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### Hard Times for Soft Balancing

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# Hard Times for Soft Balancing

Stephen G. Brooks  
and William C.  
Wohlforth

French, German, and Russian opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 brought to the fore a question that has been a staple of scholarly and policy debate since the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union: Is the international system on the cusp of a new balancing order? In the early-to-mid-1990s, the issue in dispute was when to expect the return of multipolarity.<sup>1</sup> By the turn of the millennium, the puzzling absence of a balancing coalition against the United States became the focus of the debate.<sup>2</sup> Now the question is whether balance of power politics is emerging in a new and subtler guise.

It was a mistake to expect “hard balancing” to check the power of the international system’s strongest state, a growing number of analysts maintain, because, under unipolarity, countervailing power dynamics first emerge more subtly in the form of “soft balancing,” as it is typically called.<sup>3</sup> T.V. Paul pro-

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1. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer, “Back to the Future: Instability in Europe after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Summer 1990), pp. 5–56; and Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion: Why New Great Powers Will Rise,” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Spring 1993), pp. 5–51.

2. G. John Ikenberry, “Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Persistence of the American Post-war Order,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Winter 1998/99), pp. 43–78; Charles A. Kupchan, “After Pax Americana: Benign Power, Regional Integration, and the Sources of a Stable Multipolarity,” *International Security*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 40–79; Michael Mastanduno, “Preserving the Unipolar Moment: Realist Theories and U.S. Grand Strategy after the Cold War,” *International Security*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Spring 1997), pp. 49–88; William C. Wohlforth, “The Stability of a Unipolar World,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41; Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, “American Primacy in Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (July/August 2002), pp. 20–33; Ethan B. Kapstein, and Michael Mastanduno, eds., *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); and G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

3. The best treatments of the general soft-balancing argument are Robert A. Pape, “Soft Balancing: How States Pursue Security in a Unipolar World,” annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004; Stephen M. Walt, “Keeping the World ‘Off Balance,’” in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*; T.V. Paul, “The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory,” in Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds., *Balance of Power Revisited: Theory and Practice in the Twenty-first Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004); and

vides a concise definition of this basic concept: "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 the many analysts who use the concept, soft balancing is a warning sign that the age-old counterbalancing constraint is latent but subtly operative. For them, 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 the policies of France, Germany, and Russia 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>

As a staple of punditry both in the United States and abroad, the balance of power metaphor has contributed significantly to the growing popularity of the soft-balancing argument in scholarly circles. Commentators hail each new coordination effort among major powers that excludes the United States as an epoch-making "axis." Indeed, the leaders of other major powers—notably the

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Josef Joffe, "Defying History and Theory: The United States as the 'Last Superpower,'" in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*. The soft-balancing argument initially rose to prominence in the late 1990s, as analysts such as Stephen M. Walt and Josef Joffe sought to articulate a distinction between traditional military balancing and subtler forms of balancing. See Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off Balance';" and Joffe "Defying History and Theory." More recently, the term "soft balancing" has described balancing efforts that fall short of military balancing. See, for example, Paul, "The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory"; Pape, "Soft Balancing"; Yuen Foong Khong, "Coping with Strategic Uncertainty: The Role of Institutions and Soft Balancing in Southeast Asia's Post-Cold War Strategy," in Allen Carlson, Peter J. Katzenstein, and J.J. Suh, eds., *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004); Erik Voeten, "Resisting the Lonely Superpower: Responses of States in the United Nations to U.S. Dominance," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 66, No. 3 (May 2004), pp. 729–754; Josef Joffe, "Gulliver Unbound: Can America Rule the World?" Twentieth Annual John Boynton Lecture, Centre of Independent Studies, St. Leonards, New South Wales, August 5, 2003; Stephen M. Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced? If So, How?" annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004; Christopher Layne, "America as European Hegemon," *National Interest*, No. 72 (Summer 2003), pp. 17–30; Bradley A. Thayer, "The Pax Americana and the Middle East: U.S. Grand Strategic Interests in the Region after September 11," *Mideast Security and Policy Studies* No. 56 (Ramat Gan, Israel: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, December 2003); and Ruth W. Grant and Robert O. Keohane, "Accountability and Abuses of Power in World Politics," Duke University, March 2004. The most ambitious theoretical effort to fully develop the soft-balancing concept is Pape, "Soft Balancing."

4. Paul, "The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory," p. 3.

5. Joffe, "Gulliver Unbound."

presidents of France, Russia, and China—sometimes invoke the balancing proposition themselves, arguing that their policies are intended to foster the return of a multipolar world.

This confluence of theoretical expectations, journalistic commentary, and political rhetoric lends initial plausibility to the soft-balancing proposition and partly explains its current popularity as an argument for restraint in U.S. foreign policy. The growing popularity of the soft-balancing argument raises one of the most important questions in international relations today: Are recent state actions that have the effect of constraining U.S. foreign policy an outgrowth of the systemic balancing imperative? If the soft-balancing argument is right, then the international system's current equilibrium could shift toward a rapid escalation of constraints on the United States. As Stephen Walt warns, "Successful soft balancing today may lay the foundations for more significant shifts tomorrow. If other states are able to coordinate their policies so as to impose additional costs on the United States or obtain additional benefits for themselves, then America's dominant position could be eroded and its ability to impose its will on others would decline."<sup>6</sup>

So far, the soft-balancing argument has only been asserted. In this article, we conduct the first rigorous evaluation of soft balancing by performing four tasks. First, we show how the high stakes involved in this debate are closely linked to its underpinnings in balance of power theory. We demonstrate the core conceptual components that a theory of soft balancing must have to yield the soft-balancing argument that is so often applied to the United States today.

Second, we address the principal analytical flaw in the arguments of soft-balancing proponents: their failure to consider alternative explanations for the state behavior they observe. Other states obviously sometimes take actions that make it harder for the United States to advance its foreign policy goals, including its military security. Yet just because other states' actions periodically constrain the United States does not mean that soft balancing explains their behavior. Analysts' failure to address alternative explanations for the constraint actions undertaken by other states biases the discussion in favor of the soft-balancing argument. We remove this bias by putting forward four obvious but nevertheless overlooked alternatives to soft balancing: economic interest, regional security concerns, policy disputes, and domestic political incentives.

Third, we redress an equally critical weakness in the case for soft balancing:

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6. Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?" p. 17.

the absence of a careful empirical analysis of the phenomenon. We compare the strength of soft balancing to alternative explanations in the four most prominent cases that soft-balancing proponents have highlighted: Russian assistance to Iranian nuclear efforts; Russia's strategic partnerships with India and especially China; enhanced military coordination among members of the European Union; and opposition to the U.S.-led war in Iraq. In the fourth section, we show why it is crucial to distinguish policy bargaining from balancing.

We conclude that although states do periodically undertake actions that end up constraining the United States, the soft-balancing argument does not help to explain this behavior. There is no empirical basis for concluding that U.S. power, and the security threat that potentially inheres in it, has influenced recent constraint actions undertaken by the other major powers. Our examination therefore provides further confirmation of the need for analysts to move beyond the familiar but misleading precepts of balance of power theory. Instead, new theorizing is needed that is more appropriate for understanding security relations in today's unipolar era.

Beyond the theoretical stakes, our analysis has repercussions for the debate over U.S. foreign policy. Put simply, soft balancing is not a compelling argument for U.S. restraint. The champions of the soft-balancing perspective uniformly oppose the recent "new unilateralist" turn in U.S. foreign policy.<sup>7</sup> Although we agree with their main recommendation—that the general disposition of the United States ought to be restrained—we do not agree that this recommendation can be derived from any variant of balance of power theory.<sup>8</sup> We find no evidence to support the expectation that the coordinated actions of other major powers will compel the United States to be restrained. Instead, the case for restraint will hinge on convincing U.S. foreign policy makers that it serves the United States' long-term interest.

### *The Stakes in the Soft-Balancing Debate*

No one disputes that states sometimes undertake actions that either hamper the ability of the United States to further its foreign policy aims in the short

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7. For a discussion of this so-called new unilateralism, see Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment Revisited," *National Interest*, No. 70 (Winter 2002/2003), pp. 5–18.

8. See the related discussion in Brooks and Wohlforth, "American Primacy in Perspective," pp. 31–33.

term or are contrary to its long-term preferences. The United States is not omnipotent, and other states' actions have clearly complicated Washington's ability to pursue its foreign policy interests effectively. The challenge is in explaining and assessing the general significance of this behavior. After all, the United States has long had to contend with actions that ran counter to its objectives, 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 in 1962: France defected from NATO's military command; the United States was unable to obtain assistance from its major European allies in conducting 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, the United States and the Soviet Union provided the other with a yardstick for measuring the implications and significance of policy changes by third states. As a result, it was apparent that although the United States and its major allies had a relationship that was not always harmonious, they were far from being geopolitical rivals.

In today's unipolar system, in contrast, no comparable reference point exists. When any state begins to undertake actions that are contrary to U.S. interests, it is hard to estimate exactly how far it has traveled toward becoming a geopolitical rival. In turn, no identifiable yardstick exists for assessing the negative consequences of various state policies. The soft-balancing argument is influential precisely because it provides a familiar framework for making such assessments. In a unipolar system, the argument is, actions that may appear similar to inter-allied squabbling of the bipolar era are actually early warning signs of a coming era in which the United States will face increasing, and increasingly consequential, opposition deriving not just from the specific policies it may adopt but also from the very fact of its power.

The link to balance of power theory is what gives the soft-balancing argument this dramatic punch. Take away that link, and soft balancing collapses into a portentous-sounding term to describe conventional policy disputes and diplomatic bargaining. It follows that the soft-balancing argument must share some core features with balance of power theory. The theory posits that because states in anarchy have an interest in maximizing their long-term odds of survival (security), they will check dangerous concentrations of power (hegemony) by building up their own capabilities (internal balancing) or by ag-

gregating 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>9</sup> Moreover, many classical and modern formulations of the theory do not apply to the United States today, and so they cannot serve as the conceptual basis for soft balancing.<sup>10</sup> But despite the numerous setbacks it has received in the world of academic research, the basic proposition that state systems tend toward balanced power still has a strong claim on many analysts' thinking. Two popular formulations of the theory clearly do yield implications for the United States today: Kenneth Waltz's structural variant and Stephen Walt's balance of threat version.<sup>11</sup>

Waltz's theory defines hegemony as "unrivaled power" and predicts a general tendency toward balance. According to his theory, U.S. hegemony is so extreme that robust predictions of balancing emerge.<sup>12</sup> Walt modified the theory, notably by including perceptions of intentions as a factor that influences balancing. According to Walt, the willingness of other states to bear the high costs of balancing the United States depends not only on its power but also on its intentions, as revealed to other states by its behavior.<sup>13</sup>

9. For a sampling of this discussion, see John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power: A New Debate* (Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2003).

10. See Jack Levy, "What Do Great Powers Balance Against and When?" in Paul Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power Revisited*. Levy argues 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. *Ibid.*, p. 30. A prominent modern 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 such as the United States. Indeed, Mearsheimer's theory yields an explanation for the recent, more independent behavior of some U.S. allies that is the 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." Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), p. 391.

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

12. 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), pp. 54–57. This argument makes the theory exceedingly general, extremely difficult to falsify and test, and impossible to apply to any specific case. More important, accepting the contention that balance of power theory does not predict balancing would sever it from the soft-balancing argument, which is explicitly about state strategies. We can set this claim aside, however, because Waltz has stated that his theory predicts balancing against U.S. unipolarity. Hence, he expects that causal mechanism to be in play today, however subtly. See Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–41; and Kenneth N. Waltz, "Evaluating Theories," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 91, No. 4 (December 1997), pp. 913–917.

13. Walt, "Keeping the World 'Off Balance.'"



The soft-balancing argument combines elements of Waltz's structural balance of power theory and Walt's balance of threat theory. In keeping with the intellectual history of balance of power theory, both formulations are systemic when applied to the United States.<sup>14</sup> For each, balancing is action taken to check a potential hegemon. It reflects systemic incentives to rebalance power, rather than the specifics of a given issue. 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. The key point is that balance of power theory is not relevant to state behavior unrelated to systemic concentrations of power, which is arguably much of what goes on in international politics.

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. Soft balancing must be linked causally to the systemic concentration of power in the United States. U.S. behavior is so important only because the United States 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 Washington.

In addition, soft balancing must reflect the imperative of security seeking under anarchy, something advocates of the concept are keenly aware of.<sup>15</sup> Soft-balancing proponents raise the concern that states will increasingly see the concentration of power in the United States as a direct security threat, especially if it comes to be seen as having malign intentions. As Walt puts it, "If the United States acts in ways that fuel global concerns about U.S. power—and in particular, the fear that it will be used in ways that harm the interests of many others—then the number of potential 'soft balancers' will grow."<sup>16</sup> Balancing has been muted to this point, the argument goes, for two main reasons: the Soviet Union's sudden demise left the United States in such a commanding position that putting together a balancing coalition is especially hard; and the United States had acquired a reputation for benign intentions that is only now being undermined by actions such as the war in Iraq. The prediction is that as other states gain relative capabilities and update their assessments of the U.S. threat, they will begin to take soft-balancing measures. Under the logic of soft balancing, these measures must plausibly be linked to enhancing these states'

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14. On the intellectual history of balance of power theory, see Martin Wight, *Power Politics* (Leicester, U.K.: 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).

15. For an argument stressing this point, see Pape, "Soft Balancing."

16. Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?" p. 18.



security vis-à-vis the U.S. threat. In undertaking these measures, 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 the real capability of the United States to threaten the security of other major powers fall outside the logic of soft balancing.

### *Alternative Explanations*

How does one identify soft balancing? The answer matters greatly for both policy and theory, yet it remains elusive because soft-balancing proponents have not supplied the conceptual tools to distinguish behavior that is an outgrowth of the systemic balancing imperative from what we might call “unipolar politics as usual.” Crucially missing from the literature is sufficient recognition that other explanations besides soft balancing exist for state actions that constrain the United States. As a result, analysts tend to treat nearly any behavior that complicates U.S. foreign policy as soft balancing. We remove this bias by setting out four alternative explanations.

#### ECONOMIC INTEREST

States may undertake actions that hamper the conduct of U.S. foreign policy not principally because they wish to do so, but rather to advance economic gains, either for the state as a whole or for powerful interest groups or business lobbies. A government’s interest in fostering economic growth or obtaining revenue for itself or its constituents may be unrelated to the presence of a hegemon on the horizon or the potential security threat it poses.

#### REGIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS

States routinely pursue policies to enhance local security that are unrelated to constraining U.S. hegemony. For a variety of reasons, there is a greater demand for regional policy coordination than existed in the past: a vast increase in the number of states; a consequent increase in the overall number of weak or failed states; and the rise of transnational security challenges such as organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking, and refugee flows. Major powers frequently face incentives to enhance their capabilities—often through collaboration with other regional states—in response to 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 U.S. hegemony is not an important driver of them.

#### POLICY DISPUTES AND BARGAINING

Other states may undertake actions that constrain the United States not in response to the security threat presented by U.S. hegemony, but rather because they sincerely disagree with specific U.S. policies. Governments may resist a given U.S. policy because they are convinced that it is ill suited to the problem at hand or otherwise inappropriate, and not because they think it directly threatens their security or that opposition to it will reduce U.S. power over the long term. If so, then soft balancing is a misnomer, for the behavior concerned is unrelated to maximizing security under anarchy by checking a dangerous systemic concentration of power. In short, other states may push back against specific U.S. policies (pushing back because they disagree) and not against U.S. power in general (pushing back because they fear or wish to challenge U.S. hegemony). Given the reasonable expectation of future policy differences on various issues, and therefore the expectation of future policy bargaining, it follows that states may take actions intended to increase, or at least maintain, bargaining leverage over the long term. This is where policy bargaining takes forms that most closely resemble what analysts mean by soft balancing. As we show below, there are crucial analytical differences between long-term bargaining enhancement strategies and real soft balancing.

#### DOMESTIC POLITICAL INCENTIVES

Opposing the United States on a particular issue may be a winning strategy domestically even for leaders with no general interest in constraining U.S. power. Only domestic opposition that is an outgrowth of the security threat flowing from U.S. power can be thought of as a manifestation of soft balancing. All other ways in which the domestic politics of other countries may feed actions that complicate matters for the U.S. government fall outside the logic of soft balancing. Specifically, soft balancing does not encompass opposition to the United States that is a manifestation of the unpopularity of a particular U.S. policy. In addition, opposing the United States may be strongly compatible with long-standing historical, political, or cultural understandings—either for the nation as a whole or for individual political parties—that predate any recent shift in U.S. foreign policy, or indeed the rise of unipolarity.

#### SOFT BALANCING VERSUS THE ALTERNATIVES

To the degree that these other four explanations account for actions that constrain U.S. foreign policy, the soft-balancing argument is weakened. It would

be surprising to find no evidence consistent with the soft-balancing explanation. Just as unlikely would be evidence that soft balancing is the only explanation in play—even though the concept’s proponents essentially imply just such an expectation by failing to consider alternatives. The real issue is relative salience. Determining the strength of the various explanations, however, is no easy task.

The key cases of soft balancing are quite recent, so reliable inside information can be scarce. The chief putative soft-balancing powers—France, Russia, and China—are also not known for the transparency of their executive decisionmaking. And public rhetoric presents difficult analytical challenges. A government with a sincere interest in soft balancing may not want to advertise it. At the same time, all four other dynamics may generate balancing rhetoric from policymakers, creating *prima facie* evidence for a soft-balancing explanation. Leaders motivated chiefly by domestic political considerations are hardly likely to say so; they may detect domestic political advantage in touting the balancing element even if countering the threat from U.S. power is not the real issue. In turn, leaders who have sincere policy differences with the United States may talk up balancing to help build a coalition to increase their bargaining leverage. Being seen by Washington as a potential soft-balancer has risks, to be sure, but it also holds out the promise of magnifying one’s bargaining influence and the significance of any concessions one might make. Governments that pursue relative economic advantages for themselves or their constituents may find it convenient to cloak the policy in high-minded talk about checking U.S. power. And 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 cooperate on regional security issues. States will likely have strong disagreements on the specifics of how to cooperate at the regional level; a public stance against U.S. policies may be one issue they can agree on. Balancing rhetoric can thus be a useful rallying point for stimulating regional cooperation.

Balancing talk, moreover, is often as cheap as it is useful. A state can rationally be expected to address an issue only to the degree that it has the capability to do so. Actors and observers expect France to play a far more substantial role in resolving an issue in the Balkans than in North Korea, and vice versa for China. Yet because of the United States’ globe-girdling capabilities, critical U.S. involvement is likely to be expected in both cases. This illustrates the immense gap between the set of issues the United States might rationally be expected to address seriously and the corresponding issue sets of the other great

powers. As a result, there is a range of issues over which they can take positions without expecting to be compelled to bear the costs of their resolution. Ultimately, rhetoric is a poor indicator of the salience of soft balancing.

Perhaps recognizing these challenges, proponents of the soft-balancing concept frequently place more emphasis on its portents for the future than on its contemporary significance. For the argument to be taken seriously, however, there must be evidence for its current explanatory value.<sup>17</sup> Otherwise, soft balancing is not an explanation but an expectation: a mere reassertion of the well-known, neorealist prediction of the return of multipolarity that has been advanced since 1990, which is also typically formulated in an unfalsifiable manner.<sup>18</sup>

Although some uncertainty will always attend judgments about such recent events, there are observable implications of the differences between soft balancing and the other explanations we delineated. In assessing the competing arguments, two guidelines are most important. The first is the overall significance of the policy. Soft balancing is not an argument about symbolic action. It applies only to policies that promise to do something to increase constraints on or shift power against the United States. The second guideline is policymakers' willingness to accept trade-offs between constraints on the United States and other valued objectives. Soft balancing is not an argument about preferences but rather behavior. Many politicians in France, Russia, China, and other putative soft-balancing states periodically express a preference for what they often call "multipolarity" (although by this they usually mean multilateralism). They also express a desire for mutually beneficial partnerships with the United States, robust economic growth, prosperity, and many other values. The question is: How much are they willing to give up to obtain constraints on the United States? The United States is so powerful that no state can meaningfully seek to check it single-handedly; policymakers who wish to take this route will need to work in conjunction with other states that must also see a compelling interest in doing so—to the point that they will consistently seek opportunities to check U.S. power even when the pursuit of this goal conflicts with other priorities.

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17. On this falsifiability issue, see Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander, "Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Isn't Pushing Back," annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 2–5, 2004.

18. For example, Christopher Layne asserts that other states will balance the United States, but it may be fifty years before this occurs. See Layne, "The Unipolar Illusion," p. 17.

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

Using these guidelines, we evaluate the relative strength of soft balancing compared with the other explanations identified above in the four most prominent cases highlighted by proponents of the concept. These cases have attracted so much attention from advocates of soft balancing because they share three key characteristics: (1) they involve coordination among two or more states in areas directly related to security; (2) at least one great power, and in most cases several of them, are involved; and (3) they feature state actions that make it harder for Washington to advance its foreign policy goals.

### RUSSIAN “STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS” WITH INDIA AND CHINA

In some respects, Russia’s strategic partnerships with India and especially China represent the strongest case of soft balancing.<sup>19</sup> These are treaty-governed relationships that have resulted 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 defense industry. To the extent that its strategic partnerships with India and China permit the transfer of some of this output to militaries that can use it effectively, the net effect is a shift in relative power. Moreover, Russia-China cooperation includes the creation and promotion of a regional security organization that excludes the United States—the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In the end, however, each of the three elements that make up the much-touted “Asian triangle”—the diplomatic relationships, the SCO, and the arms sales—defies a soft-balancing interpretation.

Although Russian, Chinese, and (to a lesser extent) Indian leaders periodically describe their diplomatic partnerships as an expression of their preference for a multipolar world, there is little evidence that balancing U.S. power is a driving force behind them. Rhetoric notwithstanding, the policies are crafted precisely to avoid the need for any of the parties to face a trade-off between their mutual partnerships and their key bilateral relationships with the United States. Russia’s partnership 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 the largely symbolic Declaration on Stra-

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19. Analyses that treat these partnerships in soft-balancing terms include Paul, “Enduring Axioms”; Walt, “Can the United States Be Balanced?”; and Joffe “Defying History and Theory.”

tegic Partnership signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in 2000. The Russia-China Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation, signed in 2001, capped more than a decade of improving bilateral ties, but it similarly lacks anything resembling a mutual defense clause.<sup>20</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 other public Russo-Chinese agreement entails any observable or costly commitment to counter U.S. power. No mutual undertaking by the two powers in accordance with their partnership has involved major costs in their relationships with the United States. The same is true of Russia's cooperation with India.

This reluctance to jeopardize relations with the United States is not surprising to experts on all three countries. Russia, China, and India 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 such a strong influence. The strategy has yielded high growth rates for all three countries in recent years. Moreover, in all three cases, policymakers have explicitly reoriented their strategic priorities to emphasize regional security issues such as terrorism and weapons proliferation on which they tend to have roughly similar preferences to those of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

A significant constraint on the development of deep Russia-China security ties is the nature of their economic relationship: trade between the two countries remains anemic; they do not have complementary economies from which high levels of trade can develop; and both are dependent to a large degree on inward flows of capital and technology, which come mainly from the West. Even more important, Russia's willingness to commit to its Asian partnerships is limited by its perceived weakness in the region.<sup>22</sup> Russians remain wary of China's growing economic and diplomatic clout, and express a general prefer-

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20. 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.

21. Ample evidence and analysis concerning these grand strategies is presented in the chapters on Russia, India, and China in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg, with Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia, 2002–03: Asian Aftershocks* (Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2003). 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, eds., *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*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Spring 2003), pp. 5–56.

22. Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 2 (March 2004), pp. 295–309.

ence for diversifying Russia's Asian relationships. Suspicions plague both countries, stemming partly from mutual fears that each is using the other only to gain leverage over Washington. Many Russian analysts regard their country's partnership with India as a hedge against rising Chinese power in Asia. Russia tends to sell India more advanced weapons systems than it exports to China, and the agreements on the joint design and production of weapons that Russia has signed with India also tend to be deeper and more comprehensive than the arrangements that Moscow 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.

These background factors all help to explain the real role and limitations of the SCO. Russian and Chinese leaders have frequently used SCO gatherings to express their preference for a multipolar world, and observers sometimes see the organization as a coordinating mechanism for counterbalancing U.S. power in the region.<sup>23</sup> Yet an examination of the organization's real activities belies this interpretation.<sup>24</sup> The SCO's main initial goal was confidence building among the new states in the region, especially by resolving old Soviet-Chinese border disputes. China further sought to stabilize and secure its 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 receiving funding and arms from Uighurs in its neighboring states, as well as from Afghanistan. Russia shared the common threat of an increasingly Islamicized Chechen separatist movement. Uzbekistan joined the SCO in 2001 as it sought a common forum for responding to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—a transnational guerrilla threat.<sup>25</sup> 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 counterterrorism center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, known as the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (RATS), but the project stalled and few assets were invested or resources committed.<sup>26</sup>

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23. See, for example, Sergei Blagov, "Russia Seeking to Strengthen Regional Organizations to Counterbalance Western Influence," *Eurasia Insight*, December 4, 2002.

24. See Kathleen Collins and William C. Wohlforth, "Central Asia: Defying 'Great Game' Expectations," in Richard J. Ellings and Aaron L. Friedberg, with Michael Wills, eds., *Strategic Asia, 2003–04: Fragility and Crisis* (Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2004), pp. 291–317.

25. Interview with senior analyst, Institute of Strategic Studies, Uzbekistan, Tashkent, August 2002, reported in Collins and Wohlforth, "Central Asia: Defying 'Great Game' Expectations."

26. "Declaration of the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, June 15, 2001," <http://www.missions.itu.int/?kazaks/eng/sco/sco02.htm>.



A key problem with interpreting the SCO as an example of soft balancing is that the main issue that China, Russia, and the Central Asian states agreed upon that warranted an upgrading of the organization was counterterrorism. Having coordinated the SCO around this issue, however, the members were unable to assemble the capabilities required to address it. This shortcoming was made brutally evident after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when U.S.-led Operation Enduring Freedom quickly toppled the ruling Taliban in Afghanistan and weakened the IMU—the very threats whose rise had just begun to provide the SCO's *raison d'être*. The U.S. deployment to Afghanistan created a 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 United States in the 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 2002 pledged the organization's support for the UN Security Council resolutions on Afghanistan and the international war on terror.<sup>27</sup>

In short, pragmatic regional cooperation is the chief driver of the SCO, with soft-balancing rhetoric sometimes providing a convenient focal point for rallying greater collaboration. The real core of Russia's relationships with India and China, however, is not the diplomatic partnerships but extensive military coproduction arrangements and major arms sales. Yet Russia's interest in these exports is not driven by the need to counterbalance U.S. power but rather by a desperate need to slow the inexorable decline of its military industrial complex. Between 1992 and 1998, Russia experienced what was probably the steepest peacetime decline in military power by any major state in history.<sup>28</sup> Weapons procurement and spending declined dramatically after 1991, and by 2000 only 20 percent of Russia's operational weapons stocks were modern, compared with 60–80 percent in NATO countries.<sup>29</sup> Maintenance and training

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27. "Joint Statement by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization," January 7, 2002, Beijing, [http://russia.shaps.hawaii.edu/fp/russia/sco\\_3\\_20020107htm](http://russia.shaps.hawaii.edu/fp/russia/sco_3_20020107htm).

28. Christopher Hill, "Russian Defense Spending," in United States Congress, Joint Economic Committee, *Russia's Uncertain Economic Future* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2002), p. 168. For an excellent overview of the defense sector's dilemmas, see Christopher Davis, "Country Survey XV: The Defence Sector in the Economy of a Declining Superpower: Soviet Union and Russia, 1965–2001," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (June 2002), pp. 145–177.

29. "Only 20% of Russian Arms Are Modern," *RFE/RL Daily Report*, May 21, 2001.

are dismal; personnel problems are dire and getting worse.<sup>30</sup> Unable to subdue the Chechen rebels, the Russian military is beset by so many problems of such magnitude that experts agree that major reforms entailing huge expenditures are critically necessary simply to forestall its continued decline. Increased budgetary outlays and intensified reform efforts are thus driven by deep problems of decay that are unrelated to counterbalancing U.S. power.

Arms sales are a substrategy that aids Russia's more general interest in staving off further military decline. Given the collapse of domestic orders (in 2001 only 10 percent of Russian defense firms received state orders), Russia's defense sector possesses massive excess capacity.<sup>31</sup> Exports are a 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 competitive sectors. Even more immediately, exports aid a defense sector that supplies 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. Military industry represents one of the few high-technology sectors in which Russians remain competitive, and they perceive a strong overall commercial interest in promoting exports.

In sum, the evidence concerning Russia's major arms relationships overwhelmingly indicates that Moscow's eagerness to sell weaponry to Beijing and New Delhi is only indirectly and marginally connected to the issue of U.S. hegemony. If the United States were to cut its defense outlays by two-thirds tomorrow, Moscow's interest in arms sales would be undiminished, as would India's demand. To be sure, China's demand for Russian military hardware is partly a response to U.S. military support for Taiwan, but China's desire to enhance its bargaining position over the Taiwan Strait has been a constant since 1949 and hence is not causally related to the advent of unipolarity after 1991 or recent U.S. security behavior. And what makes the soft-balancing argument superficially applicable to the case is not that China wants to import weapons. If the Chinese obtained weaponry from Israel or South Africa, it would hardly attract the attention of soft-balancing proponents. The arms sales seem so significant because they come from Russia, suggesting interstate coopera-

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30. "Every Third Potential Conscript Said Not Fit for Military Service," Itar-Tass, May 23, 2002.

31. 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*, pp. 385-410.

tion to balance U.S. capabilities. Yet the evidence strongly indicates that it is regional security needs in conjunction with economic concerns, not soft balancing, that explain Russian military sales to both China and India.

#### THE MOSCOW-TEHRAN CONNECTION

Analysts commonly interpret great power support for states that are opponents of the United States as soft balancing. Russia's relationship with Iran is the most prominent case in point.<sup>32</sup> Russia has assisted Iran's nuclear program, cooperated in space technology and other high-technology areas, sold large quantities of military hardware (Iran is Russia's third largest customer, after China and India), and pursued a general policy of engagement with Iran. Such policies helped to buttress Iran against pressure from Washington for nearly a decade.

There is scant evidence, however, that a desire to balance U.S. power explains the relationship. Regional security concerns and economic incentives have remained consistently at the forefront. Russia has numerous reasons besides balancing U.S. power to seek good relations with Iran. Nuclear sales, technology transfers, and other moves that appear to bolster Iran serve as part of an engagement strategy that is itself driven by Moscow's need for Iranian cooperation in resolving a complex nexus of regional issues surrounding the exploitation of petroleum and other natural resources in the Caspian. Even regional analysts who stress the importance of geopolitics do not accord balancing the United States a significant role in explaining the Moscow-Tehran connection.<sup>33</sup> As in the China case, Moscow has no incentive to alienate Tehran. At the same time, the two states remained at loggerheads on local issues throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, placing limits on the scope and depth of their cooperation.

Russia's arms sales to Iran buttress this general strategy of engagement. But, as in the China and India cases, economic incentives loom large for all the reasons noted above. The issue of nuclear cooperation attracts the most attention from analysts. From the early 1990s on, Russia was the only major power openly cooperating with Iran in this area, defying occasionally intense pres-

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32. See, for example, Pape, "Soft Balancing"; and Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?"

33. See, for example, Carol R. Saivetz, "Perspectives on the Caspian Sea Dilemma: Russian Policies since the Soviet Demise," *Eurasian Geography & Economics*, Vol. 44, No. 8 (December 2003), pp. 588–607; Gawdat Bahgat, "Pipeline Diplomacy: The Geopolitics of the Caspian Sea Region," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (August 2002), pp. 310–327; and Douglas W. Blum, "Perspectives on the Caspian Sea Dilemma: A Framing Comment," *Eurasian Geography & Economics*, Vol. 44, No. 8 (December 2003), pp. 617–703.

sure from Washington. The chief problem with a soft-balancing interpretation is that Russia experts are virtually unanimous in regarding the Moscow-Tehran nuclear connection as driven principally by economic concerns. No one in Russia is able to develop a plausible argument for how the country's security would benefit from Iran's nuclearization. Russia's official policy is that proliferation of weapons of mass destruction "is the main threat of the 21st century."<sup>34</sup> The commercial interests in play are substantial enough, however, to induce Moscow to set a relatively high bar for proof of the relationship's proliferation risks.

Nuclear technology is a declining asset inherited from the Soviet Union that figures importantly in Russia's small share of high-technology exports. With abundant hydrocarbon-fueled electrical generation capacity and declining demand compared to Soviet times, the domestic market for nuclear technology has dried up. Foreign sales are vital to sustaining essentially half of the atomic energy ministry's activities, and Iran is a major market.<sup>35</sup> Viktor Mikhailov, Russia's atomic energy minister when the agreement with Iran was initiated, summed up the motivation succinctly: "What could Russia have brought onto world markets? We only had one strength: our scientific and technical potential. Our only chance was broad cooperation in the sphere of peaceful nuclear energy."<sup>36</sup>

Large sums of money for the atomic energy ministry and associated firms are at stake. Russia's construction of Iran's Bushehr reactor alone is worth up to \$1 billion; reprocessing fuel is also lucrative; and more reactor projects are planned. And the Iranians, Russians stress, pay cash. Boosters of these deals claim that the total value of the long-term relationship could exceed \$8 billion and involve orders for more than 300 Russian companies. Moreover, significant numbers of high-technology jobs—many located in politically crucial and economically strapped regions of Russia—are involved.<sup>37</sup> The Russian

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34. Transcript of Putin's BBC interview on June 22, 2003, reprinted in Johnson's Russia List, No. 7236, June 24, 2003.

35. See Celeste A. Wallander, "Russia's Interest in Trading with the 'Axis of Evil,'" testimony given at "Russia's Policies toward the Axis of Evil: Money and Geopolitics in Iraq and Iran" hearing, House Committee on International Relations, 108th Cong., 2d sess., February 26, 2003. For an overview of the problems facing Russia's nuclear industry and its interest in foreign sales, see Igor Khripunov, "MINATOM: Time for Crucial Decisions," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (July–August 2001), pp. 49–59.

36. Quoted in Vladimir A. Orlov and Alexander Vinnikov, "The Great Guessing Game: Russia and the Iranian Nuclear Issue," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p. 51.

37. See Anatoly Andreev, "Mirnyi Atom dlia Bushera" [Peaceful atom for Bushehr], *Trud*, December 27, 2002, p. 1. For more on Russia's role in proliferation in Asia, see Bates Gill, "Proliferation," in Ellings and Friedberg, with Wills, *Strategic Asia, 2003–04*.

atomic energy ministry remains a formidable interest group in Moscow politics, and its lobbyists work hard to make the case publicly and in Kremlin corridors that the nuclear sector is critical to Russia's modernization drive.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's substantive foreign policy behavior is consistent with this analysis. When the economic and regional security incentives for engaging Iran appear to contradict Russia's general antiproliferation stance, the latter wins. The extent of Iran's nuclear weapons-related programs came to the fore in 2002–03, and they turned out to have been based not on the Russian project but on purchases from the transnational nuclear proliferation network run from Pakistan by Abdul Qadeer Khan, as well as indigenous efforts. In response to the new evidence, Moscow recalibrated its policy in 2003. Russia reaffirmed its commitment to nonproliferation and its desire to see Iran submit to robust International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections. To allay potential IAEA concerns regarding the Bushehr reactor, Russia secured a deal with Iran on returning all fuel to Russia for reprocessing. The Russians also pressured Tehran to sign and implement the IAEA additional protocol, which imposed further restrictions and openness on the Iranian program. Ultimately, U.S. and international concerns about the proliferation risks of Russia's nuclear project eased, resulting in diminished diplomatic pressure on Moscow.

Russia's continued reluctance to adopt an American-style hard line on Iran's nuclear program is the result of the same regional security, and especially economic, incentives. In expressing their reservations concerning further pressuring of Tehran, President Putin and other top government officials stressed the fear that if Russia backed away from its contract with the Iranians, American or European companies might move in to exploit the opening. As Putin put it, "We will protest against using the theme of nuclear weapons proliferation against Iran as an instrument for forcing Russian companies out of the Iranian market."<sup>39</sup> 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. Nor do Russian foreign policy makers want to forgo the diplomatic dividends of their position as the great power with the best ties to Tehran, unless Iranian recalcitrance vis-à-vis the IAEA forces them to.

In short, there is no basis for concluding that soft balancing plays any role in Russia's relationship with Iran. Regional security concerns figure importantly

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38. Although the nuclear issue attracts most of the attention, a similar constellation of interests lies behind Russia's arms sales to Iran. Tor Bukkvoll, "Arming the Ayatollahs: Economic Lobbies in Russia's Iran Policy," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 49, No. 6 (November/December, 2002), pp. 29–41.

39. Quoted in Orlov and Vinnikov, "The Great Guessing Game," p. 59.

in the larger diplomatic relationship, while economic incentives are the driver behind their nuclear cooperation.

#### EU DEFENSE COOPERATION

Since the turn of the millennium, member states have made concerted efforts to enhance the European Union's Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), including the development of a 60,000-man rapid reaction force, a new security strategy, a defense agency to support efforts to improve military capability, and most recently, the formation of 1,500-man "battle groups" capable of higher intensity operations.<sup>40</sup> European officials sometimes justify these efforts by stressing that they will lay the foundation for a larger EU role in regional and global security, thus implicitly reducing U.S. influence. For many analysts, this is a clear case of soft balancing.<sup>41</sup> The evidence, however, does not support such an interpretation.

Far from being a response to U.S. hegemonic dominance, the EU's attempts to increase its military capability are seen by European analysts and decisionmakers as necessary to deal with the prospect of the United States' decreased presence in Europe and reduced willingness to solve Balkans-style problems for its European allies.<sup>42</sup> For example, in explaining the origins of the ESDP, the director of the European Union's Institute for Security Studies, Nicole Gnesotto, notes that "because American involvement in crises that were not vital for America was no longer guaranteed, . . . the Europeans had to organize themselves to assume their share of responsibility in crisis management and, in doing so, maintain or even enhance the United States' interest within the Alliance."<sup>43</sup> For many of the key member governments, notably the United Kingdom, the corrosive effects of European military weakness on the transatlantic alliance provided the key impetus for enhancing EU capabilities. Most analysts thus concur that EU defense cooperation can go forward only if it is seen as complementary to the alliance with the United States. That is, some degree of U.S. support is a necessary condition of the ESDP's further progress. Indeed, the forces that the Europeans are actually seeking to create complement,

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40. For a comprehensive analysis, see Nicole Gnesotto, ed., *EU Security and Defence Policy: The First Five Years (1999–2004)*, (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2005).

41. See, for example, Robert J. Art, "Europe Hedges Its Security Bets," in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power Revisited*; Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?"; Joffe, "Defying History and Theory"; and Layne, "America as European Hegemon."

42. See, for example, Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

43. Nicole Gnesotto "ESDP: Results and Prospects," in Gnesotto, *EU Security and Defence Policy*, p. 25.

rather than compete with, U.S. capabilities because they provide additional units for dealing with Balkans-style contingencies or peacekeeping missions abroad.

Moreover, the EU will be unable to measurably narrow the overall gap in military power vis-à-vis the United States in the foreseeable future. Only seven of the 1,500-man battle groups—intended for smaller stability operations along the lines of the EU's Operation Artemis in the Congo—are projected for 2007. After six years of effort, the 60,000-man rapid reaction force still faces major hurdles: an independent task force of the EU's Institute for Security Studies identifies eight key strategic deficiencies, ranging from deployability and sustainability to interoperability and strategic decisionmaking.<sup>44</sup> When this force will be able to operate independently from U.S. transport, communications, and other forms of logistical support remains unclear. Both the rapid reaction force and the battle groups are not standing forces but rather pools of national units on which the EU can draw if the Council decides unanimously to use military force. And as Robert Cooper points out, "There is no member state for which EDSP is central to its security policy."<sup>45</sup>

Even if all currently envisioned forces materialize according to plan, they will do little to create any serious ability to constrain the United States. Indeed, generating a usable force for peace enforcement may work against the development of such a potential check on U.S. power. Unless Europeans assume a much greater willingness to pursue higher defense expenditures, investments toward making the rapid reaction contingent into a credible force will have to come at the expense of developing advanced systems capable of competing with or displacing those fielded by U.S. forces. In the opinion of most military analysts familiar with developments on both sides of the Atlantic, the most likely trajectory—even if all goes well for the EU's current plans—is a widening of the gap in high-intensity military capabilities in favor of the United States.<sup>46</sup> Over the past three decades, the United States has spent three times

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44. Nicole Gnesotto (chair) and Jean-Yves Haine (rapporteur), *European Defence: A Proposal for a White Paper* (Paris: European Union Institute for Security Studies, 2004). An earlier EU report noted more than forty technological shortfalls constraining the force. See Alexander Nicoll, "Spending Call for EU Rapid Reaction Force," *Financial Times*, February 8, 2002; and the discussion in Ethan B. Kapstein, "Allies and Armaments," *Survival*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2002), pp. 141–160.

45. Quoted in Gnesotto, *EU Security and Defence Policy*, p. 189.

46. See, for example, 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 of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, October 3–5, 2003; and Julian Lindley-French, "In the Shadow of Locarno? Why European Defense Is Failing," *International Affairs*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (October 2002), pp. 789–811.



more than all of the EU members combined on military research and development. This gap will affect the development of assets and capabilities for decades to come.

Hence, far from sacrificing other preferences to create capabilities that might constrain the United States, the Europeans may be sacrificing limited resources that could potentially be useful for countering U.S. power to create capabilities that largely complement those of the United States.<sup>47</sup> Why then do leaders in Europe sometimes use balancing language when describing these new forces? To begin, the overwhelming majority of the rhetoric is about building up capabilities for reasons other than balancing the United States; indeed, much of this rhetoric is about trying to be a better partner of the United States, not a competitor.

Sometimes, however, politicians do use balancing language to describe their aims for EU military strengthening, in part because increasing EU military capabilities involves financial and other costs that many member states seem very reluctant to bear. To the extent that this force is portrayed as a means of checking U.S. power, some of this hesitance may be reduced, if only because adopting a more independent EU foreign policy is popular among the public in Europe. Paying for such independence, however, 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 and an alphabet soup of new organizational initiatives but relatively limited operational output on the ground.

In sum, the evidence indicates that regional security needs, not soft balancing, are the principal driver of EU defense cooperation. To this point, there is also no indication of European willingness to pay the economic costs to take the necessary steps to develop military capabilities that could meaningfully reduce the gap with the United States.

#### OPPOSITION TO THE IRAQ WAR

Unlike Russia's Asian partnerships, opposition to the U.S. invasion of Iraq did not entail measurable shifts in hard power. It nonetheless seemed tailor-made for the soft-balancing argument. On a policy it declared vital to its national security, the United States faced opposition from key allies. The opposition was

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47. For an analysis that captures this trade-off, see Bastian Giegerich and William Wallace, "Not Such a Soft Power: The External Deployment of European Forces," *Survival*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 163–182.

not haphazard but coordinated in elaborate diplomatic exchanges. And the leaders of France, the linchpin of the “coalition of the unwilling,” made a point of describing their policy as part of an overall preference for a multipolar world. Not surprisingly, such efforts propelled the soft-balancing argument to the forefront.<sup>48</sup>

Nevertheless, this argument dramatically oversimplifies and misrepresents what occurred. Soft balancing played no discernable role for some of the principal actors in the drama. For others, strategic calculations that superficially resemble soft balancing, but actually stem from a different logic, interacted in complex ways with other incentives that also pushed strongly toward constraining the United States. Even a generous rendering of the soft-balancing argument would accord it at best a minor role.<sup>49</sup>

GERMANY AND TURKEY. A central link in the complex chain of events that ended in the failure of the U.S. attempt to achieve a second UN Security Council resolution authorizing the invasion of Iraq was Germany’s uncompromising opposition to U.S. policy and, as a consequence, a brief but dramatic shift in post–Cold War Franco-German relations. For the first time in more than a decade, Berlin was the supplicant in the relationship, which presented Paris with an attractive opportunity to regain its status as the EU’s driver just as it was expanding to include a raft of new Central European member states.<sup>50</sup> This shift originated in German domestic politics. To be sure, Chancellor Schröder expressed doubts about the wisdom of invading Iraq long before Germany’s election campaign got under way in the summer of 2002. But his need to recapture elements of his political base soon pointed irresistibly toward taking an especially strong stand on the issue. Running on a dismal economic record and having alienated his more left-wing supporters with tough economic proposals and a series of controversial new German military com-

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48. See, for example, Robert Pape, “Welcome to the Era of ‘Soft Balancing,’” *Boston Globe*, March 23, 2003, p. H1; and Joseph S. Nye, “The UN Is Right for the Job: Rebuilding Iraq II,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 14, 2003, p. 10.

49. In reconstructing inter-allied disputes over Iraq, the best extant account is Philip H. Gordon and Jeremy Shapiro, *Allies at War: America, Europe, and the Crisis over Iraq* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004). Other accounts and chronologies that were critical in constructing this case study include Elizabeth Pond, *Friendly Fire: The Near-Death of the Transatlantic Alliance* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings and European Union Studies Association, 2003); Gustav Lindstrom and Burkhardt Schmidt, eds., “One Year On: Lessons from Iraq,” Chailiot Paper No. 68 (Brussels: EU Institute for Security Studies, March 2004); John Peterson, “Europe, America, Iraq: Worst Ever, Ever Worsening?” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42, No. S1 (September 2004), pp. 9–26; David Allen and Michael Smith, “External Policy Developments,” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42, No. S1 (September 2004), pp. 95–112; and “The Divided West,” pts. 1–3, *Financial Times*, May 27–30, 2003.

50. Pond, *Friendly Fire*, chap. 3.

mitments abroad, Schröder was trailing in the polls and facing near-certain defeat as the political season began to ramp up. His political advisers told him that his re-election hinged on recapturing two key left-wing constituencies, both of which had strong, long-standing antiwar preferences: core Social Democratic Party (SPD) activists, and left-wing voters in Eastern Germany who were defecting to the pacifist and anti-American Party of Democratic Socialism (the successor party of the former Communists).<sup>51</sup>

Then came what one Schröder operative called “the miracle” of Vice President Dick Cheney’s August 26 speech calling for preventive war in Iraq and questioning a UN-based approach.<sup>52</sup> The speech generated intensely negative reactions throughout Europe and gave the Schröder team a chance to relaunch its re-election bid on an uncompromising antiwar platform. The campaign’s tenor and dynamic changed immediately. As antiwar passions mounted, economic issues, on which the Christian Democrats’ Edmund Stoiber had been campaigning effectively, receded into the background. Political incentives pushed Schröder toward an increasingly uncompromising antiwar stand. Even after President George W. Bush moved away from Cheney’s initial stance and took the Iraq matter to the UN, Schröder adopted a hard-line position, declaring his refusal to support the use of force even if sanctioned by the Security Council. Yet as strident as he became on Iraq, Schröder never expressed his opposition in balancing or multipolar terms, sticking to a script of policy opposition on strategic grounds combined with a general posture as a principled socialist heroically standing up to a U.S. president who embodies everything German leftists loathe.<sup>53</sup> Even so, important sectors of the socialist-leaning elite and media, to say nothing of swathes of more centrist SPD voters, were uncomfortable with Schröder’s stance, preferring a more statesmanlike position that upheld the centrality of the UN.<sup>54</sup>

A second link in the story of constraining the United States on Iraq was Turkey’s decision not to permit the U.S. military to use its territory for an assault on Saddam Hussein’s army. In hindsight, the Turkish government’s move did not undermine the invasion’s operational effectiveness, but this was not clear at the time, and it may have affected the resolve of France and others in their

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51. Martin Walker, “The Winter of Germany’s Discontent,” *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 2002/2003), p. 37.

52. *Ibid.*

53. See, for example, Jeffrey Herf, “The Perfect Storm and After: Retrospect and Prospect for American-German Relations,” American Institute for Contemporary German Studies, July 29, 2004, <http://www.aicgs.org/c/herfc.shtml>.

54. Pond, *Friendly Fire*, chap. 3.

interactions with the Bush administration. Accordingly, many analysts view the Turks' decision as an example of soft balancing.<sup>55</sup> In this case, however, the domestic political dynamic was even more dominant than in Germany, for it overwhelmed a strategic decision to support the United States. Of key importance here was Turkey's baleful experience of the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, which was widely perceived as an economic disaster for the Turks. Also significant was Turkey's long-standing concern that upsetting the status quo in Iraq could alter the political equation regarding the Iraqi Kurds, whose independence might incite co-nationals in Turkey itself. These two historical legacies help to explain why any Turkish government would have had to bargain hard for strong guarantees from the United States to reassure a public that was especially skeptical about the consequences of another war in the region. Negotiations with Turkey followed three tracks: political (regarding the degree of autonomy for Iraqi Kurds and the fate of Iraqis of Turkish descent); military (concerning where Turkish troops could be deployed in Iraq); and economic (compensation for the costs that a war would impose on Turkey).

Although the details of the economic package were never fully worked out, Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan and the leadership of his Islamist Justice and Development Party ultimately supported a three-track deal to allow the United States to use Turkey as a staging ground for the invasion of Iraq and submitted a resolution to parliament asking their members to support it.<sup>56</sup> Erdogan and the party leadership calculated that supporting the Bush administration would best secure Turkey's interests in postwar Iraq while maximizing the economic benefits. Both the powerful Turkish military and the opposition Republican People's Party, however, opted to free ride and let the ruling party suffer the domestic political costs of pushing through the measure, assuming, as did Erdogan and most analysts, that it would pass. In the event, it did win a majority under standard rules. But under Turkish parliamentary rules, the nineteen abstentions meant that the resolution failed by three votes to win the necessary simple majority of those present. News accounts note that some parliamentarians' ignorance of this rule may have affected their votes.<sup>57</sup> Immediately thereafter, top generals who had previously opted to free ride sought to reverse the decision. By the time these machina-

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55. See Pape, "Soft Balancing"; and Walt, "Can the United States Be Balanced?"

56. Mustafa Kibaroglu, "Turkey Says No," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (July/August 2003), pp. 22–26.

57. "A Pivotal Nation Goes Into a Spin," *Economist*, March 8, 2003, p. 41. See also Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies at War*.

tions got under way, however, the rapid advance of U.S. and British forces in Iraq radically devalued the importance of the Turkish invasion route.

In sum, the behavior of both Germany and Turkey can be traced to domestic political incentives unrelated to the concentration of power in the United States. Russia and France are far more complex actors in this case because both had stated preferences for multipolarity, general policies of buttressing the role of the UN Security Council and thus the bargaining value of their veto power in that body, economic interests in play in Iraq, strong domestic incentives for standing up to Washington, and sincere policy differences with the United States over costs and benefits of a war in Iraq and its relation to the war on terrorism. The interaction among these dynamics was complicated. How did soft balancing fit into this mosaic?

RUSSIA. In Moscow President Putin and his top foreign policy aides were reluctant to take the lead in any constraint-coalition against the Bush administration, having recently reoriented Russia's grand strategy toward pragmatic cooperation with the United States.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, they were inclined to maintain their existing policy on Iraq, under which Russia reaped rich economic rewards. Russian firms profited handsomely under the UN's oil-for-food program, and Saddam Hussein also offered longer-term inducements that Russia could realize only if sanctions were withdrawn: a major development contract with Russia's Lukoil (valued at some \$12 billion) and the prospect of settling Iraq's state debt to Russia of about \$8 billion. As long as there was some possibility that the Iraq issue could be settled with the Baathist regime in power, Russia had incentives to position itself to reap these promised rewards.

Putin's initial response to these mixed incentives was to keep his options open with strategic ambiguity. While Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov made strong statements in opposition to U.S. pronouncements, Putin authorized official contacts with Iraqi opposition figures and chose to support UN Security Council resolution 1441 in November, which warned Iraq of "serious consequences" if it did not meet its disarmament obligations. Meanwhile U.S. officials sought Russian support by offering inducements—honoring Iraqi contracts with Russian oil companies and promising Russia a role in the postwar stabilization—that the United States could deliver only after a regime change

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58. On Russia's reorientation toward the United States, see William C. Wohlforth, "Russia," in Ellings and Friedberg, with Wills, *Strategic Asia, 2002–03*; and Thomas M. Nichols, "Russia's Turn West: Sea Change or Opportunism?" *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter 2002/03), pp. 13–22. On Putin's strategy and maneuverings on Iraq, see Wohlforth, "Russia's Soft Balancing Act," in Ellings and Friedberg, with Wills, *Strategic Asia, 2003–04*, pp. 165–179.

in Baghdad. Putin's most trusted aides reportedly worked hard to reach an agreement with Bush administration officials.<sup>59</sup> But as long as Putin remained uncertain of U.S. resolve and capability to prevail, he risked more by aligning himself prematurely with the United States than by standing aloof. If Hussein somehow survived the crisis—perhaps by satisfying the world that Iraq had disarmed—Putin would have lost the economic benefits Baghdad offered and gained nothing. Pressuring Baghdad to disarm in accordance with resolution 1441 thus had three overlapping benefits: it maintained the prestige of the Security Council (Russia's favored forum); it did not foreclose the possibility of cooperation with the United States if Hussein proved recalcitrant; and it maintained Russia's potentially profitable position in case the crisis was resolved without a full-scale invasion of Iraq.

Ultimately, Russia chose to align with France and Germany in opposing a second UN resolution authorizing an invasion. In intense diplomatic exchanges in January and February 2003, President Jacques Chirac convinced Putin that France (with Germany) would lead the campaign. With such long-time U.S. allies taking the lead, Putin could expect that the diplomatic costs of opposing Washington would be minor. Given the relatively low expected costs, a number of other factors argued strongly in favor of Putin's decision. Putin appears to have considered an invasion to be an unwise and potentially very costly strategic move that would ill serve the war on terror.<sup>60</sup> Strong elite and popular opinion against U.S. policy in Iraq also doubtless figured in the Russian president's calculations—parliamentary and presidential elections were forthcoming. Having just caved in to U.S. pressure on a host of salient issues ranging from the future of the Antiballistic Missile Treaty to NATO expansion, standing up to Washington was an attractive option—particularly given that Russia could follow rather than lead the opposition, thereby reducing the likelihood that its larger efforts to realign with the West would be thrown off track.

Putin worked hard to ensure that his tack toward Europe did not come at the expense of a working strategic partnership with the United States. As his foreign policy aide Sergei Prikhodko put it, "Our partnership with the United States is not a hostage of the Iraq crisis. There are far too many common values and common tasks both short term and long term. . . . Our co-operation never

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59. Pavel Felgenhauer, "New Détente to Die Young," *Moscow Times*, May 29, 2003.

60. Reports suggest that Russia's intelligence services were feeding Putin wildly exaggerated estimates of Iraq's prospects in a war with U.S. forces. See Sergei Karaganov, "Crisis Lessons," *Moscow News*, April 23, 2003. Putin voiced skepticism regarding the strategic wisdom of U.S. policy in preinvasion interviews.

stopped, even during the Iraq crisis.”<sup>61</sup> This was not just rhetoric; concrete cooperation continued on intelligence sharing, nuclear arms control, NATO expansion, peacekeeping in Afghanistan, and the multilateral efforts to counter the proliferation threat from North Korea—all of which helped to ensure that Russia would not jeopardize its overall relationship with the United States. And as then National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice’s famous “punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia” quip indicates, this strategy worked.<sup>62</sup>

FRANCE. The primacy of long-standing domestic political factors in the German and Turkish cases, and Russia’s extreme circumspection and unwillingness to face any significant trade-off between constraining the United States on Iraq and other goals, all serve to bring France’s role to the fore. Nevertheless, soft balancing is notably absent from the three explanations for French policy upon which expert observers converge.<sup>63</sup>

First was the policy dispute between the French and U.S. governments. President Chirac, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, and indeed most of the French policy establishment opposed regime change on a variety of grounds, chief among them their expectation that an occupation of Iraq would be so bloody and long as to worsen the problem of al-Qaida-style terrorism.<sup>64</sup> Given France’s large Muslim population and its perceived high exposure to Islamic terrorism, the potential downsides of a contested occupation of Iraq were highly salient to French policymakers. Hence, at the outset they faced strong incentives to bargain with their U.S. allies to try to alter the Bush administration’s chosen policy. Pushing for the Iraq issue to be played out in the UN

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61. Quoted in Andrew Jack and Stefan Wagstyl, “Optimism on Russian Postwar Accord with U.S.,” *Financial Times*, May 16, 2003.

62. Elaine Sciolino, “French Struggle Now with How to Coexist with Bush,” *New York Times*, February 8, 2005.

63. The following sources were especially helpful in reconstructing French policymaking on Iraq: Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies at War*; Pond, *Friendly Fire*; “The Divided West,” pts. 1–3; and the conference “The United States and France after the War in Iraq” (Washington, D.C.: Center for the United States and France [CUSF], Brookings, May 12, 2003), <http://www.brookings.edu/fp/cusf/events/20030512cusf.htm>. The assessments of motivations in these analyses correspond to those found in the wider literature. Analysts do not see economic incentives as being important in this case. See, for example, Valerie Marcel, “Total in Iraq,” U.S.-France Analysis Series (Washington, D.C.: CUSF, Brookings, August 2003).

64. See, for example, “Interview Given by M. Jacques Chirac, President of the Republic, to ‘TF1’ and ‘France2,’” March 10, 2003, [http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/francais/actualites/a\\_1\\_elysee/2003/mars/interview\\_télévisée\\_sur\\_1\\_iraq-page\\_2-2.4840.html](http://www.elysee.fr/elysee/francais/actualites/a_1_elysee/2003/mars/interview_télévisée_sur_1_iraq-page_2-2.4840.html); also indicative are the analyses of French counterterrorism expert Judge Jean-Louis Bruguière. See Bruguière, “Terrorism after the War in Iraq,” U.S.-France Analysis Series (Washington, D.C.: CUSF, Brookings, May 2003), <http://www.brook.edu/printme.wbs?page=/fp/cuse/analysis/bruguiere.htm>. For an analysis of U.S.-European policy differences on Iraq, see Pond, *Friendly Fire*, chap 3.



reflected not only France's immediate policy interests, but also its long-term bargaining incentive to maintain the centrality of the Security Council. Once the Bush administration made it abundantly clear that it would invade Iraq no matter what, a French policy of criticizing the Iraq invasion could still be seen as an optimal response, especially given that the invasion's operational effectiveness did not depend on France's assistance. France may indeed have been successful in insulating itself from the potential downsides of the Iraq invasion: indicative in this regard is a recent PIPA poll that found that among the major powers, France is the one most widely viewed worldwide as having a positive influence.<sup>65</sup> Significantly, the French policy of opposing the United States on Iraq did not simply offer a potential benefit of insulation from anger emanating from the Muslim world; the expected diplomatic costs of France's opposition to the United States were also unusually low, owing to surprise decisions by two traditionally loyal U.S. allies—Germany and Turkey—to defy the Bush administration.

Second, informed accounts of French policy highlight the significance of European regional dynamics. At a time when the EU faced numerous new challenges from its inclusion of several Central European states, President Chirac could not afford to lose the policy initiative to Chancellor Schröder, whose antiwar stance was more consistent with European opinion than Chirac's initial posture. Schröder's vulnerability in the face of Washington's intense ire at his decision made him the supplicant in the bilateral relationship with France, which gave Chirac the opportunity to restart the Franco-German "motor" of the EU with himself in control. Chirac's decision in January to side with Schröder allowed him to co-opt the German leader and restore France to a more commanding role in EU affairs.

Third, observers agree that domestic politics played a role in the French president's calculations. Chirac had just weathered a touch-and-go re-election in which he won only 19 percent of the vote in the first round. True to his Gaullist roots, he clearly saw the advantage of playing to the French public's traditional appreciation of standing up to the United States. This position was particularly tempting given France's sizable Muslim minority.

In the view of most analysts, European and domestic politics were important incentives for France, but they were dominated by policy and bargaining considerations. Had the logic of policy and bargaining pointed toward French participation in the war, Chirac would likely have ignored the domestic politi-

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65. "Who Will Lead the World?" Program on International Policy Attitudes, April 6, 2005, [http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/europe/040605/Qnaire04\\_06\\_05.pdf](http://www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/europe/040605/Qnaire04_06_05.pdf), p. 1.

cal incentives. On the other hand, the political and European dimensions may well have tipped the balance in favor of opposition beyond what might have been optimal for policy and bargaining purposes—that, at any rate, is the assessment of the numerous French critics of Chirac's and de Villepin's conduct during the crisis.<sup>66</sup> The critical issue, therefore, is to assess the degree to which the soft-balancing explanation captures the general UN Security Council–focused bargaining stance and how this interacted with the more immediate policy concerns swirling around the Iraq issue.

Unlike their counterparts in Moscow and Berlin, Chirac and de Villepin publicly and loudly associated their position on Iraq with their preference for a multipolar world. Although the term “multipolarity” as French statesmen use it has many meanings, none matches its definition in American political science. Judging by their public utterances, both men believe that France and the world are better off when key decisions regarding global security are arrived at multilaterally—and that the UN Security Council is an important mechanism for achieving this state of affairs.<sup>67</sup> This preference fits with France's conception of its identity and foreign policy traditions, but it also merges seamlessly with a rational bargaining strategy vis-à-vis the United States that exploits the fortuitous circumstance of being one of the five veto-wielding permanent members of the Security Council.<sup>68</sup> Given the veto, a policy preference for maintaining the prestige of the Security Council by trying to delegitimize recourse to force without its sanction marginally increases France's influence over U.S. use of force. That influence is valuable to France, given that it is incapable of either countering American power or even, in most cases, fielding forces of its own to accomplish global missions such as disarming Iraq.

The purpose of that bargaining stance, however, is not necessarily to check

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66. See, for example, Lionel Jospin, “The Relationship between France and America,” lecture delivered at Harvard University, December 4, 2003; and commentary by French participants at the conference “The United States and France after the War in Iraq.”

67. To cite one example: It was widely reported that the first sentence Chirac uttered in the interview in which he announced his intention to veto the second Security Council resolution was: “We want to live in a multipolar world.” This, however, was only the first clause in a sentence that continues: “i.e. one with a few large groups enjoying as harmonious relations as possible with each other, a world in which Europe, among others, will have its full place, a world in which democracy progresses, hence the fundamental importance for us of the United Nations Organization which provides a framework and gives impetus to this democracy and harmony.” “Interview Given by M. Jacques Chirac.” For an example of the foreign minister's thinking, see the Alastair Buchan Lecture 2003, delivered by French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin, International Institute for Strategic Studies, London, United Kingdom, March 27, 2003 <http://www.iiss.org/conferencepage.php?confID=56>.

68. Erik Voeten, “Outside Options and the Logic of Security Council Action,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 95, No. 4 (November 2001), pp. 845–858.

U.S. power generally but to enhance France's ability to bargain over specific policy responses to global security issues. In the Iraq case, France's general stance toward bolstering the Security Council worked with its real policy preferences on Iraq. Together these incentives pushed Paris toward a position between Germany's outright opposition and the U.S.-U.K. stance. Opposition as categorical as Schröder's would push Washington toward unilateralism and thus weaken the Security Council. In late August, de Villepin repositioned France's policy on Iraq to accept the possibility of the use of force as long as it was channeled through the Security Council. After President Bush put the disarmament of Iraq before the UN in September 2002, France agreed to Security Council resolution 1441, following hard bargaining to prevent the inclusion of wording that would have given the United States and Britain a green light to topple Hussein without further Security Council say-so.

Chirac's policy may have lured the United States into the web of UN diplomacy, but only by moving France's stance much closer to Washington's and London's and actively preparing to sanction and even participate in a war against Iraq. French policymakers initially assumed that Hussein's recalcitrance would probably lead to a violation of resolution 1441 and a *casus belli*. Although it is impossible to know whether Chirac was sincere, the evidence suggests that France actively prepared for possible participation in a military action against Iraq, including mobilizing the carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, readying the armed forces, and initiating staff talks with the commander in chief of the U.S. Central Command, Gen. Tommy Franks, on a possible 15,000-man contribution to an allied assault on Iraq. The policy was logical, given Chirac's policy preferences and bargaining interests: France's main hope of pushing Washington and London closer to its preferred policy was by using its influence in the UN Security Council, a route that benefited the longer-term strategy of buttressing the role of that body. Given that bargaining incentives and policy preferences worked in tandem here, France did not face a trade-off between them. It is therefore hard to assign relative weight to each.

These incentives, however, do not always coincide. In one recent case where the two incentives came into conflict—Kosovo—France's position of supporting NATO military action in 1999 was consistent with its immediate policy preferences but not with the long-term bargaining incentive of maintaining the centrality of the UN Security Council. In the Iraq case, even though it served both the general bargaining interest and the immediate policy preference of the French, France's initial policy was illogical from a soft-balancing perspective because it potentially eased the diplomatic path for a massive exercise and possible expansion of U.S. power.

In January 2003 Chirac learned that the Bush administration was going to go to war regardless of what the UN weapons inspectors in Iraq uncovered. This intelligence exposed a fundamental contradiction between French and U.S.-U.K. policy preferences that had been diplomatically obfuscated until that moment. Chirac strongly preferred containment and inspections as a way of dealing with Iraq, while President Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair just as strongly preferred regime change. The fact that the weapons inspections seemed—to the UN’s Hans Blix and the French, at least—to be going so well (which Chirac frankly acknowledged was the result of U.S.-U.K. military pressure) exacerbated the contradictions between the two sides’ preferred policies. The realization that the Iraq question was going to be resolved through regime change no matter what the inspectors discovered meant that the French would not participate in the coalition. The only question was how strongly to oppose the Bush administration’s decision.

The French leadership much preferred a low-key approach to the Iraq issue. They tried to avoid a public showdown with the United States and the United Kingdom by urging them not to try for a second resolution—in which case, they argued in meetings with Bush officials, the French government would voice disapproval but otherwise stand aside. The Bush administration rejected Chirac’s “gentlemen’s agreement” out of deference to Prime Minister Blair, who believed that he needed a second Security Council resolution for domestic reasons.<sup>69</sup> But for this unique domestic contingency, a Washington-Paris deal might have been struck, and the most dramatic phase of the inter-allied dispute avoided. In the event, Chirac decided to work hard to deny the Americans and the British a second resolution, resulting in the well-publicized spectacle of the two sides feverishly lining up allies in the UN, France’s veto threat, and the U.S.-U.K. failure to put together a majority in the Security Council.

The soft-balancing argument holds that the United States increasingly poses a direct security challenge to other states, which they respond to by seeking to constrain U.S. power and the attendant threat. Our review of the events leading up to the invasion of Iraq shows how mistaken this argument is. For France—the linchpin of the diplomatic coalition that confronted the Bush administration—policy preferences, longer-term bargaining incentives, and domestic and European politics all pushed toward constraining the United States. Even though the French leadership strongly disagreed with the Bush administration over the sagacity of invading Iraq on strategic grounds, the

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69. This episode is detailed in Gordon and Shapiro, *Allies at War*.

most precedent-breaking aspect of French behavior—the intense campaign against the United States and Britain in the UN Security Council—was something President Chirac tried to avoid. The second UN resolution, and the attendant debate, went forward only because of complex domestic incentives acting on Prime Minister Blair. The soft-balancing argument is thus wrong to attribute the novel elements in French policy mainly to a shift in how France viewed U.S. power or the potential security threat it poses.

What is true for France also applies to the other key players. The most salient and novel behavior in the Iraq case—especially Chancellor Schröder’s fateful decision to oppose the Bush administration categorically—cannot be seen as a response to the security challenges emanating from the underlying power of the United States. Great power behavior during the past two years since the invasion of Iraq provides further evidence against the soft-balancing argument. In particular, far from seeking to further distance themselves from the United States, France and Germany have rushed to pursue a rapprochement with the Bush administration during this period. Significantly, this move had already gathered substantial momentum even before President Bush extended a diplomatic olive branch after gaining re-election.

### *Iraq Postmortem: Soft Balancing versus Bargaining*

Of all the complex motivations in play in the Iraq case, the bargaining incentive is closest to what analysts mean by “soft balancing.” But the differences between balancing and bargaining are profound. Bargaining is ubiquitous in a world of self-interested states. Using the term “balancing” to describe bargaining amounts in practice to equating balancing with international relations writ large. If it becomes another word for bargaining, balancing is meaningless as an analytical concept—something that describes a constant, rather than a variable; a mundane rather than noteworthy development in international politics.

The critical need to distinguish bargaining from soft balancing becomes even clearer when one considers that bargaining incentives can sometimes drive states into behavior that is the opposite of soft balancing. In the Iraq case, for example, France’s bargaining interest in maintaining the importance of the UN Security Council led it to follow a policy that held out as a real possibility a UN sanction of a U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Pursuit of this bargaining incentive led France toward a policy that, in the end, might have helped to legitimize a potential expansion of U.S. power in the Persian Gulf—that is, the opposite of what soft balancing predicts. To call this soft balancing makes a mockery of the

term. Acting to augment the role of the UN in this way made sense for a France interested in maximizing its long-term ability to influence U.S. decisions to use force globally. Had the Bush administration's actions regarding Iraq caused France to perceive a direct security threat from U.S. power, as soft-balancing proponents maintain, this behavior would have been nonsensical.

Distinguishing bargaining from soft balancing is also crucial because a key reason states may now seek greater capabilities is not to check U.S. power, but rather to be in a better position to bargain over the appropriate responses to security challenges from other states or actors. This is, for example, a major impetus for enhanced EU military capacity. It is an article of faith among many Europeans that the United States will take them seriously only if they are more capable militarily. This desire to influence Washington is understandable. On any given global security issue, each government is likely to have its own favored approach that fits with its traditions, ideas, and interests (commercial and strategic). Moreover, there are situations in which states are concerned that the manner in which the United States might address a security issue could redound negatively for their own security. Key here is that the concern is not about a direct security threat from the United States; rather, the security connection is indirect "blowback" from various U.S. policies that increase the threat from other actors (e.g., France's fear that a U.S. invasion of Iraq would only exacerbate the problem of al-Qaida-style terrorism). This threat of indirect blowback is hardly inconsequential, and it is not surprising that other great powers will sometimes bargain hard with Washington to change its approach when they see this threat emerging. States are not indifferent to how security issues are resolved, and so may be willing to invest in capabilities that give them a seat at the bargaining table.

Although this incentive for enhancing capabilities concerns security and is directly connected to U.S. policy, it has nothing to do with balancing. Balancing, whether hard or soft, is about protection from the security threat emanating directly from a potential hegemon. If it means anything, the soft-balancing argument must predict that less U.S. power and lower involvement will reduce incentives for other states to gain relative power. If bargaining rather than balancing is in play, however, then there is no reason to believe that shrinking either U.S. power or the level of its global engagement would reduce other states' incentives to build up their capabilities. On the contrary, a precipitous U.S. withdrawal from the world—as neo-isolationists are now calling for—could generate new security dynamics that produce much greater incentives for other powers to increase their capabilities.

Ultimately, what appears new about the behavior analysts are calling soft

balancing is not its significance, but its perceived prominence on the agenda. What used to be considered standard diplomatic bargaining is now likely trumpeted as balancing because real balancing of the kind that has appeared so often throughout history—competing great-power alliances, arms buildups, brinkmanship crises, and the like—was cleared off the international agenda in 1989–91 with the end of the Cold War. Importantly, the concept of balancing rose to prominence in a world in which great power security relations were dominated by the direct threat that they posed to each other. Today, by contrast, the likelihood of great power war is exceedingly low. Weak states and nonstates pose the main security challenge, and the great powers argue primarily over the best way to address them. Balance of power theory has no utility in explaining great power relations in this world.

### *Conclusion*

This article shows that the soft-balancing argument has no traction. The only reason some analysts have concluded otherwise is because they have failed to consider alternative explanations. If it were reasonable to equate soft balancing with great power policy bargaining, then balancing would figure as a contributor, but not a driver, in at least the Iraq case. As we have demonstrated, however, there are critical analytical costs to equating these two phenomena. Once the distinction between soft balancing and bargaining is recognized, the strict conclusion is that soft balancing plays no discernable role in any of the four cases we examine.

None of this should be interpreted to mean that Washington can safely ignore the views of the other major powers. The further one looks beyond the immediate short term, the clearer the issues become—among them, the environment, weapons of mass destruction, disease, migration, and the stability of the global economy. The United States cannot effectively address these issues on its own; all of them will require repeated dealings with many partners over many years. It is also clear that other states can take actions that end up constraining the United States, sometimes significantly. These constraint actions, however, are not an outgrowth of balance of power dynamics and cannot be explained by the soft-balancing amendment to that theory. The current practice of using balance of power concepts to describe and explain this behavior is costly in theoretical and policy terms.

With regard to theory, the widespread tendency to shoehorn policy disputes and bargaining dynamics into a simplistic balancing narrative has the effect of generating unwarranted support for balance of power theory. Our analysis



demonstrates that even though other states sometimes undertake actions that constrain the United States, and occasionally use balancing language to describe these efforts, such behavior does not validate balance of power theory. In a unipolar world, soft balancing can be seen as the first observable implication that the world works the way balance of power theory expects it to. There is no empirical basis for the soft-balancing argument, and hence any effort to invoke it as a means of buttressing balance of power theory is fruitless.

Where should scholarly research go from here? The soft-balancing argument rose to prominence only in the past several years and has not yet been fully fleshed out theoretically. One option that might seem appealing would be to develop the theoretical logic of the argument further, as Robert Pape has done in a recent analysis.<sup>70</sup> Although we certainly understand the appeal of trying to explain the constraint actions of other states with a parsimonious, generalizable theory, these advantages of the soft-balancing argument in no way make up for its lack of explanatory power—even in cases that soft-balancing proponents have highlighted to try to forward their argument. Although it is bound to disappoint those who have sought to rework balance of power theory to accommodate a world without hard balancing, this result is not surprising. Balance of power theory was developed to explain the behavior of states in systems with two or more poles in which war among the great powers was an ever-present danger. Neither of those conditions applies today: the international system is unipolar, and the likelihood of war among the great powers has receded because of a host of factors, some of which are highlighted by realism (such as the geographic location of the United States and nuclear weapons) and others of which are emphasized by nonrealist theories (such as economic globalization and democracy).<sup>71</sup> Analysts would be wise to invest their talents in investigating the novel dynamics of great power bargaining in today's unipolar system rather than seeking to stretch old analytical concepts that were created to deal with the bipolar and multipolar systems of the past.<sup>72</sup>

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70. Pape, "Soft Balancing."

71. For a general discussion, see Robert Jervis, "Theories of War in an Era of Great Power Peace," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (March 2002), pp. 1–14. On economic globalization, see Stephen G. Brooks, *Producing Security: Multinational Corporations, Globalization, and the Changing Calculus of Conflict* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). On geography, see William C. Wohlforth, "U.S. Strategy in a Unipolar World," in Ikenberry, *America Unrivaled*, pp. 98–120. On nuclear weapons, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "More May Be Better," in Scott D. Sagan and Waltz, *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons: A Debate Renewed* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003). On democracy, see Bruce Russett and John R. Oneal, *Triangulating Peace: Democracy, Interdependence, and International Organizations* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

72. A useful step in this direction is provided in Voeten, "Outside Options and the Logic of Security Council Action."

Regarding policy, this article reveals that supporters of a U.S. foreign policy characterized by restraint should not rely on balancing dynamics as they construct their arguments. 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 U.S. 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 counterbalancing. In making this argument, they are following a venerable tradition: expected counterbalancing has historically been the strongest argument for restraint in the face of temptation. It is true that soft balancing is tailor-made as an argument for U.S. restraint; the problem is that it has no empirical support. Our examination indicates that other states are simply not going to force the United States to act in a more restrained manner by acting in a systematic, coordinated manner to check U.S. power. There are many compelling reasons why the United States should adopt this foreign policy course, but soft balancing is not among them.