

DOES A BALANCE OF POWER INCREASE GLOBAL SECURITY?

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In the field of international relations exist various theories which attempt to explain how power is exercised in the international arena, and which purposes it is used for. Herein lies the concept of balance of power. When it comes to discussing war and peace, some scholars are pessimistic toward a balance of power, while others allude to its favourable traits. *This assignment will argue that a balance of power increases global security in an anarchical system where states seek to use power as a means to maintain the status quo and maximize security in the international arena.* According to the theory of defensive realism, the definition of balance of power is based on the assumptions about the behaviour of states as units within a given system. Balance of power is built up from “*the assumed motivations of states and the actions that correspond to them*” (Waltz, 1979). It assumes that in a self-help system, states who do not help themselves will be open to danger, which drives states to engage in balances of power. Global security will be taken to mean the safety and sovereignty of states in the context of the theoretical paradigms the paper concurs with. Firstly, this assignment will draw upon examples where states act as security maximizers in regards to alliance forming in multipolarity and of power equilibria between states. Secondly, it will discuss the behaviour of states in the presence of nuclear weapons. The assignment will also examine how states use balancing in a system of bipolarity, and how they seek to maintain the status quo. Furthermore, countering arguments will be presented based on various contrasting theoretical views, which reject the defensive realist main argument of the assignment. These arguments will be refuted. Lastly, the implications of a balance of power in an anarchical system will be discussed, and it will be concluded that global security is increased when states use power as a means for an end that is security.

This assignment is informed by the theory of defensive realism by Kenneth Waltz, which falls into the paradigm of structural realism/neorealism. While some scholars use ‘structural realism’, ‘neorealism’ and ‘defensive realism’ interchangeably, this paper will, for the purpose of continuity, refer to Waltz’s theory as defensive realism. Waltz argues that states “*have to be concerned with the capabilities of other states*”, and that “*the possibility that any state may use force to advance its interests causes all states to worry about their survival.*” According to Waltz, power is a means to an end, and the end is security (Baylis et al., 2020). The paper will provide its analysis in acceptance of the main assumptions of the theory regarding the conditions and intentions of states and the international system. According to defensive realism states act as security maximizers, and the international system has an anarchic structure (Waltz, 1979). Waltz’s

views of neorealism are not to be confused with Mearsheimer's variant of neorealism, offensive realism, which will be discussed in relation to criticism of the assignment's main line of argumentation. Additionally, the theories of bandwagoning, power transition, and constructivism respectively will be introduced to present counterarguments to those of defensive realism.

When power is distributed between states, such that two nearly equal rivaling coalitions form, the likelihood of war is minimized (Wagner, 1994). During the Cold War was a bipolarity made up by the United States on one pole and the Soviet Union on the other (Waltz, 1979). Both states were capable of destroying each other, and the threat of war loomed large. However, each actor could lose heavily to the other if they went to war, so they would stand to gain more from internal balancing, i.e. by developing internal resources in a peaceful manner, than by engaging in warfare (Waltz, 1979). In the bipolarity during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union balanced each other internally by relying on their own capabilities instead of those of allies. This type of balancing is reliable; there is less uncertainty and calculations are easier to make in a bipolar world. With a balance of power in place the Cold War did not turn into a hot war. According to Waltz rules of reciprocity and caution prevail in a self-help system. *"Their concern for peace and draws them together; their fears drive them apart"* (Waltz, 1979). This points to the notion that when states use their power to maintain the status quo, they can potentially increase global security in a balance of power system.

One significant aspect of the defensive realism considers the forming of alliances in a balance of power system to protect themselves from threats. This occurs in a system with more than two states (Waltz, 1979); a multipolarity. In the years before World War I are examples that illustrate how a balance of power between alliances pushes states to increase global security in a quest for safety and survival. France and Russia became allies in 1894, and later formed the Triple Entente along with England. By doing so they overcame long-standing animosities. According to Waltz, states will deal with almost anyone if under enough pressure, even though their interests do not align completely (Waltz, 1979). Although some may argue that the formation of these blocs is what caused the outbreak World War I, such claims are superficial, according to Waltz. The perception of a common threat is what brought them together (Waltz, 1979). As famously said by Winston Churchill to his secretary before Germany's invasion of Russia: *"If Hitler invaded Hell I would make at least a favourable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons"* (Churchill, 1950; Waltz, 1979). Furthermore, Churchill stated that although it would have been tempting to

join forces with most dominating power, England, by joining forces with less strong powers could defeat whichever military tyrant in question (Waltz, 1985). Waltz's balance of power theory alludes to this notion, insofar as states thrive for maintaining an international status quo through security maximization, in these cases through strategic alliance formation.

A balance of power increases security when there is an equilibrium of power between conflicting states. Demonstrating this is the long-standing conflict between Israel and Palestine. Despite Israel's military superiority it cannot impose its will on Palestine (al-Ghabra, 2018). Israel has destroyed Palestinian military capabilities in the 1980's and again in 2002, but this has not altered the core of the conflict. Each time Israel believes to have defeated Palestine, Arab and Palestine forces emerge and manage to restore some balance (al-Ghabra, 2018). The conflict is supported by the defensive realist notion that a balance of power requires an equilibrium of power. Were these actors in this conflict struggling for power, the situation could be seen as a zero-sum game. However, it is not, since both states would be better off without fighting (Wagner, 1994). Arguably, the chances of a long term ceasefire are very real (al-Ghabra, 2018). Insofar as these states use their power to achieve safety and survival, a balance of power between them contributes to international security.

According to defensive realism, dissuasion is easier to accomplish than compellence, and one way to achieve this is by deterrence. A state is largely disincentivized to employ greater force if its rival has a matching nuclear arsenal, as *"Nuclear weapons deter nuclear weapons; they also serve to limit escalation"* (Waltz, 1979). Waltz argues that it is favourable for international security that a state hold back on its nuclear establishment, as the objective of both opposing actors should be an international stalemate; *"Power maintains an order; the use of force signals a possible breakdown"* (Waltz, 1979). Supporting this notion is the fact that neither the US nor the Soviet Union fired nuclear weapons against each other despite over 40 years of rivalry and various political crises, as they would not assume nuclear war to be truly winnable or victory to be achieved at an acceptable cost (Cimbala, 2017), indicates an increment of global security with a balance of power in place in the presence of nuclear weapons, as we should not confuse the usefulness of force with its usability (Waltz, 1979). So long as this force is used to minimize the risks of endangerment.

Following Waltz's defensive realist view that states perceive security as the highest end in their international relations, a balance of power can therefore increase global security, as these

states seek to maintain their positions in the anarchic international system (Waltz, 1979). After the end of the Cold War it is widely accepted that the years between 1990 and 2001 were dominated by the United States as a hegemonic power (Hook & Jones 2010; Hincu, 2014). Some argue that closer European cooperation in 1999 could be attributed to attempts at balancing the power of the US following the bipolarity that previously had existed (Posen, 2006; Hincu, 2014). As the current international system is shifting towards multipolarity, China is on the rise and internally balancing the US by for example increasing military capabilities. As this challenges US hegemony, the relative power of the US is declining (Baylis et al., 2020). Arguably, China can be observed to be a status quo power aiming to preserve its position rather than upsetting the international system, which concurs to the theory of defensive realism (Jalil, 2019). Considering China to be inclined to balance the US, since states can rarely afford to make maximizing power their main goal (Waltz, 1979), a balance of power can have positive implications for global security in the current international system.

Due to an inability of the West to intervene in Syria in order to maintain a local balance of power, the situation in the Middle East subsequently worsened. The US intervention in Iraq in 2003 and withdrawal of troops in 2011 inadvertently led to the rise of the Islamic State regime. Arguably, a balance of power would have minimized radical Islamic extremism (Panayiotides, 2015). Had the US engaged in eliminating the power vacuum that led to ISIS gaining territorial control, security could have been increased as the Middle East might have benefitted from a balance of power in place. Following the end of the Cold War and American unipolarity, the Middle East is contending with a regional power imbalance. Going forward the challenge is reducing incentives for revisionist versus status quo behaviour. Disturbances in the Middle East can cause further instability in the international realm (Harrison, 2018). Seen through the lens of defensive realism the actors operating within the anarchical system see it in their best interests to prevent a power-seeking opponent to upset the status quo. Therefore in the situation of the Middle East, other actors might gain an incentive to use power in order to maintain the status quo and increase global security.

Some scholars may argue that a balance of power does not increase global security and that contrasting theories serve more useful to explain the behaviour of states in international relations. In sharp contrast with balancing behaviour is the concept of bandwagoning (Waltz 1979). The essence of bandwagoning is captured in the famous dictum from Thucydides: *"the strong do what*

they can and the weak suffer what they must" (Mearsheimer, 2001). According to Larson (1991) the decision of the US to defend Asian dominoes after 1945 reflected a realistic fear that fragile West European states would bandwagon with the Soviet Union, insofar as communism seemed to be *"the wave of the future"* (Larson 1991; Jervis & Snyder, 1991). There is also the example of German Admiral Tirpitz who theorized that Britain would jump on the bandwagon with Germany, should the latter build a fleet that threatened the former. The reasoning behind this being that the strategic positioning could *"repay ten times any risk or cost that its occupation may involve"* (Jervis & Snyder, 1991). However, as argued by Waltz, we are not to expect the strong to join forces with the strong in order to increase power over others, because only if survival is guaranteed, states can seek other goals such as profit and power. Therefore a balance of power does serve to demonstrate how states increase global security, since power is a means, not an end (Waltz, 1979).

From the perspective of the power transition theory by A. F. K. Organski, it is argued that the international system is hierarchical, that the dominant power establishes the status quo, and that peace can better be achieved with inequality than by equality (Bukhari, 2015). In contrast to Waltz's notion of an anarchic international system, the power transition theory argues that a balance of power increases the probability of war, and that a hierarchy of states can lead to a peaceful international order (Bukhari, 2015). These contrasting theories can be assessed in the context of the relations between India and Pakistan. There has been a period of maintained balance of power, and there has been a period with imbalance of power and power transition. Throughout several phases since 1949, relations between the two states have been relatively peaceful due to a balance of power. On the other hand, other periods with imbalance of power and power transition have resulted in crises and wars (Bukhari, 2015). A balance of power system could persist, qua Pakistan uses both internal and external balancing in the form of nuclear deterrence and alliances respectively, but India wants to use power to achieve hegemonic status (Bukhari, 2015), which can cause further instability. Consequently, when actors favouring power transition seek to maximize power it can decrease security, whereas actors in favour of a balance of power system seek to maintain the status quo, which progressively helps to increase global security.

Offensive realism argues that status quo powers are rare to exist in world politics, that the international system incentivizes states to gain power at the expense of rivals, and that the ultimate goal for a state is to gain hegemonic status. Great powers relentlessly seek more power, and this is considered optimal to maximize security, as *"survival mandates aggressive behavior"*

(Mearsheimer, 2001). According to this theory it can be argued that the root cause of World War I was the European anarchy in which states were incentivized to dominate others to achieve security (Mearsheimer, 2001). Furthermore, offensive realism argues that as states maximize relative power, they are disposed to think offensively toward other states, even though their motive is survival, as "*great powers have aggressive intentions*" and only stop when hegemony is achieved (Mearsheimer, 2001). Mearsheimer argues that a great powers will not feel secure and do not become status quo powers unless they completely dominate the system, as power is not a means to an end, but is an end in itself. Therefore, according to this theory, a balance of power in an anarchic system does not increase global security. Instead it argues that "*the best defense is a good offense*" (Mearsheimer, 2001), since states will ultimately use power to get more power. However, defensive realism rejects this logic and argues that it is not in the best interest of states to consider hegemonic power as an end, since a balance of power in the anarchic system can prevent states from being dominated and defeated, and therefore does increase security on a global scale.

Some constructivist scholars may argue that a balance of power in an anarchical system does not constitute security maximizing behaviour of states. According to Alexander Wendt, Waltz's definition of structure is unable to predict the dynamics of anarchy (Wendt, 1992). Additionally, Stephen Walt argues that it is a balance of threat rather than a balance of power that determines state action, where threats are socially constructed (Walt, 1987). The structures of identity and interest do not follow logically from anarchy (Wendt, 1992). Wendt's constructivism argues that while the distribution of power may affect states' calculations, it depends on intersubjective understandings and expectations (Wendt, 1992) rather than a quest for power or security in a system of anarchy. Self-help and power politics do not logically or causally follow from anarchy, and that structure has no causal powers apart from process. By transforming egoistic entities into collective identities and moving away from the balance of power system, identities and interests are transformed. Security based on self-interest is not a constitutive property of anarchy (Wendt, 1992). On the other hand, defensive realism contends that international systems are decentralized and anarchic, and within the anarchic system states act like units. According to Waltz, it is by the interactions of states that international political structures are generated. He argues that the international system is state-centric, and therefore the structure of international politics is defined by the terms of states (Waltz, 1979). Therefore states' actions in the anarchical

system define international relations, and as argued by defensive realism, a balance of power constitutes security maximizing behaviour in the global realm.

The purposes for which power is exercised have great implications for the safety and survival of individual states. The actions of states as units in a self-help system determine the prospects of global security. Given that the structure of the international system is assumed to be anarchic, the theory of defensive realism argues that states do indeed use power to maintain a status quo and to balance opposing forces. By operating in a balance of power, states minimize the risks of being defeated or dominated by greater powers, thereby contributing to security on a global scale. Instead of exercising power to achieve hegemonic status, it is preferable to engage in balancing. Furthermore, by engaging in alliance forming, and by deterrence in the presence of nuclear weapons, states in a balance of power ultimately achieve the highest end, which is security. As argued through the lens of the theory of defensive realism, in an anarchic system, a balance of power increases global security when states seek to use power to maintain a status quo and to maximize security.

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