrained and magnanimous—we question whether this recommendation can be derived from any variant of balance of power theory.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of one’s preferences regarding U.S. foreign policy, it is crucial to scrutinize whether recent opposing policies have actually been governed

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the “new unilateralism” in recent US foreign policy, see Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment Revisited,” *The National Interest*, Winter 2002/2003.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, “American Primacy in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 2002, pp. 30-33.

by a balancing logic. This issue has great theoretical import and also has a variety of significant repercussions for policy. The problem with the current discussion is that it is biased in favor of the soft-balancing argument. Our chief purpose in this paper is to remove this bias and provide a balanced assessment of the relative significance of the soft balancing phenomenon. To achieve that purpose, we must first briefly address two key questions: What key attributes distinguish balancing—whether soft or hard—from other kinds of states behavior? And what are the competing explanations for the constraining behavior scholars label as soft balancing? The next two sections take up these questions in turn.

### **The Hard Conceptual Core of Soft Balancing**

The soft balancing argument is influential precisely because of its conceptual link to classic balance of power thinking. It is that link that raises the specter of a world in which the United States will face increasing and increasingly consequential opposition deriving not from the specific policies it may adopt but rather from the very fact of its power. Take away the link to balance-of-power theory, and soft balancing collapses into a portentous sounding term to describe standard diplomatic bargaining over policy differences. On any given issue, the United States may take a more or less restrained stance. Much of the debate on any issue will naturally concern cost-benefit assessments specific to that issue. Nonetheless, when arguing for restraint scholars and policy analysts routinely appeal to the staple balance-of-power proposition that the costs of a relatively unrestrained policy on some issue transcend the specifics of the case and include expected general opposition of other states to U.S. power that is systemic and enduring. In making this argument, they are following a venerable tradition: expected counter-balancing has historically been the strongest argument for restraint in the face of temptation. In short, what makes the soft balancing argument potentially important is its association with the systemic nature of balance of power theory. It follows that the soft balancing argument must share some core features with that theory that we must clarify, if briefly.

Balance of power theory posits that because states in anarchy have an interest in maximizing their long-term odds on survival (“security”), they will check dangerous concentrations of power (“hegemony”) by building up their own capabilities (“internal

balancing”) or aggregating their capabilities with other states in alliances (“external balancing”). The theory sounds simple, but it is fraught with ambiguity and remains the subject of ongoing scholarly dissension.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, there are many formulations of the theory that clearly do not apply to the current situation the United States faces, and so cannot serve as the conceptual basis for soft balancing.<sup>9</sup> But despite the setbacks it has received in the world of academic research, the basic proposition that state systems tend toward balance has a very strong claim on many analysts’ thinking. Two popular formulations clearly do yield implications for the United States today: Kenneth N. Waltz’s structural variant and Stephen Walt’s balance of threat version.<sup>10</sup> Waltz’s theory defines hegemony as “unrivaled power” and predicts a general tendency toward balance. According to his theory, the current international system represents such an extreme value of the independent variable (hegemony) that robust predictions of balancing emerge.<sup>11</sup> Walt modified the theory to include perceptions of intentions as part of the independent variable. Balancing is costly (especially against the United States today), and the willingness of other states to bear those costs depends, according to Walt, not just on America’s latent power but on its intentions, as revealed to other states by its behavior.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>For a sampling, see John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds. *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2003)

<sup>9</sup> See Jack Levy. “What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?” in Paul and Wirtz, ed., *Balance of Power Revisited*, for the case that “Few balance of power theorists, at least in the tradition of Western international theory that includes Morgenthau, Claude, Gulick, and Dehio, would predict balancing against the United States” today (draft chap., p. 5). A prominent example is John J. Mearsheimer’s offensive realist theory, which encompasses a version of balance of power theory that applies only to contiguous great powers and not to offshore powers like the United States. Indeed, Mearsheimer’s theory yields an explanation for the recent, more independent behavior of some U.S. allies that is the precise opposite of soft balancing: a response to the fear of the retraction rather than the expansion of U.S. power. “America’s Cold War allies have started to act less like dependents of the United States and more like sovereign states,” he writes, “because they fear that [Washington] ... might prove to be unreliable in a future crisis.” John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001): p. 391

<sup>10</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Waltz and some of his followers have claimed that their theory explains balanced outcomes without necessarily predicting balancing strategies by states. [See Kenneth N. Waltz, “International Politics is Not Foreign Policy,” *Security Studies* Vol. 6, No. 1 (Autumn 1996).] This argument makes the theory exceedingly general, extremely difficult to test, and impossible to apply to any specific case. More importantly, it would sever the theory from the soft balancing argument, which is explicitly about state strategies. Fortunately, we can set this claim aside, for Waltz has stated clearly that his theory predicts balancing against U.S. unipolarity. Hence, he expects that causal mechanism to be in play today, however subtly. See Waltz, “Structural Realism after the Cold War,” *International Security* Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5-41; and “Evaluating Theories,” *American Political Science Review* Vol. 91, No. 4 (1997), pp. 913-917.

<sup>12</sup> Walt, “Keeping the World Off Balance.”

The intellectual godfather of the soft balancing argument is this combination of Waltz's structural balance-of-power theory and Walt's balance-of-threat element. There is a great deal of debate over how these theories relate to each other and to the realist school, how they apply to state behavior, and so on. In turn, different proponents of the soft balancing idea place different degrees of emphasis on the "power" versus "threat" elements of the independent variable. Eventually, these nuances will need to be sorted out. At this preliminary stage, it is only necessary to stress the chief implications that this theoretical background has for soft balancing: it clarifies what hard balancing is, so we can at least begin to identify the soft variant, and it establishes the core assumptions the soft balancing argument must make about the state behavior it seeks to explain.

### What is hard balancing?

Unfortunately, balance-of-power theorists have devoted remarkably little effort to developing operational criteria for distinguishing balancing from other routine kinds of security behavior.<sup>13</sup> If all security policies are "balancing," then balance of power theory becomes vacuous. And if we can't tell what hard balancing is, we will never be able to pin down soft balancing. The key here is that the theory is *systemic*. It is not about dyads. The intellectual history of the balance of power as well as classical and modern efforts to develop it as a theory all testify to the centrality of this systemic element.<sup>14</sup> It follows that *balancing* is action taken to check a potential hegemon. It is action, moreover, that would not have been taken in the absence of the prospect of a dangerous concentration of power in the system. And it is action that actually has the potential to affect the systemic distribution of capabilities. State behavior that is unrelated to systemic concentrations of power -- and that is arguably much of what goes on in international politics -- has nothing to do with balance of power theory. This yields two often-

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<sup>13</sup> For more discussion on this point, see W.C. Wohlforth "Revising Balance of Power Theory in Central Eurasia," in Paul and Wirtz, *Revisiting Balance of Power Theory*.

<sup>14</sup> On the intellectual history, see Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1978); and Herbert Butterfield, "Balance of Power," in Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, (New York: Scribner's, 1968).

overlooked distinctions that are central to any application of balance of power theory in today's unipolar system.

First is the distinction between the standard kinds of competitive and disputatious behavior that is endemic in international relations and genuine balance-of-power dynamics. During the Cold War, for example, the United States and its allies frequently disagreed on important policy matters. Often, allies withheld cooperation and even struggled vigorously to get Washington to change course, as in the Vietnam War. For its part, the United States sometimes took very tough action against its own allies, as in Suez. It rarely occurred to anyone to try to use balance of power theory to explain these phenomena, for the simple reason that a compelling example of real balancing -- against the Warsaw Pact -- stood right before their eyes.

The second distinction is that between economic growth and internal balancing. Internal balancing is enhancement of a state's power in response to a potential hegemon. Not all shifts in relative power -- not even all power shifts that work against the international system's leader -- are caused by balance of power dynamics. Most states want their economies to grow rapidly and would prefer their power to increase relative to others whether there is a hegemon on the horizon or not. In other words, internal balancing is the net growth in states' relative capabilities caused by a systemic concentration of power. It may be difficult to distinguish routine increases in states' power from increases specifically sparked by balance of power imperatives. The clearest case is when a state chooses to translate economic potential into military power in order to check another state's bid for mastery of the system. Not all military buildups, however, are necessarily internal balancing.

### Core Assumptions of Soft Balancing

In order for the soft balancing argument to have the explanatory and predictive punch its proponents advertise, it must be connected to these same underlying causal mechanisms. Two crucial conclusions follow. First, soft balancing must also be linked causally to the systemic concentration of power in the United States. To be sure, some proponents of the concept hold that this power alone will not generate soft balancing unless the United States also acts in a threatening manner. But America's behavior is only so important because it is so powerful. Soft

balancing is action that would not be taken if the United States were not so powerful. It is not merely a reflection of a specific policy dispute with the United States. The real issue is the inherent threat U.S. capabilities pose to other great powers once Washington is seen to have malign intentions. Proponents of soft balancing are not arguing that “on this specific case, other powers have acted such that the costs exceed the benefits for the United States.” Rather, their argument takes the following form: “If the United States steps too far on this issue, it will make it more likely that a systemic counterbalancing reaction will result.”

Second, soft balancing must reflect the imperative of security seeking under anarchy. That, after all, is the core assumption that drives both Waltz’s and Walt’s theories. The soft balancing argument must be that the concentration of power in the United States threatens the security of others, especially if Washington comes to be seen as having malign intentions. Balancing has been as muted as it has, the argument goes, for several reasons: the Soviet Union’s sudden demise left the United States in such a commanding position that putting together a coalition is especially hard; the sheer force of intellectual and policy inertia; and also, because the United States had acquired a reputation for benign intentions that is only now being undermined by actions such as the war in Iraq. As other states shake off inertia, gain relative capabilities, and update their assessments of the U.S. threat, they will begin to take such soft balancing measures as they can. But if the theory truly applies, these measures must plausibly be linked to enhancing these states’ security vis-à-vis the U.S. threat. As they undertake soft balancing, these states must rationally expect to constrain the threat posed by the United States and so be more secure as a result. Actions that are expected only to frustrate U.S. policies without affecting its real capability to threaten the security of other major powers are impossible to explain as soft balancing.

### **Soft Balancing Versus Unipolar Politics as Usual**

Thus far, soft balancing proponents have not supplied us with the conceptual tools necessary to distinguish behavior that derives from the systemic balancing imperative from more or less routine security competition or policy bargaining. A core question remains to be addressed: How do we know when we are seeing soft balancing as opposed to what might be

called “unipolar politics as usual”? Crucially missing from the current literature is a sufficient recognition that there are many other possible explanations for recent constraint policies besides balancing. Because these alternative explanations have not been delineated, IR scholarship is currently biased in favor of concluding that soft balancing is occurring. Here we remove this bias in order to provide a fair, objective evaluation of the soft balancing argument.

Obviously, some opposition to the United States is motivated by the politics of prestige. U.S. power may threaten the self-esteem if not the security of other states. Standing up to the United States, or appearing to do so, is a useful tool for building oneself up on both the domestic and international stage. Even the most pragmatic leaders clearly face strong incentives to at least occasionally resort to this strategy. Was it an accident, for example, that Boris Yelstin’s strongest tirade against U. S. power—a joint statement with Jiang Zemin inveighing against “forcing the international community to accept a unipolar world” – occurred just a week before crucial parliamentary elections in Russia in December 1999? Did Gerhard Schroeder join France in opposing the U.S. on Iraq out of the fear of the security threat emanating from American power or because it was a popular pre-election stance? Have the French have taken the lead in Europe as defenders of “multipolarity” because they most strongly believe that there has recently been an erosion of America’s benign intentions? Or is it partly because taking a strong stance against the U.S. sells well politically in a country whose elites, in Charles Krauthammer’s words, “for the last 50 years...have insisted on making themselves the great Western dissenter to American greatness”?

The prestige motivation falls outside the logic of the balance of power theory that informs soft balancing. To the degree that it lies behind opposition to the United States, the soft balancing argument is impugned. But the prestige motivation is so ubiquitous and at the same time so hard to nail down empirically that it might bias our findings to downgrade our assessment of the salience of soft balancing every time prestige seeking plausibly figures in the explanation of a case. While we believe that scholars are now prone to conclude too quickly that soft balancing is occurring because they fail to systematically consider alternative explanations for constraint policies, bringing in the politics of prestige would likely tilt the playing field too far in the other direction.

There are, however, many other plausible explanations for the kinds of behavior scholars are so quick to attribute to soft balancing. In our assessment, the explanatory purchase of the soft balancing argument is reduced to the degree that any of the following three dynamics are in play:

(1) *Policy bargaining*. Other states may undertake constraint policies not in response to the security threat presented by U.S. hegemony, but rather because they disagree with a specific set of U.S. actions or policies and seek to limit US freedom of action in this particular area. More specifically, other states may oppose U.S. policies because they believe that those policies are ill suited to the problem at hand or otherwise inappropriate and not because they think these U.S. policies threaten their security or that opposition to these policies will serve to generally reduce the long-term power or influence of the U.S. on the world stage. If that is the case, then soft balancing is a misnomer, for the behavior concerned has nothing to do with balance of power theory – that is, it is unrelated to maximizing security under anarchy by checking dangerous concentrations of power. In short, the world may push back against specific US policies (“pushing back because we disagree”) and not against US power in general (“pushing back because we fear or wish to challenge”).

(2) *Regional security concerns*, by which we mean efforts to enhance local security unrelated to constraining U.S. hegemony. For a variety of reasons, there is a greater demand for regional policy coordination than in the past: a vast increase in the number of states, a consequent increase in the number of weak or failed states, and the rise of transnational security challenges such as organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking, refugees flows, and the like. Major powers frequently face incentives to enhance their capabilities—often through collaboration with other regional states—in order to address these local or regional concerns. These efforts may result in shifts in relative power—and perhaps in reduced U.S. freedom of action—even if constraining threatening U.S. hegemony is not an important driver of them.

(3) *Material interest*. States may undertake constraint policies not principally because they wish to hamper the conduct of US foreign policy, but rather simply to advance economic or other material gains, either for the state as whole or for powerful interest groups or business lobbies. A government’s interest in fostering economic growth or obtaining rents for itself or its

constituents may be unrelated to the presence of a hegemon on the horizon. Given the ubiquity of American economic interests, a government's routine interest in promoting material gains may induce it to oppose US policy—possibly in cahoots with other like-minded governments.

It is important to recognize that these three dynamics may all generate balancing rhetoric from policymakers, creating prima facie evidence for a soft balancing explanation. Governments that pursue relative economic advantages for themselves or their constituents may well find it convenient to cloak the policy in high-minded talk about checking U.S. power. In turn, leaders with sincere policy differences with the United States may still detect domestic political advantage in touting the balancing element even if countering the threat from U.S. power is not the real issue in play. Finally, the United States is so prominent on the global stage that it can potentially serve as a convenient focal point for other states that seek to cooperation on regional security issues. States will likely often have strong disagreements on the specifics of how to cooperate at the regional level; opposition to the US may be one binding force that they hold in common. Balancing rhetoric can thus be a useful rallying point for stimulating regional cooperation.

All three dynamics are facilitated by an underlying enabling condition: the ability to free ride on US security policy. Other states will be more tempted to pursue narrow material interests, raise objections to particular US security policies, and use opposition to the US as a focal point for stimulating cooperation to the degree that they believe that the US has the means and the motive to tackle core global security problems -- and to take most of the blame if things go wrong. The stronger other states are relative to the US, the less persuasive these beliefs would be; that is, the more they would also be expected to have the means and the motive to address these security issues, and, given those expectations, the more they might suffer in the case of failure. Under those conditions, they reasonably would have to ask themselves if pursuing material interest, raising objections, or using the US as a focal point would undercut any effort to solve ongoing core security threats and so diminish their security. The more lopsided the distribution of power, the less other states have to worry about such tradeoffs and how best to resolve them.

Motives are always mixed in political life. It would be surprising to find no evidence of soft-balancing motivations behind policies directed against the United States. Leaders' balancing rhetoric is doubtless partly the result of sincere preferences. Chirac and Putin surely would prefer to live in a more balanced inter-state system than the present one, all other things equal. But that *ceteris paribus* clause is the key. The question is how much are they willing to pay to get multipolarity? Balance-of-power theory, especially the neorealist variant, is built on a possibilistic assumption that states are willing to take very costly action to forestall the mere possibility of hegemony.<sup>15</sup> This is an implausible assumption under most circumstances but especially now, when U.S. hegemony is not a possibility but a reality. And it is one that other major powers are living with—and living rather well by historical standards. So in sifting the evidence to consider the relative salience of soft balancing as opposed to the other explanations for periodic opposition to the United States we have delineated, a key criterion is the willingness to accept trade-offs between other values and placing constraints on the hegemon. To the degree that we find other powers willing to accept losses in other areas in exchange for increased constraints on Washington, the soft balancing argument gains traction. To the degree that increased constraints on Washington is merely a bonus dividend from policies that first and foremost serve other valued objectives, the soft balancing argument is impugned.

### **Testing Soft Balancing Against Unipolar Politics as Usual**

We now use these criteria to evaluate the relative strength of the soft balancing element, as opposed to the three dynamics we identified above. We do so in those recent cases highlighted by proponents of the soft balancing concept. Because we must perforce deal with the relative salience of causes of complex behaviors, it is vital to examine a range of cases. Scholars who use the soft balancing argument have suggested possible cases that fall into three categories that can be termed: “incipient hard balancing,” “indirect balancing,” and “institutional balancing.”

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen G. Brooks, "Dueling Realisms," *International Organization* Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997), pp. 445-477.

## 1. Incipient Hard Balancing: Weak and Strong Forms

Incipient hard balancing is a strategy in which other powers seek to aggregate their military capacity to balance the United States. This strategy comes in both a strong and weak form. The weak version is a joint effort to preserve or enhance military technological capacity; the key cited example along these lines is Russia's security cooperation with China and India. The strong form of this strategy is to build a joint military force; the key such case noted by soft balancing proponents is the ongoing effort to form an EU defense force that is separate from NATO.

### *Russian "strategic partnerships" with India and China*

Before the Iraq War, Russia's strategic partnerships with India and especially China were probably the strongest potential case of soft balancing. These are treaty-governed relationships that result in a net shift in the distribution of military power against the United States. Russia's own military is presently unable to use most of the output of its own defense industry. To the extent that the strategic partnerships with China and India permit the transfer of some of this output to militaries that can use it effectively, the net effect is a shift in relative power. Whereas much of this increase is devoted to local security issues unconnected to the United States, across the Taiwan strait this is not the case. There, the change in capabilities directly affects U.S. military requirements.

In reality, however, the partnerships are quite limited. The relationship with India amounts to a Soviet holdover based on the Friendship Treaty of 1971, whose language implied weak security obligations even in the Cold War, and a largely symbolic Declaration on Strategic Partnership signed by Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2000. The Russia-China Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation signed in July 2001 capped over a decade of improving bilateral ties but it similarly lacks anything resembling a mutual defense clause.<sup>16</sup> While the treaty obligates the signatories in a general sense to maintain the global equilibrium and to consult each other in the event of security threats, neither it nor any public Russo-Chinese agreement entails any observable or costly commitment to counter U.S.

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed analysis of the treaty, see Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russia and China: Brothers Again?" *Asian Survey*, vol. 41, no. 5 (September–October 2001), pp. 797–821.

power in any way. No mutual undertaking by the two powers in accordance with their partnership has entailed major costs in their relationships with the United States. The same goes for Russia's cooperation with India.

This is not surprising to experts on all three countries. Moscow, Beijing and Delhi are pursuing grand strategies that highlight economic and institutional modernization, a goal that requires cordial relations with the United States and the global economic institutions over which it has influence. The strategy has yielded very high growth rates for all three countries in recent years. Moreover, in all three cases policymakers have explicitly reoriented their strategic priorities to highlight security issues like terrorism and proliferation on which they tend to have roughly similar preferences to those of the United States.<sup>17</sup>

Russia's willingness to commit to its Asian partnerships is also limited by its sense of weakness in the region. Russians remain wary of China's growing economic and diplomatic clout, and express a general preference for diversifying Russia's Asian relationships. Deep suspicions plague the Russo-Chinese relationship, stemming partly from mutual fears that each is using the other only to get a better deal with Washington. Many Russian analysts regard their partnership with India as a hedge against rising Chinese power in Asia. Many agreements on the joint design and production of weapons that Russia has signed with India are deeper and more comprehensive than the arrangements it has made with Beijing. Russian officials are quick to cite these facts when questioned by domestic critics who accuse them of mortgaging Russia's security through the arms transfers to China. A constraint on the development of deep security ties is the nature of their economic relationship: trade between Russia and China remains anemic; they do not have complementary economies from which high levels of trade can develop; and both are highly dependent upon inward flows of capital and technology, which can only come from the West. Real cooperation may develop between them, but all indications are that it will

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<sup>17</sup> See Wohlforth, Christensen and Stephen P. Cohen chapters in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron Friedberg, with Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia 2002-03: Asian Aftershocks* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2002). On China's grand strategy and its implications for balancing see Avery Goldstein, "An Emerging China's Grand Strategy," in G. John Ikenberry and Michael Mastanduno *International Relations Theory and the Asia Pacific* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); and Alastair Iain Johnston, "Is China a Status Quo Power?" *International Security*.

be strictly regional in scope on issues such as terrorism, separatism, organized crime, and containing the perceived threat from Islamic fundamentalism.

The real core of Russia's relationships with India and China are not the diplomatic partnerships but major arms sales and extensive military co-production arrangements. Russia's interest in these exports, however, is not driven by the need counterbalance U.S. power. Rather, they are desperately needed to slow the inexorable decline of Russia's military industrial complex. The crucial background here is that between 1992 and 1998 Russia experienced what was probably the steepest peacetime decline in military power by any major state in history.<sup>18</sup> Weapons procurement and spending declined dramatically after 1991, and by 2000 only 20 percent of Russia's operational weapons stocks were modern, compared to 60–80 percent in NATO countries.<sup>19</sup> Maintenance and training are dismal; personnel problems are dire and getting worse.<sup>20</sup> Unable to subdue the Chechen rebels, the Russian military is beset by so many problems of such magnitude that all experts agree that major reforms entailing huge expenditures are critically necessary simply to forestall its continued decline. Hence, increased budgetary outlays and intensified reform efforts are driven by deep problems of decay that are unrelated to counterbalancing U.S. power.

Arms sales are a sub-strategy that aids Russia's more general interest in staving off further military decline. Given the collapse of domestic orders (in 2001, only ten percent of Russian defense firms received state orders), Russia's defense sector possesses massive excess capacity.<sup>21</sup> Exports are a crucial lifeline for a military industry producing less than one-third of its 1992 output, and rapidly losing technological competitiveness. Russia wants to sustain a core defense manufacturing capacity until economic growth affords it the opportunity to modernize its surviving military infrastructure and to transfer excess defense workers and production capacities into more productive sectors. Even more immediately, exports aid a defense sector that supplies

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<sup>18</sup> Christopher Hill, "Russian Defense Spending," in United States Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *Russia's Uncertain Economic Future* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2002), 168.

<sup>19</sup> "Only 20% of Russian Arms are Modern," RFE/RL *Daily Report*, May 21, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> "Every Third Potential Conscript Said Not Fit For Military Service," ITAR-TASS, May 23, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin P. O'Prey, "Arms Exports and Russia's Defense Industries: Issues for the U.S. Congress," in Joint Economic Committee, *Russia's Uncertain Economic Future*.

income and welfare services to hundreds of thousands of workers and their families, provides the economic lifeblood of dozens of cities, and enriches numerous managers and public officials.

In short, the evidence concerning Russia's major arms relationships overwhelmingly indicates that the United States could cut its defense outlays by two-thirds tomorrow, and Moscow would remain just as eager to sell weaponry to Beijing and New Delhi. Material interests provide for more explanatory purchase on the case than soft balancing.

### *EU defense cooperation*

The European Union is in the process of developing a 60,000-man rapid reaction force that has the ability to engage in military missions without having to rely on US capabilities.<sup>22</sup> Analysts frequently treat this as an example of incipient hard balancing, noting that European officials themselves sometimes justify the creation of this force by stressing that it will lay the grounds for the development of a progressively larger check on US military power.<sup>23</sup> There are three problems with viewing this as an example of incipient hard balancing.

First, there is scant evidence that balancing the US is the operative intention behind this EU military force. Most European analysts and decision-makers see increased military capability as necessary to deal with the prospect of America's *decreased* US presence in Europe and reduced willingness to solve Balkans-style problems for its European allies. Dealing with regional issues, not global ones, has been the rationale for creating this force. Indeed, the forces that the Europeans are actually seeking to create complement rather than compete with the US in that they provide additional (though much lower-tech) forces capable of dealing with Balkans-style contingencies.

Second, there is no question of the EU narrowing the overall gap in military capabilities vis-à-vis the United States in the foreseeable future. Europe faces enormous hurdles in creating this 60,000-man force, not to mention a more impressive set of joint military capabilities. A recent EU report noted over forty technological shortfalls that currently constrain the ability of

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<sup>22</sup> For an excellent overall analysis, see Hans-Christian Hagman, "EU Crisis Management Capabilities," paper delivered at the conference *The European Union – Its Role and Power in the Emerging International System* (Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, October 3-5 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Layne, "America as European Hegemon."

Europe to develop this rapid reaction force.<sup>24</sup> As a result, it will not be until 2012 at the earliest that the EU will be able to field this relatively small force while relying on its own capabilities.<sup>25</sup>

Third, generating a usable force for peace enforcement may do nothing towards the creation of any serious constraint on the United States. Indeed, it may actually work against the development of such a potential check on US power, since European investments towards making the rapid reaction contingent into a credible force will likely have to come at the expense of developing advanced systems that are capable of competing with those fielded by US forces. In the opinion of most military analysts who are familiar with developments on both sides of the Atlantic, the most likely development—even if all goes well for the EU’s current plans—is a widening of the gap in favor of the US. Over the past three decades, the US has spent over three times more than the EU combined on military R&D. This gap will affect the development of assets and capabilities for decades to come.

In short, not only are the Europeans not sacrificing other preferences in order to create capabilities that constrain the United States, they may well be sacrificing limited resources that might be useful eventually in countering American power to create capabilities that largely complement those of the U.S. If that is the case, then why do leaders in Europe sometimes use soft balancing language when describing this force? It is important to stress that 80% of the rhetoric is about building up capabilities for reasons other than balancing the US; indeed, much of this rhetoric is about trying to be a better partner of the US, not a competitor. But politicians (especially in Paris) do sometimes use balancing language to describe their aims for EU military strengthening. A key reason why is that the creation of this military force involves financial and other costs that many members of the EU seem very reluctant to bear. To the extent that this force is portrayed as a means of checking US power, some of this hesitance may be reduced, if nothing else because adopting a “more independent” foreign policy is popular among the public in Europe. However, *paying* for such independence is unpopular in Europe, which is why EU aggregate defense spending has steadily declined even as European politicians’ rhetoric about defense has escalated. The result is a crescendo of calls for enhanced EU military capabilities

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<sup>24</sup> *Financial Times*, 8 February 2002, 4. See also the discussion in Kapstein 2002, 149-150.

<sup>25</sup> *Sunday Telegraph*, 13 January 2002, 17.

and an alphabet soup of new organizational initiatives but very little operational output on the ground.

Thus, the EU's efforts at generating independent military capabilities are mainly the result of a perceived regional security need, with the soft balancing rhetoric mainly an occasionally useful foil for stimulating cooperation in this area.

## 2. Indirect Balancing: The Moscow-Tehran Connection

Indirect balancing is a strategy in which other great powers seek to arm opponents of the United States in order to balance American power. One of the most often cited cases is Russia's nuclear cooperation with and arms sales to Iran. In 2001 Moscow and Tehran signed a protocol on mutual relations that featured a commitment to develop cooperation in areas of vital interest to Russia's military-industrial and nuclear complexes: nuclear energy, weapons modernization, air defense, and space programs. The protocol followed years of varying levels of cooperation in these areas—which could not help but have the effect of buttressing Iran against pressure from Washington under its “dual containment” policy in the Persian Gulf.

Russia has numerous reasons besides balancing the United States to seek good relations with its Caspian Sea neighbor. As far as the arms sales are concerned, the explanation is identical to the China and India cases: they result from the need to preserve defense manufacturing by selling excess capacity. The underlying incentive for Russian nuclear sales to Iran is very similar. Nuclear and space technology is another declining asset inherited from the Soviet Union that figures importantly in Russia's small share of high technology exports. Revenues for nuclear materials and technology amounted to between .6 to 1.5% of exports from the mid-1990s to the present.<sup>26</sup> There is virtually no domestic demand for these products. With abundant hydrocarbon-fuelled electrical generation capacity and declining demand compared to Soviet times, the domestic market for the Ministry of Atomic Energy (Minatom) has dried up. Foreign sales are

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<sup>26</sup> Calculated from statistics presented in Celeste A. Wallander, “Russia's interest in trading with the ‘Axis of Evil,’” Testimony for “Russia's Policies toward the Axis of Evil: Money and Geopolitics in Iraq and Iran,” Hearing before the House Committee on International Relations 26 February 2003.

essential to keeping essentially half the Ministry's activities alive, and Iran is a major market. Large sums of money for Minatom are in play—the Bushehr project is worth about \$1 billion, reprocessing fuel is also lucrative, and more reactor projects are planned. The total value of the long-term relationship could exceed \$8 billion and involve orders for more than 300 Russian companies, boosters of the deals claim. Moreover, significant numbers of high-technology jobs—many located in politically crucial and economically-strapped regions—are involved.<sup>27</sup> Hence, Minatom remains a formidable interest group in Moscow politics.

Russia experts are virtually unanimous in regarding Russia's nuclear ties to Iran as a case of opportunism. No one in Russia is able to develop a plausible argument for how Russia would benefit from Iran's nuclearization. Russia's official policy—which Putin has reiterated emphatically—is that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction “is the main threat of the 21st century.”<sup>28</sup> On numerous Caspian issues, the Moscow and Teheran are at loggerheads. Moreover, the nuclear industry's lobbyists have a harder time than those from the defense industry in making the case that nuclear sector is critical to Russia's modernization drive. Hence, most analysis think Russia's incentive to sell nuclear technology to Iran is much weaker than the material incentives at play in the case of arms sales to China and India.

In keeping with this analysis, Russia recalibrated its Iran policy in 2003. Moscow reaffirmed its commitment to non-proliferation and its desire to see Iran submit to robust IAEA inspections. In expressing their reservations concerning pressuring Teheran, Putin and his officials stressed commercial concerns—especially the fear that if Russia backed away from its contract with the Iranians to pressure them to comply with US demands, American or European companies might move in to exploit the opening. Moscow wants guarantees that international efforts to compel Iran to comply with IAEA strictures do not come at the expense of Russia's commercial interests. In the domestic media, discussion of such material concerns massively outweighed strategic rationales about bolstering Iran against the United States. Notwithstanding

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<sup>27</sup> Minatom claims that the Bushehr contract alone will secure 20,000 jobs and involve work at over 300 Russian companies. Anatoly Andreev, “Mirnyi Atom dlia Bushera,” *Trud* December 27, 2002, p. 1. For more on Russia's role in proliferation in Asia, see Bates Gill chapter herein.

<sup>28</sup> Transcript of Putin's BBC interview on June 22, 2003, reprinted in Johnson's Russia List, no. 7236, 24 June 2003.

the material interests at stake, in 2004 Putin tacked toward the emerging international consensus that Iran must accept stricter IAEA oversight. After his re-election in March, Putin downgraded MINATOM, making it subordinate to “superministers” he controls. If the prevailing assessment among Russia-experts is right, this move should limit policy entrepreneurship by Russia’s nuclear industry and reduce friction between Moscow and Washington on this issue.

In short, material interests overwhelmingly trump soft balancing incentives as an explanation for Russian behavior in this case.

### 3. Institutional Balancing: Two Cases

Institutional balancing is a strategy in which other great powers seek to develop new institutional structures, or use an existing one, to balance the US. The most prominent example of forming a new security institution potentially to balance the US is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The most significant case cited by soft balancing proponents of using an existing institution to balance the US is French-Russian-German opposition in the UNSC before the invasion of Iraq. We consider each case in turn.

#### *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)*

Russian and Chinese leaders have frequently used SCO gatherings to express their preference for a multipolar world, and the grouping is often seen as a coordinating mechanism for counterbalancing U.S. power in the region.<sup>29</sup> Yet a close examination of the organization’s real activities belies this interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Its main goal has been confidence-building among the new states, especially by resolving old Soviet-Chinese border disputes. China further sought to stabilize and secure the borders from Islamic extremism, a factor that threatened not only post-Soviet Central Asia but also the restive Xinjiang region of western China. China feared that the Uighur separatists were getting funding, arms and support from Uighurs in its neighboring states, as well as from Afghanistan. Russia shared the common threat of an increasingly Islamicized

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<sup>29</sup> See, for example, Sergei Blagov, “Russia Seeking to Strengthen Regional Organizations to Counterbalance Western Influence,” *Eurasia Insight* December 4, 2002, at Eurasianet.org.

<sup>30</sup>For more, see Kathleen Collins and William C. Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying ‘Great Game’ Expectations,” in Richard J. Ellings and Michael Wills, Eds., *Strategic Asia 2003-4* (Washington, NBR, 2003).

Chechen separatist movement. Uzbekistan joined the group in 2001 as it sought a common forum for responding to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)--a transnational guerilla threat.<sup>31</sup> The Shanghai six, now upgraded to the SCO, signed a declaration on June 15, 2001, expanding its mission in the region and focused increasingly on terrorist threats, religious extremism, and to a lesser extent, arms and narcotics trafficking. The organization announced the creation of a counter-terrorism center in Bishkek known as the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS), but the project stalled and few assets were invested or resources committed.<sup>32</sup>

The problem with the soft balancing interpretation is that the main issue that China, Russia and the Central Asians agreed upon that warranted an upgrading of the SCO was counter-terrorism. Having coordinated the grouping around this issue, however, the members were unable to assemble the capabilities required to address it. This shortcoming was made brutally evident after September 11, when U.S.-led *Operation Enduring Freedom* quickly toppled the Taliban and weakened the IMU—the very threats whose rise had just begun to provide the SCO’s *raison d’être*. The U.S. deployment created a clear contradiction between the SCO’s rhetorical role as a counterbalancing mechanism and its operational role as a regional security organization. China and Russia resolved the contradiction by bandwagoning with the U.S.-led war on terror. Indeed, on September 14, 2001, the SCO was the first international organization to issue a formal statement condemning the attacks on the United States. An extraordinary meeting of SCO foreign ministers in Beijing in January 2001 pledged the organization’s support for the UN Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan and the international war on terror.<sup>33</sup>

Pragmatic regional cooperation is the chief diver of the SCO, with the soft balancing element providing a convenient focal point.

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<sup>31</sup> Interview with senior analyst, Institute of Strategic Studies, Uzbekistan, Tashkent, August 2002, reported in Collins and Wohlforth, "Defying 'Great Game' Expectations."

<sup>32</sup> "Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2001," <[www.missions.itu.int/~kazaks/eng/sco/sco02](http://www.missions.itu.int/~kazaks/eng/sco/sco02)>.

<sup>33</sup> "Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," January 7, 2002, Beijing, <[www.missions.itu.int/~kazaks/eng/sco/sco06](http://www.missions.itu.int/~kazaks/eng/sco/sco06)>.

Still drafting.

### **Conclusion: Implications for Policy and Theory**

Our conclusion is that soft balancing is mainly rhetorical icing on the cake of policies adopted primarily for reasons other than the need to counter-balance threatening U.S. power. Other states often justify or explain their actions as being part of a general effort to balance US power, but there is little evidence that this motivation figures prominently in explaining the adoption of the policies in question. The cases show other causes playing a much more consequential role than soft balancing in stimulating the behavior under consideration. The expected benefits of constraining U.S. power are overwhelmed in most cases by the expected costs to other valued objectives. Politics is often theater, and soft balancing features prominently on unipolarity's stage. Behind the scenes, other aims much more immediate and prosaic than constraining the American threat actually run the show.

So what? Why should people other than nitpicking IR scholars care if balancing language is used loosely to describe politics that are, after all, consequential if not world shattering? Why not use arresting language to capture attention? The problem is that the use of balancing concepts in this context imposes significant costs—both analytical and political.

To begin with politics, does it matter that Chirac and others use the language of balancing? The short answer is yes. Consider first the influence of soft balancing language on bargaining over those issues and policies on which the United States runs into disagreements with other powers. In these instances, the use of soft balancing language could cause the respective countries to miss potential cooperative equilibria. For one thing, it can reduce the quality of communication between Washington and other capitals. This is, essentially, the French dilemma: the more French policymakers make use of balancing rhetoric, the more likely their diplomatic interlocutors are to discount their specific objections to the policy issue at hand. Second, to the extent that American leaders are led to believe that other powers oppose them not because of their approach to the specific issue under consideration but instead because of the nature of US power, they face reduced incentives to seek out accommodation by modulating

their approach. Former NSC official Charles Kupchan, for example, recalls seeing his colleagues taking unread French memos on the Kosovo crisis from the diplomatic pouch to the wastebasket. “If they come from Paris,” the NSC staffers explained, “they must reflect an effort to weaken the United States.” The key conclusion is that when much of the other powers’ opposition to the United States is seen as a response to American power, then it becomes harder to resolve issues by focusing on the specifics at hand.

Looking beyond particular cases, the use of soft balancing language is likely to strengthen the US tendency to resort to unilateralism. There is a debate in American policy circles over the usefulness of multilateral institutions and the degree to which Washington should defer to them in its global undertakings. Most of the second-tier great powers express a strong preference for operating through such institutions. The more they use soft balancing rhetoric, however, the weaker the argument for U.S. multilateralism. If the US believes that other powers’ demands for multilateralism are mainly motivated by balancing concerns—that is, if all other powers begin to be seen as France already is seen— then it will likely only reduce American willingness to work through international institutions. Touting objections to specific US policies as parts of a grander strategy to constrain the United States is only likely to enhance the Americans’ temptation to go it alone, not reduce it. Some leaders clearly grasp this (e.g. Putin) while others do not (e.g. Villepin).

What about the implications for theory? Our main finding is that when you look at systemic-level incentives, most of them now are pushing other powers to avoid using Villepin-type rhetoric as much as possible. Why then is France not rushing to distance itself from using soft balancing language? The answer is that there are strong domestic-level incentives for using this rhetoric. Standing up rhetorically to the United States may not help a state maximize security, but it certainly does offer the prospect of enhancing grandeur and improving a leader’s domestic standing. As a result, it is tempting for leaders to employ the language of balancing even if they have scant real need to balance America and even agree with the overall course of its policy. The more domestic/prestige oriented a state is, the stronger this temptation will be.

From the standpoint of theory, there are three key punchlines. First, the most compelling evidence that proponents of soft balancing have for their argument – that leaders of other powers

often do describe constraint policies they are pursuing using the language of balancing – turns out mainly to be a response to domestic-level incentives, not system-level ones. When one looks at system-level incentives, it is hard to see why a state would want to suffer from the French dilemma, which clearly does not serve to maximize security.

Second, soft balancing initially appears to be the strongest argument that is rooted in international relations theory for restraint in U.S. foreign policy. In fact, it is weak. Other research traditions – institutionalism and constructivism – might turn out to furnish much stronger arguments for restraint. Or, they might not. That is a question for further research.

Third is the question that has dogged IR scholars since the Soviet Union's demise and which the soft balancing argument has raised anew: Are we on the cusp of a new balancing order? Does IR scholarship suggest that we are about to embark—or indeed have already embarked—along a path of escalating opposition to the United States, with other states increasingly willing to absorb costs in order to constrain the American Gulliver? Our answer is no. Rather, periodic opposition to the United States is better understood as what we call unipolar politics as usual.