**Balance of Power in International Relations**

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**Balance of Power**

* According to Kegley and Eugene, “The core of balance of power theory is the idea that national security is enhanced when military capabilities are distributed so that no one state is strong enough to dominate all other”
* The only way to achieve security in the international system, according to political realism, is by creating a ‘balance of power’ among the most powerful states of the system.

**Introduction**

* Concept of Balancing is nebulous and is used to imply the presence of countervailing strength against another power.
* Within the neo-realist literature, the key medium of balancing is the forging of temporary alliances, usually with the weaker or less threatening power against the stronger or more threatening power.
* States do not always balance against the strongest actor. Sometimes smaller ‘jump on the bandwagon’ of the most powerful state; this has been called as ‘bandwagoning’ opposed to balancing.

**Bandwagoning**

* Bandwagoning refers to act of weaker states joining a stronger power or coalition within balance of power politics.
* Realist claim that balancing is when states ally against the prevailing threat and results in a more secure world whereas in a bandwagoning world security is scare as rising hegemons are not kept in check.

**Examples**:

* After WWII, a broad coalition did not form to contain US power; rather most major states joined the US bloc.

**Core Assumptions:**

Two assumptions are of central relevance that gave rise to the BOP theory

1. **International System is anarchic**

* The international system is considered to be anarchic, with no system-wide authority being formally enforced on its agents
* Because of this “self-help” nature of the system, states do not have a world government to resort to in a situation of danger, but they can only try to increase their capabilities relative to one another through either internal efforts of self-strengthening, or external efforts of alignment and realignment with other states

1. **States are the principle actors**

* Second, states are the principle actors in the international system, as they “set the terms of the intercourse”, monopolize the “legitimate use of force” within their territories, and generally conduct foreign policy in a “single voice”.

**Main Principles**

**Counterbalancing**

* Imbalances and concentrations in military and material capabilities among the great powers are checked, and the equilibrium is restored in order to ensure the survival of the major powers in the international system.
* How states balance will depend on the distribution of capabilities among the greater powers. In bipolar distributions of power (two great powers) states will balance through internal military build up.
* In multipolar distributions of power (three or more) states will balance through the formation of counterbalancing alliances
* The main feature of the distribution of capabilities today is unprecedented American primacy.

**Sustaining Status quo**

* The idea of agreed upon status quo is essential for the establishment of the balance of power
* Without an accepted or recognizable status quo the balance of power as guide to state behaviour and policy calculations is virtually meaningless
* The eighteenth century is considered to be 'the Golden Age of the balance of power in theory and practice’, and the concept received ongoing attention in European diplomacy.
* Wars occurred, but they were limited and not general.
* All these wars pursued a politics to sustain the status quo
* States happy with their place in the system are known as "status quo" states, while those seeking to alter the balance of power in their favour are generally referred to as "revisionist states" and aspire for hegemony, thus repairing the balance

**Securing State’s Sovereignty**

* The primary concern of the balance of power theory is to secure national sovereignty and integrity
* It distributes military capabilities in a way that no one state is strong enough to dominate all others
* Therefore in one way or another, balance of power, somehow, assists the existence of international state system
* If one state gains inordinate power, the theory predicts that it will take advantage of its strength and attack weaker neighbours
* The theory of balance of power attracts weaker state to unite in a defensive coalition so as to avert the assault of the greater power
* Some realists maintain that balance of power adds to the stability of the system as aggression appear unattractive and is likely to be averted if there exists equilibrium of power between the rival coalitions.
* Regarding the era 1848-1914, English diplomatic historian A.J.P. Taylor argued:

*Europe has known almost as much peace as war; and it has owed these periods of peace to the Balance of Power. No one state has ever been strong enough to eat up all the rest, and the mutual jealousy of the Great Powers has preserved even the small states, which could not have preserved themselves.*

**Status quo and peace and stability**

* Although agreed status quo, a precondition for the notion of balance of power does not guarantee peace and stability
* There is no guarantee that wars will not happen
* However, balance of power increases the predictability of the system. Any abrupt collision is either not possible or is avoided
* Eighteenth centuries great powers (England, France, Austria etc.) maintained a balance of power among them while at the same time continued their quest for sphere of influence
* This balance, however, guaranteed neither peace nor stability as later Napoleonic wars disrupted the status quo and set the balance in European continent in transition

**Effectivity of Alliances**

* The balance of power theory seeks to explain the alliances formation
* Realists claim that balancing is when states ally against the prevailing threat and results in a more secure world
* By forming the alliances against the prevailing threat, states increase their mutual power which in turn helps them to balance the power.
* Therefore alliances are more effective in counterbalancing.

**Post-Cold War Scenario**

* Post cold war era is marked by US hegemony across the globe
* U. S is the largest economy in the world with the fewest economic problems. It is also the greatest military power.
* However, now, the humanity is at a point where the post-Cold War model no longer explains the behaviour of the world. The world is in fact entering a new era.
* Although the United States remained the dominant power in most dimensions, however, its hegemony is being challenges
* Europe is returning to its normal condition of multiple competing nation-states
* Russia is re-emerging and asserting herself
* The rise of China at an unprecedented rate is being as one of the greatest events of the twenty-first century.
* China's extraordinary economic growth and active diplomacy are already transforming East Asia, and future decades will see even greater increases in Chinese power and influence.
* Some observers believe that the American era is coming to an end, as the Western-oriented world order is replaced by one increasingly dominated by the East.
* The historian Niall Ferguson has written that the bloody twentieth century witnessed "the descent of the West" and "a reorientation of the world" toward the East.

**China and Russian Growing Closer**

* As Russia’s relationship with the United States and its European allies grows worse, its ties to China have become closer.
* Despite many differences and possible points of contention, China and Russia are united by a major strategic interest: disrupting the United States.
* Beijing and Moscow have found common cause on the United Nations Security Council, where they have repeatedly blocked U.S.-led foreign policy initiatives.
* Central Asia seems to be a mutual potential interest field for China and Russia. They are cooperating there in a way to prevent US power from consolidating in Central Asia

**Other Power Centres**

* BRICS members, Brazil, Russia, India, China and Russia are increasingly cooperating to achieve the twin goals of faster growth and reforms in global governance.
* Collectively, the five BRICS nations account for 42% of world population, 20% of output, and nearly all of current growth in the global economy.
* Scholars opine that BRICS nations are slowly creating a new power centre

**Counterbalancing in the aftermath of 9/11**

* There are certain instances that brought great powers or public sentiments in favour of US
* The most reckoning among these events is undoubtedly the alignment of the world with the US in the aftermath of 9/11 attack.
* However, the momentum was short-lived as soon 2003 Iraq War prompted counter-balancing against US hegemony.
* In recent years especially in the post Iraq War scenario, the US has seen its public popularity ratings decreasing sharply around the world
* Even the European power like France and Germany strongly resented US invasion in Iraq
* The world is witnessing anti-American sentiments on the rise

**Anti-Americanism**

* Anti-Americanism, is dislike, fear or hostility toward the United States or the American people and their culture, business practices and technology, or the policies of their government, especially its foreign policy.
* Common contemporary negative stereotypes of Americans include the assertions that Americans are;
* aggressive, arrogant, ignorant, overweight, obsessed with making money, too materialistic, too involved as policeman for the world, and generally obnoxious

**Criticism**

1. Waltz's balance of power theory posits that states are more inclined to practice balancing than bandwagoning strategies however post-cold war scenario does not reflect such a tendency.

* Rather than attempting to counter US supremacy, many states have chosen to participate in American power and primacy

1. Unlike Waltz prediction, balance of power does not occur frequently.
2. Scholars and academics continue to question and criticize Waltz's balance of power theory. Among them, the assessments of Stephen Walt, Randall Schweller, and Paul Schroeder are representative examples.

**Criticism by Schweller:**

* Schweller opines that balancing usually comes at a heavy cost, while bandwagoning can often lead to unexpected gains
* Based on this assumption, Schweller concludes that bandwagoning is actually more prevalent than balancing in international politics

**Criticism by Paul Schroeder**

* Schroeder points out that balancing has not been a strategy commonly practiced in major international conflict since 1648 AD, while bandwagoning has been widespread among small and great powers.
* The main reason for states not pursuing a balancing strategy is its high cost
* Schroeder believes that when under threat, a state has a number of strategies from which to choose: balancing, hiding, transcending, and bandwagoning.
* Balancing is actually the least common strategy adopted, and is usually a last resort, while bandwagoning and hiding are far more common

**Conclusion**

* The concept of Balance of Power is still relevant as there is possibility that US hegemonic assertions may lead the world to counter-balancing acts.
* Its relevancy increases manifold also because the world is moving from unipolar momentum to multipolarity with many power centres emerging across the globe