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“Soft Balancing” avant la Lettre: Latin America and the United States

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Faced with unilateral U.S. military intervention, a coalition of secondary powers—including both traditional rivals and allies—publicly questions the United States’ use of its unchallenged might. Turning to international organizations and law, bilateral diplomacy, coalition building, and public rhetoric, though never to overt military alliances, these countries seek to constrain the ability of the United States to deploy military force, following a pattern that has been referred to as “soft balancing.” Variations of this story are present in the literature; most describe global responses to the United States’ 2003 invasion of Iraq, and the debate on soft balancing largely has been confined to the post-Cold War world. A similar description is apt, however, for a previous era, too. Starting with the Spanish-American War of 1898, the United States launched frequent interventions in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean.¹ This earlier era of unbridled, unilateral U.S. interventionism also drew important responses that represent a valuable case offering new insights into the nature and effects of soft balancing.

Robert Pape’s influential argument on “soft balancing” holds that weaker states confronting a unipolar power may leverage “nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality” to constrain the superpower.² In an age of U.S. unipolarity, Pape’s concept gave a name to the strategies of states seeking to curtail U.S. power. It made an immediate splash in international relations scholarship and policy debates by updating balance of power theory. Growing out of the international responses to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, the debate around soft balancing has focused almost exclusively on very recent history,

particularly responses to the perceived unilateralism of the George W. Bush administration. The concept has been applied to other situations, too, including the foreign policies of Brazil, India, and South Africa;³ Southeast Asian institutionalism,⁴ and U.S.-European relations.⁵ With few exceptions, these cases are set in the last two decades. The temporally narrow scope of the evidence employed in the debate on soft balancing has limited efforts to refine the concept, to understand the mechanisms through which soft balancing may occur, and especially to judge its possible consequences.

The importance of expanding scholars' and policymakers' understanding of soft balancing is theoretical, empirical, and practical. Theoretically, this article demonstrates that soft balancing has applications beyond the events for which it was coined. Although the term has been limited to situations of global unipolarity, we demonstrate that it can be applied to at least some instances of regional unipolarity. The article expands the empirical base for soft balancing into a period in which both private diplomatic and public statements are available as evidence; in doing so, it also advances the understanding of Latin American agency in U.S.-Latin American relations. This evidence demonstrates that soft balancing is statecraft, not just rhetoric for public consumption. Finally, soft balancing has largely been seen as a threat to the United States. This article shows this need not be the case. In fact, the soft balancing examined here led the United States to adjust its policies in the Western Hemisphere toward an approach with less overt intervention, which produced great benefits at considerably lower costs. Soft balancing need not be feared.

This article argues that more than a century before the French, Germans, and Russians combined at the United Nations to oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Latin Americans sought to develop new international norms against military intervention in a strategy that closely resembles

descriptions of more recent soft balancing. In response to heightened U.S. interventionism, which was demonstrated in practice and declared in doctrine, Argentina and Mexico led an effort that contributed to a tidal shift in U.S. policy on military intervention lasting from the 1930s into the 1950s and arguably thereafter. These Latin American responses would seem to present an ideal case for examining a precedent for soft balancing long before the term was coined. The period offers a strong comparative case that is independent from those studied in the more recent debate about soft balancing. Scholarly discussion of soft balancing has implicitly assumed that because the post-Cold War era is the only modern unipolar system, there are no other relevant cases to examine. We see such an example, however, in U.S. relations with Latin America in the early twentieth century. The degree of power asymmetry between the United States and its southern neighbors at this time was so great that the Western Hemisphere was effectively a unipolar system. This provides an invaluable case to add historical depth to examining the concept of soft balancing, which otherwise must remain confined to the very recent period in which unipolarity characterized the entire globe. (Treating a portion of the world as a system in its own right is not unusual, for example, in studies of the European balance of power.)

Although U.S. actions during this period have received extensive study, Latin American reactions have received much less attention. To the degree Latin American actions have been considered, they have most often been assumed to fall under U.S. hegemony or to constitute bandwagoning. During the pre- World War II period, Latin American states displayed a variety of responses to the growth in U.S. power and unilateralism, including trying to constrain its exercise. This finding can contribute to the body of work on Latin American agency that disputes scholarship wedded to a version of dependency theory in which U.S. hegemony is absolute,⁶ and updates accounts that argue that balancing behavior has not been relevant to intra-American

relations.⁷ It also questions international relations approaches that conform to what David Mares has characterized as an oversimplified view of Latin American foreign policy autonomy, in which “the constraints posed by the United States are perceived to be so overwhelming that Latin American countries are assumed incapable of formulating their own security definitions.”⁸

This article contributes to the debate on soft balancing in three main ways. The soft balancing debate, like that of balance of power generally, has been dominated by realism. The strategies of soft balancing, however, draw heavily on institutions, international law, and the promotion of norms that constrain the unipole’s exercise of power. It also invokes questions of “threat,” not just material power, and the perception both of a unipole’s role and intentions. The article seeks to refine the concept of soft balancing, both through additional empirical application and through more explicit dialogue with institutionalist and constructivist theories, and to more clearly delineate the interactive processes of soft balancing. From a methodological perspective, the concept of soft balancing has been applied almost exclusively to the circumstances that gave birth to it. To demonstrate that a concept is worth its salt, it is important to show that it illuminates events and processes separate from the ones it was coined to describe. In a final, related point, the article makes important empirical contributions to the soft-balancing literature. As Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth noted, the presentism of the soft-balancing debate has meant that it draws on a limited range of sources—largely public pronouncements—which might be less reliable than private information.⁹ It also means that the process of soft balancing was still ongoing and its outcomes were unclear. Examining a historical example, using multinational archival sources, can help scholars and policymakers understand where soft balancing may lead. In contrast to much of the debate, we conclude that soft balancing need not be feared. It will not always lead to hard balancing and greater conflict; in fact, an evolution of

great power policies to account for soft balancers' interests could induce more cooperation and mutual benefit.

The article summarizes the debate over soft balancing, before suggesting further developments to this concept that more explicitly connect the concept to liberal and constructivist international relations theory. While it makes sense to limit the concept to unipolar systems, the article argues that it may also be applied to regional unipolar systems, and that these are useful for examining the conditions under which soft balancing occurs. This argument is illustrated through the soft balancing behaviors displayed by Argentina, Mexico, and other Latin American states in response to U.S. interventions from the 1890s to 1930s. In conclusion, the article suggests further directions for the study of soft balancing, while noting that its consequences for U.S. policymakers might not be as dire as many scholars have feared.

The Debate over Soft Balancing

The debate over soft balancing, chiefly in the pages of this journal, has been characterized by a focus on unilateral U.S. actions and the international responses to those actions. The key cases reflected responses from secondary powers—primarily China, France, Germany, and Russia—to the United States during the administration of George W. Bush. Although there have been some empirical disagreements over the facts of these cases, the primary disagreement has been over whether these states' actions represent a response to a perceived increase in the threat posed by the world's lone superpower. This article takes no position on which recent events might qualify as soft balancing versus policy bargaining; instead it seeks to clarify the concept and ask whether that concept can help illuminate historical situations in which there were multilateral attempts to constrain the unilateral use of U.S. power by means other than military confrontation.

The argument for soft balancing, advanced by international relations luminaries Robert Pape, Stephen Walt, T.V. Paul, Robert Art, and Charles Kupchan, has received well-reasoned criticism from Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth.¹⁰ Keir Lieber and Gerard Alexander have questioned evidence of any balancing behavior today, dismissively saying “that discussion of soft balancing is much ado about nothing.”¹¹ The crux of Brooks and Wohlforth’s critique is that the original soft-balancing argument fails to consider alternative explanations for these states’ behaviors. Many of the actions taken have been overblown and are not systematic attempts to constrain and balance the United States. Instead, they are better understood as “diplomatic friction,” in Lieber and Alexander’s words, that frequently accompanies policy bargaining. Moreover, some of the behaviors originate as responses to domestic politics.¹² This article takes care to consider the critiques and alternative explanations offered by Brooks and Wohlforth. To begin, it reviews the literature on soft balancing with an eye to spelling out the crucial elements of a distinct concept of soft balancing that avoids risks of “conceptual stretching.”¹³ This is an important exercise if scholars are to apply the term beyond the circumstances for which it was developed.

Realist scholars traditionally saw balancing as the natural, almost automatic response of states in an anarchical system to the rise of a new power.¹⁴ This theory led to numerous predictions that the collapse of the Soviet Union, and with it the bipolar world order, would spur the rise of a new balancing coalition.¹⁵ Although there have been important critiques of the ubiquity of balancing, from hegemonic-stability theory realists,¹⁶ historically oriented scholars,¹⁷ and from many outside realism,¹⁸ the theory’s parsimony retains considerable appeal. As Brooks and Wohlforth note, soft balancing derives part of its conceptual purchase from its implied relation to the balance of power. At the same time, the seeming longevity of U.S. unipolarity, a

quarter century after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has led international relations scholars to dedicate greater study to the dynamics of the unipolar world.¹⁹

In the early 2000s, these two developments in international relations theory intersected. Spurred largely by concern about the long-term consequences of the United States' seemingly unprecedented embrace of preventive war, Pape and others termed the strong international opposition to the U.S. doctrine as "soft balancing." What are the key components of soft balancing? First, it seemingly pertains only to situations of unipolarity. This excludes international systems that vary in either direction. In bipolar or multipolar systems, states could adopt traditional balancing coalitions to contain the dominant power. In the other direction, if a system were hegemonic, balancing would not be feasible given the power and control exercised by the hegemon.²⁰ In a recent article, Ilai Saltzman divorces soft balancing from questions of polarity (and balance of power theory generally), looking at U.S. policy toward interwar Japan as soft balancing.²¹ Saltzman argues that soft balancing is a foreign policy strategy; in this he is correct. Hard balancing is also a foreign policy strategy. Separating balancing behavior from questions of coalitions and polarity is a mistake, as it risks collapsing almost any nonmilitary response—even by the dominant power—to a change in the distribution of capabilities into soft balancing.

Second, soft balancing is not a direct response to a preponderance of power, but to perceptions of power and fear of its unilateral use. It responds to what Walt called the "balance of threat."²² This change helps explain why no immediate rebalancing occurred when it became clear in 1990 that the United States had emerged as the unquestioned sole superpower. The post-Cold War United States did not appear to threaten the sovereignty of the vast majority of states in the international system; its military interventions often had at least a veneer of institutional

legitimacy that promised a restoration of sovereign rights. Nor is the United States' tremendous wealth predicated on territorial expansion. In short, the United States was a "constrained hegemon," as Paul argued.²³ The question of threat instead of power alone places a great degree of importance on the intentions of the unipole, or rather on how those intentions are perceived by other states. If the unipole is perceived as possessing self-restraint, and particularly if it provides benefits in the form of private or public goods, the costs of checking the unipole will outweigh the benefits. This difference represents a significant departure from realists' traditional emphasis on the inherent uncertainty of intentions, emphasized especially by John Mearsheimer.²⁴ If the unipole is perceived as increasingly imperialistic, soft or even hard balancing is likely to be employed. Soft balancing behaviors are not limited to responses to direct threats from the unipole. Pape argues that secondary powers can be driven by indirect threats, as in European concerns over the planned 2003 invasion of Iraq and the Bush Doctrine's claim of a right to unilateral preventive war, because they fear blowback, the spillover of regional insecurity, or a destabilizing precedent. They might also fear that the unipole is seeking hegemony, which would materially lessen secondary states' autonomy and well-being.²⁵ The implications are enormous: If power alone were the issue, the only way the unipolar state could prevent balancing would be to become less powerful—an unlikely proposition—or become a hegemon, a tall order bringing its own risks. In a balance of threat world, changes to the unipole's behaviors can obviate the need for balancing.

Third, soft balancing is primarily a nonmilitary strategy.²⁶ States deploy a host of other instruments instead. Pape notes, "Mechanisms of soft balancing include territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening, and signaling of resolve to participate in a balancing coalition."²⁷ Providing aid to rivals, including nonstate actors, and excluding the

unipole from multilateral political and economic organizations have also been discussed as strategies.²⁸ Along these lines, states engaged in soft balancing seek to limit the ability of the unipole to “impose its preferences on others” through coordinated action, attempts to augment power, and countervailing coalitions.²⁹ Walt emphasizes cooperation as an important aspect of soft balancing: “In the current era of U.S. dominance, therefore, soft balancing is the conscious coordination of diplomatic action in order to obtain outcomes contrary to U.S. preferences, outcomes that could not be gained if the balancers did not give each other some degree of mutual support.”³⁰

More controversially, soft balancing is often seen as a possible precursor to hard balancing. Soft balancing is a lower-cost, lower-risk strategy for secondary states to pursue their priorities without provoking the overwhelming power of the unipole. Forming a balancing coalition is always a risky endeavor, in which individual states have incentives to pass the buck, free ride, or shirk. Building cooperation is particularly difficult in a unipolar system; more states must coordinate their actions, and the unipole can inflict high costs on states that oppose it.

One of the main criticisms of soft balancing is that it is indistinguishable from the normal course of diplomacy and international bargaining that result from disagreements over policy. Brooks and Wohlforth call soft balancing “a portentous-sounding term to describe conventional policy disputes and diplomatic bargaining” with U.S. interlocutors after the fall of the Soviet Union. They argue that these disputes seem important only because unipolarity does not provide a frame of reference for real balancing behaviors, as a bipolar or multipolar world did.³¹ Advancing a similar critique, Lieber and Alexander argue, “The events used to detect the presence of soft balancing are so typical in history that they are not, and perhaps cannot be, distinguished from routine diplomatic friction between countries, even between allies.”³²

Although shades of gray will continue to exist, useful distinctions can be drawn between the two. Robert J. Art argues that both routine policy bargaining and soft balancing are inherently focused on outcomes vis-à-vis the unipole. Soft balancing, however, is a future-oriented strategy: “[P]olicy bargaining is the attempt to produce favorable outcomes with current assets, whereas balancing behavior is the attempt to augment assets so as to produce better outcomes the next time.”³³ Both the temporal and coalition aspects of soft balancing can be used to help distinguish it from “routine diplomatic friction.” Kupchan argues that even if many of the behaviors associated with soft balancing are “mundane,” they may still be consequential in geopolitical terms. What matters are the intentions to constrain the unipole and the consequences of the actions taken by soft-balancing states.³⁴

In addition, Brooks and Wohlforth point to the importance of considering alternative explanations: states could be pursuing economic interests, posturing for domestic political aims, or worrying about regional security. Although these possibilities must be considered, it is important to recognize that the explanations are not mutually exclusive. Brooks and Wohlforth argue that any balancing behavior, soft or hard, must be a response to a concentration of power. A concentration of power could threaten states’ economic interests (and thus their ability to maintain or develop their own power), drawing policy responses that seek to both constrain the unipole and advance economic interests. Domestic politics and regional security could complement rather than contradict balancing motives.

Concepts and Cases

Soft balancing requires further development, both empirical and conceptual. This section strengthens the concept by highlighting the implicit use of concepts identified with

institutionalism and constructivism in a debate about balancing behavior. It justifies the extension of the soft-balancing debate to a period and region that scholars have previously overlooked for theoretical and empirical reasons. Finally, it will argue that the case of Latin American responses to U.S. interventionism is particularly useful for examining arguments about why soft balancing occurs—as opposed to either hard or no balancing.

Enriching soft balancing

Soft balancing is, foremost, a foreign policy strategy that aims to constrain through nonmilitary means how, where, and why a unipole deploys its unrivaled military power. It does not refer to the balance of power as existing equilibrium in the international system.³⁵ Soft balancing does not need to be successful to exist, just as hard balancing has existed as a strategy despite failure. It could be, but is not necessarily, a precursor to hard balancing. Soft balancing emphasizes secondary states' perceptions of the threat posed by the unipole, meaning changes in perceptions will lead to changes in balancing behavior. Soft balancing is not an inevitable reaction to the growth of another state's power. Soft balancing is distinct from policy bargaining, which is narrowly focused on a given issue because it has a longer time horizon, and seeks not just to limit one particular use of power but the unipole's ability to deploy that power in the future by augmenting the resources available to secondary states. Soft balancing is likely when secondary states begin to see the unipole as a direct or indirect threat to their national interests.³⁶

Soft balancing, like balance of power theory more generally, has largely been the domain of realists. An examination of soft balancing, however, shows the possibilities for more explicit dialogue between institutionalist and constructivist approaches and debates about balancing. These are worth exploring in two areas: the question of changing perceptions of unipolar

intentions and the institutional and normative strategies employed by soft balancers. The question of changing perceptions of unipolar intentions goes beyond Walt's criteria for "threat." He lists these as power resources (or strength), geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intentions.³⁷ Because resources, geography, and offensive capabilities are too fixed to spark soft balancing against a unipole, the explanatory onus falls entirely on intentions—and more to the point, other states' perceptions of those intentions, a matter on which Wohlforth made signal contributions a decade before the soft-balancing debate.³⁸ Constructivists have long emphasized the interplay between a state's actions and how its role in international relations is defined.³⁹ The United States alone cannot define itself as a "benign hegemon," a role that depends not just on U.S. words and actions but on how those are intersubjectively perceived by other actors in the international system. The United States almost certainly did not intend to weaken that perception in 2003, but others' understandings of U.S. doctrines and actions did just that. An analysis of soft balancing must be attentive to how perceptions of intentions affect the roles states play in international politics.

Soft balancing employs tactics that have often received short shrift from realists, which has likely contributed to the dismissal of the concept by some critics. If international institutions are epiphenomenal to the distribution of power, as many realists have argued,⁴⁰ then they cannot create serious challenges to that distribution. Soft balancing is also discussed as a method of overcoming coordination problems under anarchy, drawing on institutionalist theorizing advanced by Robert Keohane, David Axelrod, and others.⁴¹ Secondary states can use institutions to address various needs: At times they may facilitate coordination with or in opposition to a unipolar power; they may also be forums to publicize and delegitimize unipolar unilateralism. These scholars offer additional insights into how institutional soft-balancing tactics might

constrain the unipole. Institutionalism has emphasized the information-sharing role of international institutions, which may allow potential soft balancers opportunities to demand disclosure, reporting, and monitoring from the unipole. Secondary states may use international institutions to press the unipole to make public commitments; while the unipole's power may let it break commitments, international institutions increase the publicity of a commitment and therefore enhance domestic and international audience costs.⁴² Publicly reneging on commitments could further erode perceptions of benign intent. The question of perceived U.S. intentions has been central to the soft-balancing debate, though "intentions" in these discussions have not been limited to narrower understandings of what the United States will do in a particular situation. Beneath the surface, the question of "benign hegemony" is actually about what role the United States will play in the international system—what will the United States' identity be? The constructivist literature offers insights into the intersubjective construction of state identity and its consequences.⁴³ Constructivism also has much to offer for scholars' understanding of normative soft-balancing tactics, including how states may use "rhetorical entrapment" to constrain U.S. actions or to increase the costs of those actions.⁴⁴ A constructivist reading of soft balancing might focus on how the unipole seeks to build legitimacy for its actions, while opposing coalitions seek to deny it, thus imposing costs and affecting decisionmaking.

Polarity and Soft Balancing

A key reason for the presentist nature of the debate is that soft balancing has been understood as pertaining to global unipolar systems. The power advantage of the unipole encourages states to soft balance instead of resorting to military balancing. In bipolar or multipolar systems, shifting alliances allow states to compensate for the growing power of a single actor. The implicit

assumption has been that because the post-Cold War era is the only modern unipolar system, other relevant cases of soft balancing do not exist.

The Western Hemisphere at the turn of the twentieth century, however, provides such an example, nested within a multipolar world. During the period, the degree of power asymmetry between the United States and its neighbors became apparent. In 1900 U.S. national income per capita was \$1495, more than 600 percent greater than the average \$220 in Latin America.⁴⁵ The United States had a blue-water navy that had just defeated the Spanish Empire on both sides of the globe, while most Latin American countries were limited to a “brown-water” navy of riverine boats and a few ships for coastal patrols.⁴⁶ Although this advantage allowed the United States to establish its authority over some of the small states in the Caribbean and Central America, it never established hegemony over the entire hemisphere. With regard to the South American subsystem, the relationship with the United States cannot be understood either as multipolar—the U.S. advantage was too great—or hegemonic—U.S. control was inadequate.

Even if the United States had established a unipolar position within the hemisphere, did global multipolarity offer the secondary powers of Latin America other options for traditional balancing? Although in theory, and to some extent in commerce, these options did exist, options for hard balancing through military alliances with extrahemispheric powers were not an option. Despite sporadic U.S. fears about an intrusion by Wilhelmine Germany, only two extrahemispheric powers had noteworthy presences. The first was Spain. Most of Latin America had fought—or in the case of Cuba, continued to fight—for liberation from Spain and the possibility for an alliance against the United States was slight. More important, the Iberian power was in advanced decline by the turn of the century, and the war of 1898 definitively established its military impotence. Great Britain, the second extrahemispheric power, was more noteworthy,

especially as a commercial partner. The United States, however, had steadily pushed the British out of the Caribbean and Central America, a shift highlighted by the repudiation of the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, which had granted equal U.S. and British rights to railways and a future canal across the Central American isthmus. The possibility of military alliance with Great Britain throughout the hemisphere declined steadily throughout the period. Although South American independence hero Simón Bolívar and some of his contemporaries advocated alliance with Great Britain early in the nineteenth century, and France and French culture certainly had advocates, the feasibility of these arrangements declined dramatically by the last quarter of the century. The proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine that the hemisphere was closed to European powers, which was presumptuous in 1823, had become effective by the eve of the World War I, at least in terms of military alliances. If Latin American states were going to constrain the growing power of the United States, they would have to do so largely on their own. It is worth noting that there are numerous precedents for treating a portion of the world as a system in its own right. This has often been done, without explicit recognition, in discussions of the European balance of power.⁴⁷ Considering the Western Hemisphere as a unipolar system in its own right during this period is thus historically accurate and theoretically useful.

Conditions for soft balancing: Geography, restraint, and asymmetry

“Discovering” another example of a unipolar system offers strong grounds to examine possible soft-balancing behaviors, given the dearth of possible comparative cases. It also provides evidence to examine the conditions, such as geography, perceptions of unipolar restraint (or its opposite), and power differentials, that Pape and others have argued either provoke or dissuade secondary powers from engaging in soft balancing. In doing so, it seeks to better specify the concept of soft balancing.

The case of Latin American responses to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is analogous to the current debate on soft balancing in ways beyond the existence of effective unipolarity. The period was marked by an explicit change in stated U.S. doctrine, from an interpretation of the Monroe Doctrine that focused on excluding European powers to the Roosevelt Corollary, in which the United States declared its own right and duty to intervene in the internal affairs of its neighbors. This change of policy was accompanied by major changes in practice. “Gunboat diplomacy” by the United States and European powers had been common—and frequently denounced by Latin Americans—in the late 1890s; now the United States began a period of larger military interventions. Importantly, these led to a number of occupations of much longer duration than previous military episodes. Although it might be an exaggeration to say U.S. intentions were considered benign before 1898, given the Mexican experience and widespread suspicion of filibustering expeditions, the combination of growing U.S. economic and military clout and the alacrity with which it was employed spurred a new level of concern. Importantly, it also led to important changes in the behavior of the secondary powers in Latin America. As described below, these behaviors mesh with Walt’s description of balancing behavior: “If states are in fact choosing to coordinate action, augment their power, and take on new commitments with others, because they are worried about the unipole’s dominant position and/or are alarmed by the actions it is undertaking, it is appropriate to regard such behavior as a form of balancing.”⁴⁸

Proponents of the soft-balancing concept have focused on two explanations for limited balancing against the United States before 2003. First, they emphasize the geographical isolation of the United States from secondary powers. This has been understood as a constant, because more geographically proximate states in Latin America and the Caribbean have been deemed too

minor to display important balancing behaviors or were subjected to a U.S sphere of influence, empire, or hierarchy.⁴⁹ Taking Latin American responses more seriously allows for an examination of the effects of varying distance. Second, the debate around soft balancing has focused on a perceived shift in U.S. intentions, with proponents arguing that a primary reason for the lack of earlier balancing behavior after the collapse of the Soviet Union was the perception that the United States was a restrained hegemon. From at least the 1890s through the early 1930s, however, many countries in the Western Hemisphere did not share a belief in the benign intentions of the United States.

The following case, therefore, offers the opportunity for comparison with those that have been examined in the literature. It is not intended to “test” soft balancing; the literature does not currently offer a fully formed theory of soft balancing from which testable hypotheses could be derived. Instead, soft balancing is treated as a concept. Gary Goertz writes, “Developing a concept is more than providing a definition; it is deciding what is important about an entity.”⁵⁰ As Goertz argues, concepts should be both empirical and theoretical. The application of a concept to new empirics allows scholars to ask whether that concept helps illuminate events and processes. The case at hand sheds light on which unipolar behaviors may spur soft balancing, the motivations and tactics of the balancers, and how the practice of soft balancing need not inevitably lead to hard balancing or bring bad outcomes for the United States.

The Case: Soft Balancing against the United States, 1898-1936

From the late 1890s to the 1930s, the wealthiest Latin American country, Argentina, soon joined by the first revolutionary power of the twentieth century, Mexico, undertook what would become a hemispheric effort to constrain the ability of the United States to deploy military force in Latin

America. Their distinct geopolitical interests and national diplomatic traditions led them to take the lead at critical moments in efforts at soft balancing that coincided or were directly coordinated. This was not merely diplomatic friction over transient disputes but represented a sustained, systemic balancing effort through coalition building, international law, and multinational institutions.

Latin America in the early twentieth century faced a United States so disproportionately powerful that it had been able to absorb half of Mexico's territory in 1848, replace Spanish colonial rule directly in Puerto Rico and indirectly in Cuba in 1898, take control of a wide swath of Panama in 1903, then send the Marines to govern directly or rule by proxy in Nicaragua (1912-33), Haiti (1915-34), and the Dominican Republic (1916-24). The end of U.S. occupations in the circum-Caribbean that followed is typically credited to Franklin Roosevelt's benevolence and the "Good Neighbor policy" he (and his predecessor, Herbert Hoover) determined would be more advantageous to the United States by reducing the costs of occupation once compliant dictatorships were keeping order on their own. In fact, as explained below, the dictators were not always so compliant, and Roosevelt's decision to commit the United States formally to a policy of nonintervention in Latin America was not an act of *noblesse oblige* but the culmination of several decades of diplomatic and legal activism in multinational forums by Latin American countries in what appears now to have been a strategy of soft balancing.

Just as the 2002-03 soft balancing effort by France, Germany and Russia to oppose the U.S. invasion of Iraq took place in the United Nations, much of Latin America's soft balancing project unfolded in the context of the emerging inter-American diplomatic system, the recurring conferences launched in 1889 as part of the U.S.-sponsored project of Pan-Americanism. David Sheinin has described Pan-Americanism as a program to integrate Latin America into a U.S.-led

system based on political, commercial, legal, and defense coordination.⁵¹ Argentina led the opposition to U.S. initiatives in this process, often sponsoring its own counterproposals centered on the defense of national sovereignty. That led Nicaraguan nationalist poet Rubén Darío to prophesy that “on the balance scales of the American continent, it is the Argentine Republic that gives us the counterweight to Yankee power.”⁵² After the Mexican Revolution of 1910-17, Mexico, too, played a leading role in rallying opposition to U.S. intervention in the region. This pattern persisted through recurring inter-American conferences—the precursors to the current system centered on the Organization of American States—between 1889 and 1936, when the United States finally agreed without reservations to Latin American demands to formally renounce military intervention in the hemisphere as a tool of statecraft.

Taken in isolation, each confrontation at each conference, it could be argued, might be better understood as falling into the category of the “conventional policy disputes and diplomatic bargaining” Brooks and Wohlforth describe. The whole record of decades of maneuvering to get the United States ultimately to endorse the principle of nonintervention, however, seems much more significant than the sum of its parts. Indeed, it represents a striking case of soft balancing as an alternative to bandwagoning for weaker powers.

The two lesser powers each had its own reasons for challenging U.S. hard power. Mexico’s interest in constraining military intervention is self-evident, not only because of the traumatic loss of its northern territory in the 1840s, but because of the U.S. shelling and occupation for five months of the port of Veracruz (1914) and the yearlong campaign by Gen. John Pershing and his army of 10,000 men who repeatedly violated Mexican sovereignty to try to stop border incursions by Mexican rebels (1916). Moreover, Mexico’s foreign policy has never been confined to the subservient position implied in the famous lament of its last

prerevolution autocrat Porfirio Díaz: “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.” Díaz himself diverged from U.S. policy in Central America, and Mexico carved out substantial room for independent stands after the revolution and throughout the Cold War.⁵³

Argentina, which initiated the balancing project in the early twentieth century, may in our time seem an unlikely country to have launched a bid for international leadership, but in those days it was widely recognized to be on the ascendant. By 1910 Argentina was the world’s largest grain exporter and had the highest per capita level of international trade on Earth. Buenos Aires boasted a world-famous opera, a subway, and the second-largest port in the Americas (after New York). Europeans favored the expression “as rich as an Argentine.”⁵⁴ When it began to oppose the United States in international forums, Argentina drew the ire of U.S. officials.⁵⁵ Argentina was in a position to anchor a soft-balancing coalition in part because of geographical factors: not only was Argentina remote from the United States, but the Pampas region produced similar agricultural goods to the U.S. heartland, making them commercial competitors and directing Argentine exporters’ gaze toward the industrial powers of Europe. That made Argentina less dependent on the United States than the Central American and Caribbean countries were. For Argentine elites, the economic success of their country, the European origin of most of its population, and its important role in transatlantic trade justified the assertion of a leadership role in the Americas.⁵⁶

The Pan-American project arose in a context of competition among empires. While Europeans fought over the resources and markets of the developing world through intervention in Africa and Asia, the United States entered the fray in the War of 1898 and with expansive versions of the Monroe Doctrine in the Olney (1895) and Roosevelt (1904) corollaries that asserted a U.S. right to intervene at will throughout Latin America. As the United States

increased its investments in South America, Argentine leaders, like their counterparts in Brazil and Chile, calculated the costs and benefits of aligning with one of the great powers. Brazil's practice of bandwagoning with the United States rather than seeking to balance it dated from the era of the Baron of Rio Branco (José Maria da Silva Paranhos Jr.), who spent a decade (1902-1912) as Brazil's foreign minister. He sought to boost his country's quest for regional leadership and balance Argentina's growing strength by aligning Brazil's foreign policy with that of its biggest coffee customer, the United States, receiving as a reward the first U.S. ambassador accredited to South America. In Pan-American conferences, Brazil was generally a reliable partner of the United States.⁵⁷ Chile's concerns in this era included preventing external interference in its territorial disputes with Peru and defending its right to maintain neutrality in the First World War. Chile opposed a Brazilian project to get Latin American countries to adopt the Monroe Doctrine as a continental declaration, citing U.S. intervention in the Caribbean.⁵⁸

There was more to Argentine policy than rhetorical cover for entering the geopolitical bazaar or the fleeting pleasure of grandiloquent, self-inflicted wounds. Soft balancing was a more substantial and effective program than has been acknowledged, and one that replaced the leverage available to lesser powers from latching onto the force of a great power with the leverage available from appropriating the legitimacy increasingly tied in the twentieth century to international norms and multilateral institutions. This strategy was not designed at a single moment or even recognized by its authors as such; as Michael Fortmann, T.V. Paul, and James Wirtz have observed, "soft balancing strategies are ad hoc."⁵⁹ Instead, it developed in stages with multiple lines of origin involving cooperation among a shifting constellation of foreign partners, including many other Latin American players. Nonetheless, in the initial effort to counterbalance

the growing U.S. threat to the autonomy of Latin American and Caribbean states, Argentina led the way.

The Argentine strategy focused on changing international norms for interstate behavior through law, diplomacy, and multinational institutions. Argentina's most famous international jurist-diplomats, Carlos Calvo (1824-1906) and Luis María Drago (1859-1921), promoted formal doctrines designed to constrain the great powers from violating the national sovereignty of weaker powers by using force to collect debts. Gunboat diplomacy practiced by the great powers made the rights of foreign capital an existential question for Latin American debtor nations, including Argentina. Argentine thinkers had been wrestling for some time with the need to preserve inflows of foreign capital while protecting weaker Latin American states from the power of the investors' home governments when disputes arose. As early as the 1860s, Calvo began to campaign for an absolute prohibition on diplomatic or military intervention for debt collection. At a time when most European countries and the United States promulgated a doctrine of diplomatic protection that held that their nationals were entitled to preferential treatment and effective extraterritorial sovereignty, Calvo argued in his *Le droit international théorique et pratique [Theoretical and Practical International Law]* (1868) that parties that develop grievances in the course of doing business in a foreign country must seek redress through that country's judicial system rather than turning to their home governments for satisfaction.⁶⁰ When diplomatic or military pressure led to one country's nationals being compensated ahead of other claimants, this violated the principle of *pari passu*, which holds that creditors should be paid equally and without preference. (A century later, *pari passu* was central to the dispute between Argentina and a few hedge fund investors unsatisfied with the debt rescheduling negotiated with most of its creditors.)⁶¹

Although the Calvo Doctrine did not find formal acceptance in international law,⁶² Argentine diplomats followed Calvo by continuing to press for the adoption of new norms to constrain the great powers—increasingly directed specifically at balancing the United States—in international venues.⁶³ Secretary of State James Blaine launched the First Pan-American Conference in 1889 to try to create a customs union and system of arbitration in Latin America, both under U.S. leadership. The Argentine delegation, led by future president Roque Sáenz Peña, was successful in rallying Latin American support to block the U.S. projects, and pressed, over U.S. objections, its own resolutions prohibiting territorial conquest and asserting the juridical equality of states.⁶⁴ At the Second Pan-American Conference in 1902-03, Argentina submitted a version of the Calvo Doctrine, prohibiting extraterritorial intervention (diplomatic or military) to resolve pecuniary disputes and holding that natives and foreigners were equal before the law. By articulating a concern widespread in Latin America and persuasively lobbying the other delegations, the Argentines succeeded in isolating the United States: every delegation present signed the resolution except the United States and Haiti.⁶⁵

The confrontation between Argentina and the United States came into sharp relief in the same period over the Venezuela crisis. In 1902-03, a joint naval force sponsored by Germany, Great Britain, and Italy shelled and occupied Venezuelan ports after the Venezuelan government fell behind on loan payments during its civil war. The events provoked outrage in Argentina; as its leading daily *La Nación* editorialized, the attack was “a latent aggression against any of the nations that have grown from the same cradle. Today you, tomorrow me.”⁶⁶ While belatedly objecting to European intervention, President Theodore Roosevelt articulated a special U.S. right to intervene, to exercise “international police power” in the hemisphere, in what came to be known as the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine. Roosevelt’s motto “speak softly but

carry a big stick” acquired new resonance for Latin Americans, who thought the big stick was aimed at them. Their fears seemed realized when Roosevelt, dissatisfied with Colombian demands in negotiating rights to an isthmian canal, helped revolutionaries break Panama away from Colombia in 1903. The Roosevelt Corollary and the interventions in Panama, Cuba (1906), and the Dominican Republic (1905), where the United States set up a customs receivership to ensure foreign investors would be first in line for any government revenues. As in 2003, the combination of U.S. actions and explicit doctrine spurred soft balancing by secondary powers. Marshaling Latin American opposition, Foreign Minister Drago, wrote a message to the Roosevelt administration calling for an absolute prohibition on military intervention in “the territory of American nations.”⁶⁷ The Buenos Aires newspaper *La Prensa* proclaimed that Argentina was fulfilling its “great mission” by “defending the principle of sovereignty for all Latin America in the face of the Big Stick.”⁶⁸

Drago’s message to Roosevelt might have been forgotten had it not been for Calvo’s seizing the moment to campaign for its acceptance in international law. Drago asked him to give the doctrine the widest possible circulation.⁶⁹ Calvo was exhilarated: “For more than forty years I have been fighting the practice of armed interventions, whatever the cause that motivates them, and I am prepared to decidedly support the principles so accurately articulated by your excellency and that have my enthusiastic support.”⁷⁰ As Argentine minister to France and a member of both the Institut de France and the Institut de Droit International in Paris, Calvo appealed to his network of fellow jurists throughout Western Europe to formally state their support for the Drago Doctrine.⁷¹ Leading international law experts who signed on included Frédéric Passy, president of the French Society for International Arbitration and joint winner of the first Nobel Peace Prize in 1901; Gustave Moynier, president of the International Committee

of the Red Cross; André Weiss, author of *Manuel de droit international privé* [*Manual of Private International Law*]; and Thomas Erskine Holland of Oxford University and author of *Studies in International Law*.⁷² That enabled Argentina to draw upon the soft resources of legitimacy represented by the world's preeminent authorities on international law when making claims within the international system.

The contrasting visions of appropriate behavior of states clashed visibly in international forums. At the Third Pan-American Conference in 1906, Argentina sought the adoption of the Drago Doctrine forbidding military intervention, but the United States managed to thwart the resolution. At the Second Peace Conference at The Hague in 1907, the Argentine delegation and some of the supporters Calvo had mobilized in Europe were determined to see the Drago Doctrine enshrined into international law. The delegates of the great powers, especially Great Britain and the United States, were determined to vitiate it. The initial British position was essentially that Britannia waived the rules. The British delegation's instructions were "to reserve the right of the Governments of the injured individuals to decide for themselves in each case whether a resort to armed interference would be justified." But faced with pressure from a score of countries to support the Argentine position, British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey then consented to align his government with the U.S. proposal that placed international arbitration as an intermediate step between complaint and armed intervention.⁷³ As an alternative to war to settle disputes, arbitration was widely accepted in Latin America, including in Argentina, which both practiced and preached its virtues, agreeing to arbitration in boundary disputes with Chile and Brazil.⁷⁴

The U.S. position was not to reject the Drago Doctrine outright, but to embrace it with fingers crossed. Although personally impressed by Drago's erudition and diplomatic skills,⁷⁵ the

U.S. and U.K. delegations joined forces to amend his doctrine with a loophole big enough to sail a gunboat through. Where Drago had spoken of public debt and an absolute prohibition on military force, the amended version pushed through by U.S. delegate Col. Horace Porter referred only to “contractual debts” and called for compulsory arbitration—after which noncompliance by the debtor nation could be punished by military action. Latin Americans present understood that this hardly barred gunboat diplomacy; as Argentina’s delegate Roque Sáenz Peña put it, the arrangement “envisaged international Judges as the adversaries of sovereignty, and as the enemies of national honor.”⁷⁶ Argentina registered two formal reservations, calling for disputes over contractual debts not to be submitted to international arbitration but to go before national courts, and stating that public loans “cannot in any circumstances give rise to military aggression.”⁷⁷ The “Porter Doctrine” that supplanted Drago at The Hague immediately sparked a clash with Latin American countries over representation at the International Court of Justice, which the United States and Great Britain sought to dominate, and where Argentina, Brazil, and other Latin American states demanded equal representation—not only on the principle of the juridical equality of states, but to ward off the possibility that the international body would become merely one more instrument for future intervention.

Were the story to end there, with defeat snatched from the jaws of victory at The Hague, the Argentine exercise in soft balancing would have been insignificant, an ignominious failure. But by taking a longer view, one can see the seeds planted by Calvo and Drago, and the consistent tradition in Argentine foreign policy of pushing back against U.S. projects of hemispheric integration under its leadership, growing and bearing fruit. The Latin American countries that joined Argentina in expressing reservations along similar lines at The Hague included Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti,

Peru, and Uruguay.⁷⁸ Having failed to persuade the entire conference to go along, Latin American governments began taking matters into their own hands, changing by national law the international norms on intervention within the Americas. They incorporated Calvo's principles into the language of contracts with foreign corporations, legal statutes, or even their constitutions in the form of the so-called Calvo Clause, requiring parties doing business under those laws or contracts to agree to be bound by the host country's judicial system. (Among the countries that at one point included a version of the Calvo Doctrine in their constitutions are Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru, and Venezuela.) Foreigners who wanted to do business in those countries had to agree to the new terms restoring national sovereignty over international capital or look elsewhere for investment opportunities.⁷⁹ Argentina, along with numerous Latin American supporters, advanced international norms with far-reaching effects beyond what could be traced in the letter of international law. As renowned newspaper editor William Stead put it in 1908, Drago was "the one man" who had "permanently changed" international relations through international law, making his name "deservedly famous around the world."⁸⁰ At this early date, the Argentine strategy of rallying multinational opposition to unilateral intervention through international organizations had borne fruit. The key role played by particular individuals further demonstrates the theoretical value of linking soft balancing with constructivist insights.

Enter Mexico

If Argentina's faded grandeur is largely forgotten by today's international relations community, so is Mexico's outsized impact on international relations in the inter-American system—as is the importance of their synchronized opposition to U.S. military intervention. During the long Porfirio Díaz regime (1877-1911), U.S. officials generally considered Mexico a compliant ally, welcoming of U.S. investments and unlikely to lead opposition to U.S. foreign policy. Theodore

Roosevelt went so far as to propose that reliable Mexico should annex Cuba and the Dominican Republic and also “run” Central America.⁸¹ Nonetheless, prerevolutionary Mexico was not a vassal state, and Mexican officials objected to U.S. interventions, including in Nicaragua in 1909, when Mexican Ambassador Enrique Creel devoted his Christmas holiday to trying to persuade President William Howard Taft not to land troops. Creel saw it as his objective to “defend principles of international law that are of interest to the good harmony of a whole continent,” and reported sympathy from nearly every Latin American envoy in Washington.⁸² Argentina’s envoy in Mexico City, Juan Agustín García, saw a “new round of imperialist policy in Washington.” Cooperation between the two countries provided an opportunity. “We should seek the closest relations possible with Mexico,” he wrote to his ministry, “in order to establish a balance in the Americas.” Their goal should be “counteracting the influence and dominating tendencies of the Colossus of the North.”⁸³

Argentina won some goodwill with Mexico during the revolution, when President Woodrow Wilson ordered the occupation of Veracruz, and Argentina stepped in with an offer to mediate, along with Brazil and Chile. The ABC countries’ mediation, which fundamentally assumed that the occupation was illegitimate, helped bring the crisis to a peaceful end with U.S. withdrawal and “nullified the aims of the United States’ armed intervention,” as the Argentine foreign minister put it.⁸⁴ The three countries reached out again during Pershing’s punitive expedition in Mexico in 1916, again winning Mexican gratitude. Mexico’s foreign minister later praised the South American diplomacy for helping to prevent a war with the United States “that would have been fatal to us.”⁸⁵

After the revolution, Mexico would present the most thoroughgoing challenge to foreign investment and U.S. interests by asserting, in stages, control over its own mineral resources in

Article 27 of the new constitution; incorporating the Calvo Clause stricture that financial disputes with foreigners must go before Mexican courts in Article 103; and then nationalizing foreign petroleum enterprises outright in 1938. That challenge is well known. Less remembered in U.S. policymaking circles is that it was coupled with an ambitious foreign policy agenda aimed at spreading the revolution's conceptions of international behavior to other states in the Americas. President Venustiano Carranza (1917-20) issued what came to be known as the Carranza Doctrine in 1918, embodying Mexico's vision of how international affairs should be conducted: all nations are equal under the law, which meant that there could be no legitimate intervention with no exceptions. Nationals and foreigners are also equal under the law and subject to the sovereignty of the state where they reside, meaning there could be no extraterritoriality or special protections for foreign investors.⁸⁶ This point illustrates a problem with Brooks and Wohlforth's presentation of economic motives as an alternative explanation; in this instance, Mexican economic policy was closely intertwined with the country's attempts to curtail the United States' arbitrary use of unilateral power.

Mexico's commitment to the principles of nonintervention and the juridical equality of states could be expected of a country that had lost half its territory its powerful northern neighbor. Obsessed with interventions because it has been the object of the obsessive attentions of intervening powers, Mexico later codified this doctrine as the official foreign policy of the state in Article 89, Section 10 of the Constitution: "The Executive Power will observe the following ruling principles: self-determination of peoples, nonintervention, peaceful resolution of disputes, the proscription of the threat or the use of force in international relations; juridical equality of states, international cooperation for development, and the struggle for international peace and security."⁸⁷

Mexico, a relatively weak state next to a very strong one that had routinely intervened in its affairs, hoped that a system of international law based on the principles of nonintervention and juridical equality could become a way for weak states to defend their interests, and thereby to balance the overwhelming power of the United States. Mexican Foreign Secretary Genaro Estrada in 1930 extended the goal from nonintervention to noninterference by declaring that Mexico would no longer recognize or make judgments about the nature of foreign governments, whether they come to power legally or extralegally.⁸⁸ The “Estrada Doctrine” or “Mexico Doctrine” was invoked by other countries following the model, which acknowledged that diplomatic representatives are accredited to the state and not to the government.

Working cooperatively, Argentina and Mexico managed by the 1930s to realize one of soft balancing’s most significant diplomatic achievements: persuading the United States to formally abjure intervention. At a 1928 inter-American conference held in Havana, the Argentine delegation led broad Latin American demands for a general agreement against intervention in light of three decades of U.S. Marine landings in Central America and the Caribbean. The head of the Argentine delegation, Honorio Pueyrredón, strongly denounced U.S. intervention in Nicaragua, reaffirmed Argentina’s “unbreakable conviction” on nonintervention, then stalked out of the conference when U.S. delegate Charles Evans Hughes refused to discuss the issue. Mexico seconded the Argentines, and El Salvador, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Haiti, Guatemala, and Colombia followed.⁸⁹ Even “puppet” dictators in several of those countries turned out to have a degree of autonomy in foreign policy, and many used it to seek to delegitimize U.S. military intervention in the region.

The about-face that became the heart of Franklin Roosevelt’s Good Neighbor policy began under Roosevelt’s predecessor, Herbert Hoover. As president-elect in late 1928, Hoover

went on a ten-week tour of Latin America, where he was startled at the level of criticism he encountered, from demonstrations to challenges from government officials. President Hipólito Yrigoyen of Argentina was most direct. At a banquet for Hoover, Yrigoyen called for the American states to become “entities reigned by ethical norms so lofty that their power cannot be a danger to justice, nor a shadow projected upon the sovereignty of the other states.” In a private meeting, the Argentine president startled Hoover into a brief silence by stating that U.S. intervention on behalf of its citizens’ claims had rendered U.S. investment hazardous to national sovereignty.⁹⁰ During this trip Hoover impressed Latin American officials by showing, as an Argentine diplomat put it, “a lively interest in learning the reasons for this antipathy toward the United States—an interest based in the desire to remove the causes that motivate it.”⁹¹ A few weeks after taking office, Hoover gave an address stating that “it never has been and ought not to be the policy of the United States to intervene by force to secure or maintain contracts between our citizens and foreign States or their citizens.”⁹² This announcement made Hoover the first U.S. president to accept the Argentine doctrines of Calvo and Drago. He then withdrew the Marines from occupation duty in Nicaragua, where their war against rebels led by Augusto Sandino had long hurt the U.S. image throughout the region.

Hoover’s receptiveness to Latin American views was an essential element in the change to U.S. policy. A different president might not have been as responsive to pressure from Latin America. That pressure was another decisive element, however.⁹³ Hoover’s secretary of state, Henry Stimson, observed in a 1931 radio broadcast that “sore spots” in U.S.-Latin American relations “have damaged our good name, our credit, and our trade far beyond the apprehension of our own people,” and claimed progress in the U.S. effort “to eradicate the sore spots of Latin-American diplomacy.”⁹⁴ Mexican diplomats similarly believed that Latin American public

opinion and “declarations of an official character, such as those produced in Mexico recently” had caused these changes in “the conduct of the international policy of the United States.”⁹⁵

Franklin Roosevelt went further than his predecessor in ending the long tradition of unbridled intervention. He withdrew the Marines from Haiti and the Dominican Republic. He terminated the Platt amendment, forced upon Cuba in 1901 to codify a U.S. right to unilateral intervention at will in that country. Roosevelt even ordered his diplomats in Latin America to follow the principle of the Mexican Estrada Doctrine: the State Department relinquished the use of nonrecognition to sanction regimes that came to power through force, and its officers declined even to offer comment or advice on domestic questions in Latin American countries. U.S. policy had gone in a few short decades from defending military intervention to abjuring not only intervention but interference in the internal affairs of Latin American states.

The context of the global Depression meant that the direct costs of stationing military forces abroad loomed large, and the political costs at home and internationally seemed to outweigh the benefits. Armed insurgencies in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Nicaragua also inflicted pain that contributed importantly to the U.S. withdrawal.⁹⁶ So did anti-imperialist and nongovernmental peace organizations in the United States and Latin America. The extent of international popular pressure was reflected, for example, in the million signatures from citizens of the Americas collected by a transnational feminist peace group to deliver to the delegates at the 1936 conference in Buenos Aires.⁹⁷ A transformation as significant as the U.S. shift from frequent intervention to nonintervention in Latin America was thus necessarily the product of multicausality. Beyond changes in the personnel of U.S. administrations, a departure from the tradition of interventionism was made possible in part because of the extent to which much of Latin America was ruled by men generally willing to go along with the strategic goals and

fundamental demands of the United States. Most countries in Central America and the Caribbean were by Franklin Roosevelt's time firmly in the hands of a collection of dictators whose rigorous suppression of popular movements and abstention from forms of economic nationalism that might threaten U.S. investments seemed to make U.S. troops superfluous. The dictators were capable of exercising autonomy within the framework of U.S. predominance, and *caudillos* (strongmen) such as Rafael Trujillo of the Dominican Republic and Anastasio Somoza of Nicaragua did not cooperate with every request from the State Department. Support for dictatorship and military rule made it easier, however, for the United States to behave in a more "neighborly" fashion while still achieving its principal goals.

Too little attention has been given to yet another factor: the decades of steady pressure from Latin American countries, led by Argentina and joined by Mexico, to adopt new norms of international behavior.⁹⁸ This often took place within the mechanism of the Pan-American conferences organized every few years at the ministerial level, initially at U.S. request. The inter-American system is a good example both of Paul's recent observation that soft balancing often includes "collaboration in regional or international institutions," and Josef Joffe's remark apropos of disputes of the 1990s that "Great powers loathe international institutions they cannot dominate; lesser nations like them the way the Lilliputians liked their ropes on Gulliver."⁹⁹

The United States' ambivalence toward the Pan-American system it had created after its domination had weakened prefigured twenty-first-century U.S. impatience with the United Nations it helped create after it could no longer dominate that institution. And just as the French, German, and Russian opposition to the George W. Bush administration at the United Nations focused not on forestalling any aggressive moves aimed at their own territory but at the planned invasion of Iraq, the Argentine and Mexican opposition to U.S. intervention in Central America

and the Caribbean was not strictly a defensive response to a threat to their own territory but represented a broader and more long-range desire to reduce the potential for future U.S. military interventions in the entire region. As Pape put it, “Concerns over indirect threats are likely to be greater in unipolar systems than in other balance of power systems. . . . Hence, other states may have reason to oppose military action by a unipolar leader, even if it has no intention of harming them directly.”¹⁰⁰ Paul argues that soft balancing tends to occur when the unipole’s “power position and military behavior are of growing concern but do not yet pose a serious challenge to the sovereignty of second-tier powers” and “the dominant state cannot easily retaliate either because the balancing efforts of others are not overt or because they do not directly challenge its power position with military means.”¹⁰¹ Although Mexico was still smarting from the injuries to its sovereignty, these conditions fit Latin American diplomatic history in this period.

In the lead-up to the 1933 conference at Montevideo, Mexican expectations were initially low. The prospect of an accord on nonintervention seemed unlikely, according to career diplomat Fernando González Roa, because “the United States cannot get anything from us nor can we get anything from them.”¹⁰² But Argentina pressed forward, and Mexico decided to try to coordinate a joint offensive. Mexico’s foreign secretary, J.M. Puig Casauranc, wrote to his Argentine counterpart Carlos Saavedra Lamas, that together they could achieve at Montevideo what had long been on their respective agendas. “My ambition is that in Montevideo we completely destroy the thesis of Colonel Porter,” Puig wrote, “and bring to discussion at the VII Conference, in all of its pristine purity, the Drago Doctrine. If we achieve the acceptance of this Doctrine and its juridical translation into a Pan-American convention, the threat that has always hovered over almost all of the countries of Latin America will disappear.”¹⁰³ Saavedra Lamas replied that he welcomed the Mexican leadership role in pursuing “the common ideals that for long years have

inspired our country and the noble Mexican Republic.”¹⁰⁴ Mexican members of the program committee got the intervention issue put back on the agenda, and thwarted a proposal emerging from the American Institute of International Law that would have included an exception permitting intervention in necessary cases.¹⁰⁵ Puig’s diplomats fanned out across the region, obtaining supportive responses to his proposal to replace the Monroe Doctrine with a continent-wide assertion of the principle of nonintervention along the lines of the original Drago Doctrine. “¡Magnífico! ¡Maravilloso!” cried the Colombian foreign minister, Roberto Urdaneta Arbeláez, upon hearing the proposal.¹⁰⁶ To manage the unpredictable Foreign Minister Juan Guzmán Cruchaga of Chile and the often prickly and proud Foreign Minister Saavedra Lamas of Argentina, Puig turned to Mexican essayist and diplomat Alfonso Reyes—whom Jorge Luís Borges called the greatest prose stylist in the Spanish language—to take on a special mission to discreetly win their approval.¹⁰⁷ After getting both on board, Puig then let other chancelleries know of Argentine and Chilean backing, which led to unanimous support for a nonintervention resolution even before the meeting began.¹⁰⁸ In the end, the resolution put forward at Montevideo brought together the Drago Doctrine and the Carranza Doctrine, since Carranza in 1918 had asserted that “no country should intervene in any form or for any reason in the internal affairs of another.”¹⁰⁹ At Montevideo, conferees resolved that “no state has the right to intervene in the internal or external affairs of another.” Importantly, Secretary of State Cordell Hull signed the resolution but presented reservations, arguing that intervention was not defined, so the United States would continue to pursue its own policy.

Hull’s reservations led Mexico and Argentina to renew their efforts to get an unqualified resolution passed at the next inter-American meeting, held in Buenos Aires in 1936. There was no need, wrote Carranza’s former foreign secretary Isidro Fabela, now an adviser to the ministry,

to “turn Mexico into a Quijote country that seizes any opportunity to challenge the political wrongs committed by North America against our Republics of the South,” especially since Mexico lacked the power on its own to become the protector of the oppressed. Mexico, however, did have “a noble and transcendent mission” to continue an independent foreign policy and to express its ideas freely.¹¹⁰ By now, the rise of the fascist powers in Europe and a German trade offensive in Latin America motivated the United States to improve cooperation with Latin American countries. This time, with President Roosevelt himself in attendance, the Latin American diplomats were successful, gaining unanimous agreement to an unqualified resolution prohibiting intervention “directly or indirectly, and for whatever reason, in the internal or external affairs of the parties.”¹¹¹ In what came to be called the Good Neighbor policy, the United States was endorsing what the Argentines and then the Mexicans had pushed for decades.

Conclusion

Was a diplomatic resolution—a scrap of paper—an achievement of soft balancing? Taking into account the various structural, economic, and political factors that went into the Roosevelt administration’s commitment to the Good Neighbor policy, the long campaign to get nonintervention adopted as a norm in the inter-American system—to balance U.S. hard power with the softer tools of diplomacy and international law through cooperation in multinational institutions—must be seen as a part of that achievement. It is a good example of Robert Art’s distinction between policy bargaining, “the attempt to produce favorable outcomes with current assets,” versus balancing behavior, “the attempt to augment assets so as to produce better outcomes the next time...[B]alancing is as much about preserving a state’s autonomy, independence, and ability to influence international outcomes vis-à-vis a powerful state or group of states as it is about dealing with threats of direct attack from them.” Latin American states had

achieved these improvements using what Art calls “soft assets”—informal alignments and international organizations.¹¹² And they had done so “by assembling countervailing coalitions designed to thwart or impede specific policies,” in a process that “accepts the current balance of power but seeks to obtain better outcomes within it,” in Walt’s definition of soft balancing.¹¹³

The erosion of the Good Neighbor policy began during World War II, with deep interference in the internal affairs of many countries by U.S. pressure for them to deport their German and Japanese residents, continued with nonrecognition of governments that came to power in Argentina and Bolivia, and culminated in Assistant Secretary for Latin American Affairs Spruille Braden’s highly publicized crusade to bring down the government of Argentina (whose principal effect was to rally Argentines behind Juan Domingo Perón).¹¹⁴ In the 1950s, the United States shifted from an earlier tradition of direct military intervention to covert and proxy interventions in the cases of Guatemala (1954), Cuba (1961), Guyana (1961-64), Chile (1970-73), and Nicaragua (1981-90), as well as outright military invasions of the Dominican Republic (1965), Grenada (1983), and Panama (1989).

To see those forms of intervention as the absence of soft balancing would be to argue that strategy does not exist unless it is consistently and permanently effective. Moreover, each of those Cold War-era interventions produced widespread opposition that reminded U.S. policymakers that military action in Latin America brought costs to prestige, which may have helped ensure that even the direct military invasions were not followed by the kind of lengthy occupations common in the pre-1936 era. The shift from overt to covert intervention was itself a reflection of the diminished international tolerance, especially in Latin America, for military invasions and extended occupations. Robert Pape used the term “soft balancing” to describe a loose international coalition of states that sought to dissuade the United States from invading Iraq

in 2003.¹¹⁵ That the United States went ahead with its invasion does not mean that the balancing effort did not occur, nor does it mean we should ignore the constraints that became evident in the diminished appetite for U.S. military action on a similar scale thereafter. The United States has not intervened in the twenty-first century to cause regime change in Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Nicaragua, or Venezuela,¹¹⁶ despite the advent of leftist governments in those countries, which does suggest that changed international norms are contributing to constraints on what was once an American prerogative. The Barack Obama administration's late 2014 decision to restore diplomatic relations with Cuba and weaken the half-century-old embargo against that country was in part a recognition that continuing U.S. infringement of Cuban sovereignty had become a major obstacle to improved relations with the region. It also appeared to be a response to the soft balancing engaged in by Latin American states, especially South American middle powers, which had created multinational institutions excluding the United States such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and had strongly criticized the continuing U.S. embargo of Cuba at the Summit of the Americas in Cartagena in 2012 and threatened to do so at the 2015 Summit in Panama. In a departure from its traditionally cooperative role, Brazil, now with the world's seventh-largest economy, has become one of the leaders of twenty-first-century soft balancing, anchoring UNASUR and promoting nonviolent settlements of U.S. confrontations not only with Latin American states such as Cuba and Venezuela but in the U.S.-Iranian nuclear dispute.¹¹⁷ The rise of numerous leftist governments of various stripes whose survival would have been improbable in another era may well owe something to the long-term change in international norms Latin American soft balancing helped to achieve—even as the violent aftermath of proxy interventions

and counterinsurgency manifests itself in drug wars and unprecedented levels of urban crime in many countries in the region.

Scholarly arguments over soft balancing have focused largely on whether it is happening, and if so, whether it might lead to an erosion of U.S. power or even presages the formation of dangerous hard balancing against the United States in the future. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth 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.”¹¹⁸ Of course, one of the ways U.S. policy makers have been moved toward restraint in the past is when they recognize that the costs of military intervention are rising. Whether we are discussing Marine occupations in the Caribbean or military interventions in Vietnam or Iraq, this calculation includes reputational costs driven home by sustained opposition abroad. As Secretary of State Stimson noted, the United States had indeed paid a price for its actions in Latin America, and reaped rewards from changing course. According to T.V. Paul, if “the hegemonic power in response to soft balancing efforts tempers its aggressive behavior, then one can deduce that the efforts by second-tier major power states partially succeeded.”¹¹⁹ It may be too soon to know whether the Obama administration’s tempering of the U.S. role in the Middle East is such a case. The experience of Latin America’s relatively successful soft-balancing effort—followed by the immediate benefits to the United States of the Good Neighbor policy in the form of widespread solidarity during World War II, and the evolution of a hemisphere in which U.S. interests are largely secure—suggests that the emergence of constraints on the use of U.S. military power through the development of international law and the strengthening of international institutions

need not threaten the United States, even when those changes are initiated by other states seeking to balance U.S. predominance.

TIMELINE

- 1868 Calvo Doctrine (**Argentina**) proposes end to extraterritorial rights for investors
- 1889 First Pan-American Conference: **U.S.** proposes customs union, thwarted by **Argentina**
- 1895 **U.S.** asserts its “fiat is law” in Latin America under Olney Doctrine
- 1898 **U.S.** defeats Spain in war, takes control of Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines
- 1901 **U.S.** imposes interventionist Platt Amendment on Cuba
- 1902-3 Second Pan-American Conference: **Argentina** proposes Calvo Doctrine
- 1902-3 Germany, Great Britain, Italy send gunboats to Venezuela to collect debt
- 1903 Drago Doctrine (**Argentina**) calls for prohibition on force to collect debts
- 1903 **U.S.** aids Panamanian revolutionaries, acquires Canal Zone
- 1904 Roosevelt Corollary (**U.S.**) asserts unilateral interventionist right
- 1905 **U.S.** intervention in Dominican Republic
- 1906 **U.S.** intervention in Cuba
- 1906 Third Pan-American Conference: **Argentina** proposes Drago Doctrine, thwarted by U.S.
- 1907 Second Hague Peace Conference: **Argentina** proposes Drago Doctrine, U.S. amends into weaker Porter Doctrine
- 1909 **U.S.** intervention in Nicaragua
- 1910-17 Mexican Revolution
- 1912 **U.S.** occupies Nicaragua
- 1914 **U.S.** occupies Veracruz, **Argentina, Brazil, Chile** mediate withdrawal
- 1915 **U.S.** occupies Haiti
- 1916 **U.S.** occupies Dominican Republic
- 1916 **U.S.** troops pursue Pancho Villa in northern Mexico
- 1918 Carranza Doctrine (**Mexico**) calls for non-intervention in any circumstance
- 1928 Sixth Pan-American Conference: **Argentina** proposes non-intervention pact, seconded by **Mexico**; **U.S.** rejects

1928 Herbert Hoover elected, listening tour of South America

1930 Estrada Doctrine (**Mexico**) calls for recognition of de facto governments

1933 Franklin Roosevelt announces Good Neighbor Policy

1933 **Mexico** and **Argentina** push non-intervention on inter-American agenda, combining Drago and Carranza Doctrines

1933 Seventh Pan-American Conference: **U.S.** signs non-intervention pact with reservations

1936 **U.S.** State Department orders policy comparable to Estrada Doctrine

1936 **Mexico** and **Argentina** push unqualified non-intervention resolution on inter-American agenda

1936 Eighth Pan-American Conference: **U.S.** signs non-intervention pact without reservations

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²⁴ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 42–46.

²⁵ Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” p. 13.

²⁶ Indirect military planning (not aimed at directly confronting the unipole) might form a part of secondary states’ responses. Although direct military responses to the unipole’s power are not feasible, indirect military responses might seek to raise the costs of unilateral action by the unipole.

²⁷ Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States,” p. 36.

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- ²⁹ Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” p. 104.
- ³⁰ Ibid. See also Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005), 126-32.
- ³¹ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” p. 76.
- ³² Lieber and Alexander, “Waiting for Balancing,” p. 131.
- ³³ Art, “Striking the Balance,” pp. 183–184.
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⁹⁹ T.V. Paul, “Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory,” in Paul, Wirtz, and Fortmann, *Balance of Power*, pp. 1–28, quoted at p. 3; and Joseph Joffe, “Gulliver Unbound:

Can America Rule the World?" CIS Occasional Paper No. 85 (St. Leonards, Australia: Centre for Independent Studies, 2003), p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Pape, "Soft Balancing against the United States," p. 14.

¹⁰¹ Paul, "Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy," p. 59.

¹⁰² Fernando González Roa, "Cuestiones de política general [General Policy Questions]," May 26, 1931, L-E-229, Séptima conferencia internacional americana [Seventh International American Conference], 1933, AHGE.

¹⁰³ J.M. Puig Casauranc to Saavedra Lamas, August 29, 1933, Caja 0030, Asuntos Políticos, Conferencias Panamericanas, AMREC.

¹⁰⁴ "Actitud de países de la unión panamericana en relación con los temas sugeridos por México [Attitude of Countries of the Pan-American Union in Relation to the Topics Suggested by Mexico]," n.d. [1933], Caja 39, Exp. 253, Secretaria Particular, AHGE.

¹⁰⁵ "Memorandum sobre el Tema I del programa de la Séptima Conferencia Internacional Americana [Memorandum on Topic I of the Program of the Seventh International American Conference]," n.d., L-E-249, Séptima conferencia internacional americana, 1933, AHGE; and "Memorandum sobre el nuevo proyecto de declaración de derechos y deberes de los estados, formulado por el consejo directivo del Instituto Americano de Derecho Internacional [Memorandum on the New Project of a Declaration of the Rights and Duties of States, Formulated by the Board of the American Institute of International Law]," October 2, 1933, L-E-249, Séptima conferencia internacional americana, 1933, AHGE.

¹⁰⁶ Puig circular telegram; "Actitud de países de la unión panamericana en relación con los temas sugeridos por México"; and Duplán to Puig, August 20, 1933, L-E-247, Séptima Conferencia Internacional Panamericana, AHGE.

¹⁰⁷ Puig circular telegram.

¹⁰⁸ Reyes to Puig, August 18, 1933, L-E-246, Séptima Conferencia Internacional Panamericana, AHGE; and Puig to Reyes.

¹⁰⁹ Isidro Fabela to Eduardo Hay, “Memoranda sobre diversos temas del programa de la Conferencia Interamericana de Consolidación de la Paz [Memoranda on Various Topics of the Program of the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace],” October 26, 1936, L-E-337, Conferencia Interamericana sobre la Consolidación de la Paz [Inter-American Conference on the Maintenance of Peace], AHGE.

¹¹⁰ Isidro Fabela to Eduardo Hay, April 28, 1936, L-E-333, Conferencia Interamericana sobre la Consolidación de la Paz, AHGE.

¹¹¹ Samuel Guy Inman, *Inter-American Conferences, 1826–1954: History and Problems* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of Washington, 1965); and G. Pope Atkins, *Encyclopedia of the Inter-American System* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1997), p. 102.

¹¹² Art, “Striking the Balance,” pp. 183–185.

¹¹³ Walt, “Alliances in a Unipolar World,” p. 104.

¹¹⁴ Max Paul Friedman, *Nazis and Good Neighbors: The United States Campaign against the Germans of Latin America in World War II* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

¹¹⁵ Pape, “Soft Balancing against the United States.”

¹¹⁶ The United States did express support for a failed coup attempt in 2002.

¹¹⁷ See Eric Hershberg, Foreword to Oliver Stuenkel and Matthew M. Taylor, eds., *Brazil on the Global Stage: Power, Ideas, and the Liberal International Order* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

¹¹⁸ Brooks and Wohlforth, “Hard Times for Soft Balancing,” p. 75.

¹¹⁹ Paul, “Soft Balancing in the Age of U.S. Primacy.”