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Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History

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The balance of power is one of the most influential theoretical ideas in international relations, but it has not yet been tested systematically in international systems other than modern Europe and its global successor. This article is the product of a collective and multidisciplinary research effort to redress this deficiency. We report findings from eight new case studies on balancing and balancing failure in different international systems that comprise over 2000 years of international politics. Our findings are inconsistent with any theory that predicts a tendency of international systems toward balance. The factors that best account for variation between balance and hegemony within and across international systems lie outside all recent renditions of balance-of-power theory and indeed, international relations scholarship more generally. Our findings suggest a potentially productive way to reframe research on both the European and contemporary international systems.

KEY WORDS ♦ ancient history ♦ balance-of-power theory ♦ systems theory ♦ unipolarity

The balance of power has attracted more scholarly effort than any other single proposition about international politics. Its role in today's scholarship is arguably as central as it has been at any time since the Enlightenment, when Rousseau and Hume transformed familiar lore about balancing diplomacy into

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coherent theoretical arguments.[1] Notwithstanding the many ways it has been defined over the centuries, the concept has a core meaning: 'that hegemonies do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system' (Levy, 2004: 37). Even though the unipolar structure of the contemporary international system is fundamentally different from the multipolar world in which balancing theory emerged, many scholars and statesmen share Kenneth Waltz's (2000: 55–6) expectation that 'both friends and foes will react as countries always have to threatened or real predominance of one among them: they will work to right the balance'.

This fascination with the balance of power is understandable for it appears not only to be central to contemporary policy debates but also to answer a foundational question of the academic study of international relations: whether and under what conditions the competitive behavior of states leads to some sort of equilibrium. Notably missing from the formidable body of balance-of-power scholarship, however, is a systematic effort to evaluate the core balancing proposition in international systems other than modern Europe and its global successor. This is surprising, given continuing scholarly controversy over whether the European experience actually fits the theory and the existence of many other multi-state systems to which its core propositions apply (e.g. Vasquez and Elman, 2003).

This article is the product of a collective and multidisciplinary research effort to redress this deficiency. Building on an emerging body of scholarship on the international politics of non-European international systems (Buzan and Little, 2000; Cioffi-Revilla, 1996; Cioffi-Revilla and Landman, 1999; Kaufman, 1997; Wilkinson, 1999, 2002), our research expands the domain in which balance-of-power theory can be evaluated. We report findings from eight new case studies on balancing and balancing failure in different international systems that comprise over 2000 years of international politics in the Middle East, the Mediterranean region, South and East Asia, and Central and South America.[2]

Our findings concerning both systemic outcomes and state behavior directly contradict the core balance-of-power hypothesis that balancing behavior prevents systemic hegemony. In fact, sustained hegemonies routinely form, and balancing is relatively insignificant in explaining the emergence of non-hegemonic outcomes. This evidence fatally undermines the widespread belief that balancing is a universal empirical law in multi-state systems and the equally pervasive tendency to assign explanatory precedence to balance-of-power theory. It renders questionable the common practice in International Relations scholarship of framing research around puzzles generated by the failure of some systems to conform to the expected norm of balancing, as in the case of the 'puzzle' of the missing balance against the United States today (Ikenberry, 2002; Paul et al., 2004; Wohlforth, 1999).

Beyond that negative finding, our research also stands as an initially positive test of theoretical propositions that compete with the balance of power. We find that multi-state systems vary between the extremes of balance and empire in response to general tendencies identified both in recent social science theories and classical systems theory long sidelined by neorealism. We begin the article by setting forth these theories and deriving their implications for patterns of systemic outcomes and the causal mechanisms underlying them. The sections that follow then present compact analytic narratives derived from larger case studies on balancing and balancing failure in eight international systems (Kaufman et al., 2007). We conclude with a summary of the findings and an assessment of their implications for further research.

Theories and Expectations

There are so many versions of balance-of-power theory that we cannot even list them all, let alone survey or test them. Our focus is on what might rightly be regarded as the core or foundational proposition of the theory, which drives current expectations that balancing behavior and/or a new balance of power should emerge in the contemporary international system. This version of balance-of-power theory posits that because units in anarchic systems have an interest in maximizing their long-term odds on survival (security), they will check dangerous concentrations of power (hegemony) by building up their own capabilities (internal balancing), aggregating their capabilities with those of other units in alliances (external balancing), and/or adopting the successful power-generating practices of the prospective hegemon (emulation). In a careful review of the vast balance-of-power literature, Jack Levy concludes that these ideas constitute the core proposition of (most versions of) balance-of-power theory: 'that hegemonies do not form in multistate systems because perceived threats of hegemony over the system generate balancing behavior by other leading states in the system' (2004: 37). In Waltz's words, 'hegemony leads to balance … through all of the centuries we can contemplate' (1993: 77). As Levy and William Thompson note in another review, this 'has been one of the most widely held propositions in the field of international relations' (2005: 1–2). Hence Waltz's (2000: 56) conviction that 'the present condition of international politics is unnatural'.

This theory's pervasive influence owes something to the fact that this expectation appears to be borne out in the familiar and important case of Europe between the 17th and 20th centuries.[3] This was the very case from which the theory was derived in the first place, but its core balancing proposition is typically stated in universal terms applicable to any anarchical system — that is, any system comprising autonomous political units with armies that control territories and which wish to survive. The assumption of universality is most

explicit in Waltz's seminal *Theory of International Politics* (1979), but, as Levy (2004) and Levy and Thompson (2005) document, it is widely held.

As theoretical critiques by both constructivist and rational-choice scholars have made clear, there are no logical grounds for the assumption that the balancing proposition necessarily takes precedence over incentives identified in other theories (e.g. Powell, 1999; Wendt, 1999). Three major bodies of social science literature predict systematic impediments to balancing even if one accepts the assumptions of balance-of-power theory. First, the theory of collective goods predicts chronic free-riding and a consequent undersupply of external balancing via alliance formation (Olson, 1965; Rosecrance, 2003). Second, the new institutionalism in economics, sociology, and political science generates the expectation that increasing returns, path dependence, barriers to collective identity change, and other domestic-level institutional lags will raise the real costs and thus lower the supply of internal balancing via domestic self-strengthening reforms (North, 1990; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991; March and Olsen, 1989; Schweller, 2006). And third, decades of cumulating research on decision-making would predict pervasive uncertainty ex ante concerning the identity and severity of the hegemonic threat that would exacerbate the other system- and unit-level barriers to balancing (e.g. Gilovich et al., 2002; Kahneman et al., 1982).

Balance-of-power theorists assume that the problems of uncertainty, collective action, and endemic domestic-level impediments to balancing can be overcome endogenously; that is, that the survival motive of states under anarchy will induce them to take actions that will transcend these barriers, with the result — whether intended or not — of bringing the system into balance. But most of what scholars know about social life belies this assumption. In most social settings, some exogenous cause is necessary to overcome collective action problems, as well as increasing returns, path dependence, and barriers to collective identity change. An older tradition of International Relations scholarship, moreover, also casts doubt on the idea that hegemony could be prevented entirely through endogenous processes, and highlighted two exogenous causes of balance that apply across space and time.

First is system expansion. The 20th–21st century global system excepted, all multi-state systems, including Europe, were regional and subject to re-balancing via spatial and numerical expansion (Dehio, 1962; Thompson, 1992). A powerful mechanism for preventing sustained hegemony historically may thus lie outside rather than within a given multi-state system. We use Bull and Watson's (1984: 1) classic definition that units are members of a common international system if 'the behavior of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of others'. System expansion occurs when new units appear from outside the system: either a new state is created in the marchlands — i.e. at least

in part on territory previously outside the system (e.g. the entry of Russia into the European system); or existing states that previously had little or no interaction with the system begin significant interaction (as with the European conquests of the native Americans); or peoples previously outside the system migrate closer in and begin significant interaction (as with the Hun migration into Roman-era Europe).

The second exogenous factor is administrative capacity. A would-be hegemon not only needs to defeat opposing military forces, but must also administer conquered territory in a way that adds to its net capability to expand further (Gilpin, 1981; Van Evera, 1999). Even those states capable of conquering much of a system may not be capable of ruling it. An important obstacle to hegemony may thus lie within rather than outside the putative hegemon itself.

To summarize, balance-of-power theory predicts that processes within a given multi-state system — internal balancing, external balancing, and emulation — will generally prevent hegemony. The theoretical propositions discussed here, by contrast, yield three countervailing expectations about great-power behavior:

(1) efforts to form effective balancing alliances will frequently fail due to collective action problems;
(2) political obstacles inside states will frequently lead to failures to emulate power-generating innovations by potential hegemons;
(3) uncertainty about which power poses the greatest threat of hegemony will frequently impede or prevent efforts to balance.

Regarding systemic outcomes, these theoretical propositions predict that, far from being impossible or exceedingly improbable, systemic hegemony is likely under two historically common conditions:

(1) when the rising hegemon develops the ability to incorporate and effectively administer conquered territories;
(2) when the boundaries of the international system remain stable, and no new major powers emerge from outside the system.

That is, hegemony is likely whenever a putative hegemon can make conquest pay and the system cannot expand to bring in new potential balancers. Given that cumulativity and a closed system are assumed in all recent renditions of balance-of-power theory, the predictions that emerge from these two bodies of theory are directly contradictory and hence amenable to empirical evaluation even in settings much less rich in evidence than modern Europe.

Evidence: Balancing and Balancing Failure in Eight Multi-state Systems

Each of the compressed narratives that follows draws on larger studies that represent distillations of massive literatures on each case. Each features an anarchic great-power system: that is, a system comprising interacting, autonomous, territorially based political units state-like enough that they may, for convenience, be called 'states', containing at least one with the potential to be a hegemonic threat and thus elicit balancing behavior. Each narrative identifies the major states that comprise each system; determines the system's parameters; gauges shifts in the distribution of power and states' strategic responses; and, using the best available historical sources, weighs the relative salience of key causal mechanisms in contributing to outcomes. All cases are therefore probative for balance-of-power theory.

Given that the version of the theory we are testing is universalistic in its claims — that 'hegemony leads to balance … through all of the centuries we can contemplate' — case selection is unimportant. Any significant counterexample falsifies the universal claim; eight such examples demolish it. Indeed, the sample of cases we examine represents a substantial portion (by our estimate, approximately one-fifth) of the universe of all known multi-state systems of which we have sufficient evidence to render rough polarity assessments.[4] But we also seek generalizations about *why* balances fail. Toward that end, we adopt a most-different-systems design, with cases selected to maximize diversity across time and space, thus maximizing variation in explanatory and control variables. The included cases exhibit no clear systematic differences from other great-power systems in explanatory variables, controlling factors, or outcomes.

Thus far, we have followed the convention in the balance-of-power literature of using the term 'hegemony' to mean any situation in which one great power has amassed sufficient capabilities to predominate over the others. Beyond predicting that such predominance is improbable and (should it ever occur) unstable, the theory offers scant leverage on the form it might take. In the cases that follow, our interest in testing the theory mandates a focus on when, why and how systems pass the 'unipolar threshold' — that is, the point at which balancing the hegemon becomes prohibitively costly. We nonetheless maintain the distinction between unipolarity, on the one hand, and the kinds of hierarchical relations that come to characterize systems dominated by one especially capable state, on the other hand. These relationships range from various stages of systemic *hegemony* (that is, 'controlling leadership of the international system as a whole' [Doyle, 1986: 40]) and *suzerainty* (where control extends to domestic affairs of other units) to rare instances of universal *empire*.[5]

The Ancient Near Eastern System (900–600 BCE)

Nearly 3000 years ago in present-day Iraq, Assyria lay at the center of an international system comprising several other large states, some powers of middle rank, and many smaller ones, that modern scholars would recognize as multipolar. No one state was initially favored with a decisive size, resource, or geographical advantage (Boardman et al., 1991; Brinkman, 1991). While there is a great deal we do not know about this system, we do know that its members engaged in diplomacy and war; that they ultimately came to recognize a hegemonic threat emanating from Assyria, which promoted a militaristic ideology asserting its universal authority; and that institutional innovations played a decisive role in enabling Assyria's eventual hegemony.

All of these postulates were demonstrated in Assyria's brief rise past the threshold to unipolarity in the 9th century BCE. A determined imperial thrust under Shalmaneser III (858–824 BCE) sparked a significant balancing coalition. Documents record an alliance of 12 Levantine states, led by Damascus, aimed at thwarting Assyria's drive into what is now Syria (Grayson, 1996). Though the coalition at first succeeded in checking Assyrian advances at the Battle of Qarqar (853 BCE), it ultimately met defeat in a series of campaigns over the course of a decade as the allies successively quit the coalition. By 841, Assyria reigned supreme over most of the system, either directly or via suzerain/vassal arrangements (Brinkman, 1991; Kuhrt, 1995). But the Assyrian polity lacked the capability to administer its conquests, and by the mid-820s BCE vassal rebellions and internal civil war had reduced Assyria to its pre-Shalmaneser level.

A rough balance was thus restored and then maintained for eight decades by the inherent weaknesses of the Assyrian polity. The crucial test for the system came when a new Assyrian monarch instituted wholesale institutional reforms that remedied this defect. Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BCE) replaced the old system of indirect rule through Assyrian nobles and foreign potentates with direct administration by royally appointed bureaucrats (Saggs, 1990). Conquered kingdoms were annexed and became formally part of the heartland, and local notables were brought into the Assyrian state structure, while populations were assimilated, often via the notorious policy of mass resettlement. Replacing an old and powerful nobility with a bureaucratic elite dependent on the king — an innovation that appears to have required something akin to a social revolution — enabled Assyria effectively to administer and extract resources from conquered territory. This institutional reform resulted in the biggest and best-run empire yet seen, and a profound challenge to the other states in the system.

Once again, Assyrian expansion after 745 was met with a broad balancing coalition, this time including both great-power Urartu to the north and Arpad

and other northern Syrian city-states to the west. Tiglath-Pileser quickly shattered that and succeeding coalitions, however, so by the end of his reign he had annexed all of Syria and Israel down to the border with Egypt, and ravaged the territory of Urartu up to the gates of its capital. This expansion was repeatedly enabled by the small size of the opposing coalitions and the tendency of neighboring states to make side-deals with the Assyrian king (Lipianski, 2000). The result by 727 was systemic hegemony, which left only a few more or less independent powers on the periphery collectively incapable of checking Assyrian power.

This hegemony lasted about a century, ultimately including Egypt. Endemic collective action problems that corroded anti-hegemonic alliances partly explain this result, but the evidence also points strongly to the importance of the other units' inability to respond institutionally to Assyria's key power-accumulating reforms. West of Assyria were Syrian city-states such as Hamath, Arpad and Damascus, whose only hope of amassing power on an Assyrian scale was essentially to cease to be city-states and amalgamate into a larger polity. Accommodating Assyria likely seemed less threatening to their survival as political communities than that alternative. Urban Babylonia could only generate military power when the rural Chaldaeans ruled — and for centuries Babylonian elites preferred weakness to the strength that could only be purchased by relinquishing power to actors they regarded as illegitimate. Elam (in modern Iran) was a small society, also unable to embark on Assyrian-style imperial growth. Only Urartu emulated Assyria in this respect, but its mountainous heartland limited its ability to amass power and project it into the decisive regions in the plains (Lipianski, 2000).

The Assyrian empire always showed signs of internal fragility, however, and when these signs were apparent, its systemic hegemony faced challenges. Ultimately, Assyria's administrative capacity was not equal to the task of ruling Egypt, over 1000 miles away; and its forays into the Iranian plateau expanded the system, apparently motivating the emergence of the Median empire as a peer rival. The destruction of Babylonia's ally Elam left a power vacuum facilitating the Medes' further expansion. In 612 BCE, a Babylonian–Median coalition destroyed the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, and Assyria quickly disappeared from the world stage. There followed nearly a century of multipolarity before Cyrus of Persia established a new hegemony in the 530s BCE.

The Greek City-State System and Persia (500–330 BCE)

If the Near Eastern system was marked by prolonged hegemony, the Greek city-states in the 5th century BCE might appear to represent an archetypal example of balancing in an anarchic system.[6] Though the scale was small, the structure was familiar, with many minor powers (some 1200 small city-states),

roughly two dozen middle-ranked powers (with populations over 10,000) and five great powers (populations over 30,000), of which two, Athens and Sparta, were by far the largest and militarily most capable (Hansen, 2003). Familiar, too, was the system's intensely competitive atmosphere, graphically depicted in Thucydides' history of the destructive Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens (Strassler, 1996). As Plato (trans. Bury, 1926: 7) observed, 'every state is, by law of nature, engaged perpetually in an informal war with every other state'.

Drawing on Thucydides, balance-of-power theorists sometimes invoke classical Greece in support of the claim that balancing is a defining feature of international relations. In so doing, they ignore the relationship with Persia that figures so prominently in Herodotus. The Persian Empire was the largest geopolitical entity yet formed, extending from India to Egypt, the leading power in what must be understood as a unipolar system extending as far west as Carthage. As the historical scholarship of the last generation reveals, once this is made clear, the Greeks' experience in the 5th century no longer corresponds to the expectations of balance-of-power theory in two crucial respects.

First, there is much more evidence of bandwagoning than balancing among Greek states confronting Persia. The evidence leaves no doubt that Persia had both the potential and the intent to absorb all or part of Greece: it had brought Greek city-states in Ionia (on the islands and mainland of the Eastern Aegean) into the empire in the 6th century BCE, and by that century's end had started to penetrate Europe, establishing a foothold in Thrace. After Athens came to the assistance of some Ionian city-states that revolted against Persia in 499, the Persians made two unsuccessful invasions directed specifically at Athens in 492 and 490 (Georges, 2000). In 480 Persia mounted a much more elaborate attack on mainland Greece which was likely coordinated with an attack by the Carthaginians against the Greek city-states on Sicily.[7]

Balancing strategies should have come into play in tandem with the clarity and severity of the Persian threat. At the turn of the century, however, the Greeks remained deeply divided, with some arguing that the best strategy was to accept Persian influence and bandwagon, while others favored military opposition. According to Forrest (1986: 27–8), 'All Greek states we know of were divided about their response [to the Persian threat].' As intelligence mounted concerning the third invasion, the Athenians did set about expanding their navy (Pomeroy et al., 1999: 192). At the same time, fewer than 40 city-states, including Athens, established the Hellenic League under Spartan leadership. But hundreds of other city-states, such as Argos, chose to free-ride by adopting a neutral posture, while many others, such as Thebes, openly bandwagoned and supported the Persians (Balcer, 1995: 234). It is estimated that the League could muster around 40,000 hoplites (heavily armored infantry troops) and 350 triremes (large galleys). But this still left the Greeks

vulnerable to Persian forces of an estimated 200,000 troops and 1000 triremes (Forrest, 1986: 44). Many more city-states would have had to join the Hellenic League to balance the forces available to the Persians.

Ultimately, Persia's attack on mainland Greece failed, and the celebrated military successes of the Hellenic League — particularly the Athenian naval victories — certainly played a part. But the factor arguably most responsible for preserving Greek independence was not balancing but the logistical difficulty of getting supplies across the Bosporus, accentuated by revolts that were occurring in other parts of the Empire (Balcer, 1995: 297).

For a while, balancing efforts predominated. In 477 BCE, Athens and dozens of other city-states established the Delian League that eventually included around 150 states. Athens agreed to act as hegemon, but also to respect the autonomy of all the members. Though the Spartans never joined (lacking colonies and not dependent on trade, they had fewer incentives to control sea lanes), it was an extraordinarily successful organization, sweeping the Persians out of the Aegean and the south coast of Asia Minor. The League served as an effective balance against the Persians, and from the middle of the century, relations between the Greeks and the Persians were essentially peaceful and stabilized.

The second way in which the case defies balance-of-power expectations is that intra-Greek rivalries ultimately trumped the systemic imperative to balance power and paved the way toward the system's destruction. During the course of the 5th century Athens transformed the Delian League from a voluntary alliance into an empire, helping to destabilize the regional balance on the Greek mainland. By the 450s, Athens' relations with a number of states, including Corinth, Thebes and Sparta, deteriorated so much that the first Peloponnesian War broke out. Although a peace treaty was eventually established in 445 with Athens renouncing much of the territory it had gained during the war, relations among the larger city-states remained tense and the second Peloponnesian War erupted in 431.

Sparta and Athens were drawn into competing alliance systems that developed an independent dynamic. They were then effectively chain-ganged into a regional war because of the mutual fear that their allies might move out of their respective alliances. In short, the dynamics of the security dilemma worked to prevent rather than encourage balancing, as the danger posed by Persia was overlooked.[8] The fighting continued until 404 when Sparta, with a fleet funded by the Persians, cut off the main supply of grain to Athens and the city was forced to capitulate. The war between Athens and Sparta thus opened the way for Persia to play a central role in Greek politics. Instead of balancing against this dominant state, the major city-states proved willing to compromise Greek independence by seeking its assistance.

In sum, the Greek system is markedly less supportive of standard balance-of-power theory once it is regarded as part of the larger Near Eastern system during its phase of Persian hegemony. Behavior traditionally represented as endogenous balancing within an autonomous Greek system resolves instead into bandwagoning and coalition breakdown in the face of the persistent Persian threat, while the much-vaunted success of the Hellenic League in holding the Persians at bay turns out to owe a great deal to the logistical difficulties facing expansion of an Asian power into Europe.

Events following the Peloponnesian War conformed to this pattern. In the early and middle 4th century BCE, the poleis were able to thwart successive bids for regional hegemony by Sparta, Athens, and Thebes only by enlisting the superpower Persia. In the 330s, they were unable to bury their differences soon enough, nor marshal coordinated and unified military strength on a scale large enough, to prevent the emergence of Macedon under King Philip II as the hegemon over Greece. Persia then failed in its efforts at internal balancing, as the briefly bipolar system yielded to the equally brief hegemony of Alexander the Great.

The Eastern Mediterranean System, 300–100 BCE

Alexander failed to create administrative structures to sustain his empire, and, after his premature death in 323 BCE, the eastern Mediterranean was convulsed by 50 years of war in which his marshals seized whatever territories they could. For much of the 3rd century BCE the three greatest Greek states — the Antigonid monarchy based in Macedon, the Ptolemaic monarchy based in Egypt, and the Seleucid monarchy based in Syria and Mesopotamia — maintained a tenuous tripolar balance of power whose origins lay in mutual exhaustion after that struggle.[9] Each of these dynasties descended from one of Alexander's marshals, and each possessed a militaristic ideology stressing that it was the heir to Alexander's worldwide rule. This situation allowed middle-rank states to exist relatively comfortably by balancing (or threatening to balance) with one great power when under pressure from another.

Between 207 and 200 BCE, this tenuous stability was undermined by the dramatic decline of the Ptolemaic empire. Facing a massive indigenous Egyptian rebellion with a child on the throne at Alexandria and a series of unstable and unpopular caretaker governments, the empire was on the verge of disintegration by 203. Seizing advantage of this situation, kings Antiochus III of Syria and Philip V of Macedon encroached on the large Ptolemaic holdings beyond Egypt as far north as Lebanon and the Aegean. By 201, the entire Greek East was ablaze from the frontiers of Egypt all the way to Byzantium at the entrance to the Black Sea. Antiochus and Philip apparently reached a pact

to divide up all the Ptolemies' holdings, including Egypt itself (Polybius 15.20). As the competition between Antigonid Macedon and the Seleucid empire intensified, it appeared that either a bipolar system dominated by Macedon and Syria-Mesopotamia would emerge in the East, or — after another round of hegemonic war — one power would establish hegemony.

The sudden threat rising from Philip V and Antiochus III generated balancing responses not only from the Ptolemaic regime at Alexandria (of course), but also from the Republic of Rhodes, the Kingdom of Pergamum, and even democratic Athens, which for the previous 30 years had pursued a policy of strict neutrality in its dealings with all the Hellenistic great powers. All four of these states were at war with either Philip V or Antiochus III by autumn 201 BCE. But the Greek states could not restore systemic balance on their own. Balancing would have failed if the boundaries of the Hellenistic system had remained the same. In autumn 201 or winter 201/200 BCE, all four Greek states sent special embassies to Rome to urge the Roman Republic to come to their rescue against the depredations of the Greek kings (Eckstein, 2006: chs 4–7). When the Senate and People (reluctantly) approved war, Antiochus backed off from invading Egypt, but Philip refused the Roman ultimatum to desist from attacking the Greeks. The result was a large Roman military expedition that defeated Philip in 197. This development freed Athens, Pergamum and Rhodes from the immediate severe threat they had faced, and saved the Ptolemaic regime from total destruction, particularly at the hands of Antiochus. After diminishing Macedon's power, the Romans withdrew all their troops back across the Adriatic.

When Antiochus III, having conquered most of Asia Minor, invaded European Greece itself in 192, the middle-rank Greek states again turned to Rome, which was more eager to intervene this time because the Senate deemed it important to keep European Greece a buffer zone against the Macedonian powers. While some Greek polities went over to Antiochus (mostly because of the direct threat posed by his expeditionary force), Athens, Pergamum and Rhodes all provided important aid to the Romans when they decided to drive Antiochus from Greece. They feared what Antiochus might do if he were successful in what was now clearly his plan of establishing a hegemony which would stretch from Afghanistan to the Adriatic. Again, once the war was concluded with the Roman defeat of Antiochus, the Republic withdrew all its forces back to Italy. Balancing against a very threatening potential Greek hegemon appeared to have worked — only, however, owing to the decisive intervention of a power previously outside the system.

In 172–168 BCE, when Rome again went to war against Macedon, Polybius (27.15, and many other passages) indicates that the choice facing the smaller Greek states was not between Rome and freedom, but between the domination of Rome and the even more threatening domination of Macedon.

Most Greek states once more sided with Rome against the locally threatening hegemon even though some statesmen had already become cognizant of Rome's own hegemonic potential. The result of the war of 172–168 BCE was the destruction of Macedon, and Rome's passing of the unipolar threshold. Though he expressed it in his own terms, Polybius (1.1), writing *c.* 150 BCE, held that this was the case (Eckstein, 2006).

As Polybius' account shows, Rome's rise owed much to its institutions, yet their advantages for cumulating power would have been hard to predict in advance. In the east, Rome opposed a geographically enormous but polyglot empire ruled by a thin stratum of Greeks and Macedonians (the Seleucids) and a powerful but relatively small monarchical state (Macedon). In contrast, Rome had the strengths of Republican institutions that closely harnessed its large middle-class backbone of small farmers to a mass-mobilization army at least as disciplined as any the Hellenistic states could muster. Additionally, as Mommsen (1870) argued, Rome developed a superior capacity for inclusion of foreigners, which made it capable of gathering exceptionally large social resources with which to face the ferocious competition for security and power.

Thus, hegemony was at first prevented by a previously exogenous actor, which then proceeded to establish its own hegemony and swallow up the system — the whole process being facilitated by uncertainty concerning the identity and power of the most relevant hegemonic threat against which to balance, as well as the victor's superior domestic institutions.

The Ancient Indian System, 500–200 BCE

The Indian subcontinent saw several periods of unipolarity and hegemonic control by one power over much of the region as well as long periods of multipolarity (Schwartzberg, 1977). The earliest period for which there is adequate evidence is the middle of the first millennium BCE when a system of territorial entities with administrative structures that allowed the absorption of rivals and the cumulation of power first emerged. The major kingdoms of the period were Magadha, Avanti, Vatsa, and Kosala, which grew 'more powerful than the rest' and followed a 'policy of expansion and aggrandizement at the expense of their neighbors' (Majumdar et al., 1953). These kingdoms vied for dominance with each other and a number of republics, most notably the Vajjian Confederacy.

The kingdom of Magadha ultimately prevailed over the other powers to become the Mauryan Empire, which was established with the accession of Chandragupta Maurya (*c.* 321 BCE). Magadha's expansion began with annexation of the Anga kingdom and several smaller neighboring republics in the latter half of the 6th century BCE. These annexations gave Magadha the geographical advantage of a marcher state, as Anga had been the only power

between Magadha and the coast of the Bay of Bengal, as well as access to iron deposits and trade routes. This geographical position, as well as the resources thus gained, likely facilitated its continued expansion under a succession of kings (Kulke and Rothermund, 1998).

Balancing efforts did eventuate, but the evidence indicates that they were undermined by collective action problems and uncertainty about the source of the hegemonic threat. Magadha was not the only expansionist kingdom; Kosala sought its own expansion at the expense of both Magadha and the Sakya republic (cf. Kulke and Rothermund, 1998; Majumdar et al., 1953). Situated between Kosala and Magadha was the Vajjian Confederacy led by the Licchavis and Videhan republics, which made a concerted effort to resist the two kingdoms' expansion (Sharma, 1968). Considerable evidence suggests that the republican nature of these units' institutions magnified their ability to overcome impediments to balancing by binding together and pooling their resources.[10] After a lengthy conflict, however, these efforts fell short, apparently as the result of Magadhan efforts to undermine the unity of the league and its member republics (Sandhu, 2000). Both Kosala and Magadha attacked and eventually defeated their republican neighbors, the Sakya republic and Vajjian Confederacy. The sequence of events is unclear, though the struggle with the Sakya republic left the Kosalans weakened, leading observers to surmise that the Magadhan king took advantage of this and invaded Kosala (Sharma, 1968). This may have occurred following the conflict between the Magadha and the remaining republics. Kosala drops out of the historical record, and 'when the curtain rises again, Kosala has been absorbed into Magadha' (Rhys Davids, 1935; see also Raychaudhuri, 1997).

Later rulers of Magadha and the Mauryan Empire continued their expansion across the subcontinent. By the time of Asoka (268–232 BCE), much of the system was under the direct rule of the Mauryan empire, though experts debate the range and extent of Asoka's authority (Wink, 1994; Kulke and Rothermund, 1998; Thapar, 1981, 1997). Regardless, after defeating the neighbouring kingdom of Kalinga, Asoka announced his revulsion against the slaughter of battle, converted to Buddhism, and proclaimed an 'Empire of dharma ["righteousness"]' (Wink, 1994: 275). Though it is impossible to know Asoka's true motivations, his conversion surely was used in part to legitimize his hegemonic rule.

To the extent that there was any balance left in the system, it was largely the result of the expansion of the system itself to incorporate areas beyond its original boundaries. Paradoxically, the most sustained challenge to imperial power came from 'forest polities'. These communities maintained their livelihood in large part by raiding Mauryan supplies. In the words of Asoka, whose pacifism is so often emphasized in other contexts: 'The Beloved of the Gods [Asoka] believes that one who does wrong should be forgiven as far as it is possible to

forgive them. And the Beloved of the Gods conciliates the forest tribes of his empire, but he warns them that he has power even in his remorse, and he asks them to repent, lest they be killed' (Thapar, 1997:256). As they could evade imperial control, they preserved their autonomy long past the demise of Magadha's initial challengers and through the period of British paramountcy (Guha, 1999). These polities were a persistent problem for a series of aspirants to hegemony in the Subcontinent. The persistence of forest polities thus illustrates a continuing source of counter-hegemonic pressure in this and other systems: actors that promote and thrive on limited state capacity.

The Ancient Chinese System, 656–221 BCE

At the eastern end of the Eurasian continent, ancient Chinese states in the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (656–221 BCE) similarly struggled for survival and competed for hegemony. Similar to its European counterpart, the Chinese multi-state system emerged from the ruins of the prior feudal order. Under the Zhou hierarchy (which began from the 11th century BCE), *guo* were originally garrisoned city-states charged with defending strategic positions for the Zhou court. By the Spring and Autumn period, Zhou feudalism had disintegrated and *guo* were sovereign, territorial states that waged wars against one another, made and broke alliances as they saw fit, and set up diplomatic offices to handle matters of war and peace.[11]

For over three centuries from 656 to 284 BCE, the ancient Chinese system was remarkably stable. Balancing as a foreign policy was generally pursued, and balances in the distribution of relative capabilities occurred at various times. The states of Chu, Qi, Jin, Wu, and Wei made their bids for domination but fell one after another. In those early centuries, moreover, the future unifier Qin was weaker than other great powers. At the turn of the fourth century BCE, Qin even lost some strategic territories on the west bank of the Yellow River to the then hegemonic power Wei. Cut off from other states in the central plain by the Yellow River, Qin was a minor factor in great-power competition and largely followed a defensive foreign policy.

This scenario changed after Qin embarked on comprehensive self-strengthening reforms beginning from 356 BCE. To increase military strength, Qin introduced universal military conscription and developed an elite professional force. To encourage military contributions, Qin implemented a stringent system of handsome rewards for victories and harsh punishments for losses. To improve economic capability, Qin granted lands to the whole registered male population in return for military service, taxes, and corvée. To improve administration, Qin established a meritocratic, impersonal, and rational bureaucracy. These reforms soon allowed Qin to reverse its relative position. By the 320s BCE, Qin recovered all lost territories from Wei and proceeded to make inroads

on the east bank of the Yellow River. In ensuing decades, Qin decimated its immediate neighbors Wei, Han, and Chu. By 257, Qin had passed the threshold of unipolarity and controlled about half of the system. Qin eventually established a systemwide empire in 221.

As balance-of-power theory would expect, when Qin's relative capability rose and became increasingly threatening to its neighbors, other states responded by balancing. However, balance-of-power theorists often overlook the fact that the balancing (in Chinese, *hezong*) strategy can be countered by its opposite — the divide-and-conquer (*lianheng*) strategy. In the critical period from the late 4th to the mid-3rd century, Qin developed the *lianheng* strategy which sought to forestall and break up *hezong* alliances by playing the targeted states off against one another with threats and bribes, and then bringing overwhelming force to conquer them seriatim. In the competition between the *hezong* and *lianheng* strategies, the former suffered a dismal record in terms of both the formation of balancing alliances and the defeat of Qin. Anti-Qin alliances came about very slowly and infrequently, they did not have enough members to overpower Qin, they rarely had unified command, and they readily disintegrated.

Although ancient Chinese strategists did not have a term for 'the collective action problem', they understood that conflicts of interests would severely hinder balancing against Qin. As Zhang Yi, the mastermind of the *lianheng* strategy, observed, if even blood brothers would kill each other for money, then the impracticability of *hezong* was obvious (Sanjun daxue, 1976: vol. 2: 142). During Qin's ascendance to domination, the six major states that Qin eventually conquered (Chu, Han, Qi, Wei, Yan, and Zhao) were indifferent to mutual cooperation. They were overwhelmingly concerned with short-term gains and pursued their own opportunistic expansion. They fought bitterly among themselves to scramble for territories from weaker neighbors and from one another. Qin exploited these tendencies by lying and cheating in its diplomacy to break up opposing coalitions. On a few occasions, Qin's future victims also solicited Qin's help in their mutual bloodletting and took advantage of their neighbors' recent defeats by Qin.

The prevalence of mutual aggression weakened the balance-of-power mechanism and facilitated Qin's opportunistic expansion. Qin frequently invaded its targets when they were fighting among themselves, enabling it repeatedly to seize territory with minimal effort. In addition, the fact that all great powers pursued opportunistic expansion created the scenario of multiple threats. It was not obvious to statesmen of the time that the rapidly ascending Qin was the most threatening state. In fact, Qin's early ascendance was eclipsed by the growth of Qi, which became the hegemonic power in 341 BC. It was not until 288 BCE that Qin caught up with Qi. Qin then exploited the scenario of multiple threats and turned balancing efforts against its rival. It was only after Qi

was devastated by an anti-Qi alliance in 284 BCE that Qin emerged as the unmistakable threat. By then, however, the system had crossed the unipolar threshold: balancing was no longer feasible.

Ancient Chinese states did seek to emulate Qin's successful policies and strategies. Both self-strengthening reforms and hard-nosed stratagems were systemic phenomena, especially in the second half of the 4th century BC. But by the early 3rd century BC, most states had experienced rise and decline and found it very difficult to pick up renewed strength to play the game of catching up. Moreover, with ever widening gaps in relative capabilities, it became increasingly futile for Qin's victims to pursue meaningful balancing — either internal or external. In the mid-3rd century BC, Han and Wei, in particular, had become so demoralized that they followed a self-defeating policy of appeasement, ceding pieces of territory without fighting. To further weaken the six states' motivation for balancing, Qin massively bribed high officials in other states so that these corrupt officials would convince their kings to bandwagon with Qin.

Qin probably did not surpass other historical conquerors in terms of its ruthlessness; it achieved universal domination because it excelled in administrative capacity. At the same time that Qin introduced universal conscription and national taxation in the mid-4th century BCE, it also developed the 'modern' capacity for direct rule. Qin established a four-layered administrative structure of prefectures, counties, townships and villages, which allowed the central court to penetrate the society down to the village level. This administrative capacity allowed Qin not just to mobilize national resources at unprecedented levels, but also to consolidate conquests and prevent rebellions. When Qin swept through the Chinese continent, it could readily incorporate conquered territories as prefectures and counties. To be sure, even the mighty Qin Dynasty ultimately faced disintegration after extensive conquests beyond the original boundaries of the Warring States system. Yet it had put in place a coherent set of administrative, extractive, and coercive institutions that facilitated re-imperialization by the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). Historical China thus became known as a universal empire rather than a multi-state system.

The East Asian System: 1000–1800 CE

Chinese dynasties were to wax and wane in the ensuing two millennia. From the middle of the first millennium CE on, political units began to emerge on China's peripheries. In Korea, the Silla Kingdom conquered the Paekche and Koguryo kingdoms and unified the peninsula in 668. In Japan, the Yamato era (circa 250–710) saw the emergence of the imperial court, although it was only in the 6th century that the Yamato clan managed to prevail over their neighboring clans. In Vietnam, the Ly Dynasty (1010–1225) formed the first

government that was truly independent of China, although it retained close ties with the Chinese court and remained heavily under its influence.

With the emergence of formally independent neighboring states, an autonomous international system was formed in East Asia by roughly the 10th century. Although this system was dominated by China, it consisted of sovereign states defined over stable geographic areas that functioned under the organizing principle of anarchy. The system extended from Japan through Korea to China, and also extended from Siam through Vietnam and the Philippines. Japan, Korea, and Vietnam comprised the inner core of the Chinese-dominated system. In these three states, Chinese cultural, economic, and political influences were direct and major. States on the outer peripheries such as Siam, Java, and Burma were more influenced by Indian civilization than Chinese civilization, but they also engaged in extensive interactions with China and followed Sinocentric norms in international relations. The levels of diplomatic, cultural, and economic interdependence in this region were as high as if not higher than those in early modern Europe (Kang, 2007). China in those centuries was by far the largest, most powerful, and most technologically advanced nation in Asia, if not the world. By one estimate, China produced almost one-third of the entire global manufacturing output in 1750, while the region's second largest state, Japan, produced less than 4% (Bairoch, 1982). Trade was naturally centered on the most advanced and largest market in the region.

While cultural and economic ties in the East Asian system resembled those in the European system, security relations were quite different. Contra balance-of-power thinking, unipolarity and hegemony were norms in East Asia, upset only by occasional instability in China. There is simply no evidence of external balancing or other coordinated efforts to constrain China — neither when China was strong, nor when it was weak. The modal behavioral pattern was the opposite of balancing: formal recognition of China's supremacy in a hierarchy, symbolized by the famous kowtow to the Chinese emperor. Military conflicts occurred mainly between secondary states rather than between China and peripheral states, or as a result of Chinese efforts to manage the system in punitive expeditions. When China was stable, other states refrained from attacking each other or China. When a Chinese dynasty began to decay internally, conflicts among the peripheral states would flare up because the Chinese court's attention was turned inward. When order within China was restored, such conflicts would cease and international relations would be relatively peaceful for centuries. In such a stable system, the number of states also remained essentially the same over the centuries.

Even in moments of dynastic decline, China's neighbors would refrain from taking advantage. There was only one case in which a secondary power exploited Chinese weakness to attack it directly. When the Ming dynasty

became weak, the Japanese general Hideyoshi attempted to invade China through Korea in 1592 and 1598. But he failed to take even Korea. The only successful invasions of China came from outside the organized system: in 1215, after Genghis Khan created a vast marchland Mongol empire; and in 1618 after the Manzhus accomplished a similar feat. Even these two major invasions did not alter the system's basic dynamics. Genghis Khan's heirs ruled through the existing Chinese bureaucracy that preserved rather than supplanted the Sinocentric system. The Manzhus established the Qing Dynasty and adopted the same system-sustaining Chinese practices (Davis, 1996; Kwanten, 1979).

At the same time, China never attempted to translate its dominance into formal empire over the whole system. To be sure, an important though variable constraint was China's periodic need to devote resources to securing its northern borders, at times deploying perhaps as many as 500,000 troops there (Johnston, 1994). Nevertheless, Korea and Vietnam, both sharing borders with China, were particularly vulnerable to expansion, had China wished to pursue it. The limiting factor was probably not China's ability to project its power over long distances. At least as early as 624, sources suggest that China was able to maintain a standing army of 900,000 men (Davis, 1996; Capon, 1989). By the best estimates, China possessed the military capability to invade even offshore Japan. As one indicator of China's naval potential, the famous 1405 and 1433 expeditions by the Chinese admiral Zheng He took 62 ships and over 28,000 men as far as Africa, bringing back elephants and other treasure to China (Levathes, 1994). By some accounts, he did conquer offshore Taiwan. The navy in the Ming Dynasty consisted of 3500 oceangoing ships, including over 1700 warships (Abu-Lughod, 2004). Thus, if China had had expansionist ambitions, it could have expanded further.

On the whole, the East Asian system was characterized by stable hegemony for six long centuries until its forced incorporation into the western-dominated global system in the 19th century. It devolved neither into a balance-of-power system nor into a Chinese empire. Over the centuries, East Asian states developed formal treaties, political relationships, extensive economic interactions, and cultural exchanges that helped to signal deference to each other, to communicate important interests, and to resolve conflicts. When China was stable, the international order in East Asia was stable. The dominant power had no need to fight, and the secondary powers had no desire to fight. The smaller states knew that China was more powerful and, if provoked, could fight a very costly war. For its part, China had no desire to attack lesser states, and intervened in them only to keep the system stable. The most likely explanation for this unusual equilibrium combines a unipolar distribution of capabilities centered on China with a ramified cultural and normative overlay that reduced the uncertainties that fed balancing dynamics in other systems.

American Systems, 1300–1600 CE

In Mesoamerica and the Andean *altiplano*, the predominant form of polity for many centuries prior to 1500 was the city-state. In each of these two zones, successive urban cultures thrived and a degree of cultural uniformity was evident in shared technologies and long-distance trade. These cultural links were reinforced by the rise and fall of extensive confederations or empires. Each region provides, during the century before the arrival of the Spaniards, a well-documented example of the formation of a tribute-empire of unprecedented extent, in which vassal states contributed labor and other resources to imperial projects and acknowledged the ultimate authority of the hegemonic power. The Mexica settled in the Valley of Mexico *circa* 1325 as vassals of a local hegemonic power, the Tecpanecs. Taking advantage of a Tecpanec succession crisis in 1426, they rebelled successfully and went on to expand their dominions to the limits of settled urban civilization, though autonomous enclaves persisted (Conrad and Demarest, 1984; Soustelle, 2002: 45, 63). Then, in the spring of 1519, a small Spanish force under Hernan Cortés landed on the east coast of the empire. Spanish victory and the destruction of the Aztec Empire were complete by 1521.

In the Andes, a Quechua-speaking group better known as the Incas had settled in Cuzco. They encountered Aymara-speaking successor states of earlier empires, united by language and religion but divided by rivalry and war (Klein, 2003). The Incas developed as a local power during the 14th and early 15th centuries until they were challenged by the Chanca confederation in 1438. In the decisive battle Inca Viracocha fled. His son, Inca Yupanqui, rallied the troops and defeated the Chancas. He then deposed his father and took the name Pachacuti.[12] Pachacuti entirely reorganized the Inca polity. He tightened the control of Cuzco over local vassal states and created a North–South linear empire close to 500 miles in extent (Klein, 2003: 17). At its heart, Pachacuti established Cuzco as a formal imperial city. To hold his conquests together he built royal roads with storehouses and lodges. Further expansion took place under Topa Inca, until the Inca realm encompassed the entire Andean region from North-West Argentina in the south to Ecuador in the north. But by 1493, when Topa Inca was succeeded by Huaynu Capac, diminishing returns had set in. Military campaigns continued, but logistics were strained. When Inca Huaynu Capac went on a long northern campaign, his grip on Cuzco was weakened and a rival court emerged at the military headquarters. When Inca Huaynu Capac died in 1527, a succession crisis between his two sons degenerated into a civil war. Huascar succeeded formally in Cuzco, but his half-brother, Atahualpa, disputed the succession and had the backing of the army. The struggle ended in 1532, with the surrender of Cuzco. But as Atahualpa followed his victorious army south, with a large force, he was met, defeated,

and captured by the Spaniard, Pizarro. Held to ransom, Atahualpa later died at the hands of the Spanish in July 1533.

In each of these cases ideological revolution provided the main advantage to the emerging hegemon over technologically similar neighboring states, unlike in other cases such as Assyria and Qin in which administrative and other self-strengthening reforms played the decisive role. Ixcoatl and Pachacuti, in 1428 and 1438 respectively, had each bolstered their own authority and that of their newly emerging state by re-writing history and adapting established religious beliefs. In Mesoamerica, existing written records were deliberately destroyed, and a close identification established between the Mexica god, Huitzilopochtli, and the sun. Intended to boost the prestige of a ruling dynasty claiming descent from the deity, the idea that Huitzilopochtli required the blood sacrifice of warriors captured in battle became a self-sustaining ideology, according to which the Mexica, as a chosen people, had a sacred duty to save the cosmos from destruction by constant warfare and ritual human sacrifice. Since successful capture of warriors provided a reliable means of upward social mobility, religious belief and material interest combined to maintain the war system.

In the *altiplano*, a similar ideological revolution hinged on a fusion of existing practices of ancestor worship and split inheritance with the elevation of royalty to divine status. The Inca version of split inheritance worked in the following way. Each Inca had access to state resources, including estates and labor, but also amassed a personal fortune. On his death, the office of ruler together with public resources for the support of the state passed to his principal heir, but his personal fortune passed in trust to a collective, the *panaqa*, comprising his remaining heirs and their subsequent heirs. Each *panaqa* managed the estate of a previous ruler in perpetuity, constituting in effect his court. The mummified body of the past ruler was believed still to be alive, and became the focus for elaborate rituals. The new system created a strong incentive for each new ruler to acquire personal property, since further estates had been alienated to a new *panaqa* following the death of his predecessor. As ruler, he had access to surplus labor, but in a system of reciprocation he was expected to sustain that labor force from his own resources when it worked in the service of the state. This in turn created a constant need for new conquests of agricultural land, without which the Inca could not govern effectively, still less ensure the loyalty and wealth of the *panaqa* that would honor him after his death (Conrad and Demarest, 1984: 113–25).

In neither of these two regions did balancing or emulation prevent the emergence of a hegemon of unprecedented power during the 15th century. Initially, it cannot have been easy to foresee the extent of the threat. In the second quarter of the 15th century the Mexica and the Inca were still medium powers that had recently emerged in opposition to existing hegemons. By the time the threat of their ongoing expansion became apparent, each had

established logistical advantages over lesser neighbors in the form of resources from a growing tribute-empire. Emulation of these material advantages, as of the innovative state ideologies that motivated the emerging hegemons or of the Incas' administrative reforms, was accordingly difficult. Moreover, self-interest appeared to favor bandwagoning. Territories resisting the Mexica paid a high price immediately following their defeat, as thousands of warriors were taken to Tenochtitlan for ritual sacrifice and remaining populations subjected to punitive rates of tribute. Often, awareness of this threat meant that a mere display of Aztec military might was sufficient to secure voluntary submission on terms satisfactory to both parties (Hamnett, 1999). Similarly, in the *altiplano*, incorporation of a new ethnic group into the empire was preceded by offerings of goods and women. If these were accepted, the recipients became one more tributary state with obligations to provide goods and labor to their overlords. Only if the gifts were declined would force be used, and the existing leadership then displaced (Rostworowski, 2000). Indirect rule left tributary states with considerable autonomy and 'many societies voluntarily joined the powerful new empire' (Klein, 2003: 20).

There is much evidence to suggest that the demands imposed on tributary states had increased by the end of the 15th century as reciprocity gave way to plain oppression, and that this accounted for the willingness of so many indigenous polities to switch abruptly from bandwagoning to balancing, in alliance with the Spanish invaders. It is not hard to explain why these newly independent polities then failed to capitalize on the displacement of their oppressors by balancing the new Spanish colonial states. Already weakened by excessive human sacrifice in Mesoamerica and prolonged civil war in the *antiplano*, the indigenous populations now fell prey to new European infections. Catastrophic demographic collapse brought social dislocation. To this must be added mutual suspicions from the pre-Spanish era. An independent Inca state did indeed survive for a generation, but the Spanish could rely on non-Quechua indigenous groups to help oppose it, until, following its extinction in 1573, this balance gave way to outright Spanish control.

Summary

Three findings summarized in Table 1 radically revise the conventional wisdom derived from modern balance-of-power theory concerning anarchic great power systems. First, systemic outcomes are inconsistent with the theory. Stable system dominance by a single overwhelmingly powerful state that falls short of universal empire is as much a historical norm as multipolarity.[13]

Second, causal processes predicted by competing theories systematically overwhelm balancing. States did engage in internal and external balancing to

Table 1
Importance of Alternative Explanations for Balancing Failure

System (Leader)	Threat Uncertainty	Free-Riding	Emulation Failure	Leader's Admin. Capacity	System Border Rigidity	Outcome
Assyria	Contributing	Contributing	Necessary	Necessary	Necessary	New Hegemon
Persia	Unimportant	Necessary	Necessary	Contributing	Contributing	Stable Hegemon
Rome	Necessary	Unimportant	Necessary	Necessary	Necessary	New Hegemon
Magadha	Unimportant	Necessary	Unimportant	Contributing	Contributing	New Hegemon
Qin	Necessary	Necessary	Unimportant	Necessary	Necessary	New Hegemon
China	Unimportant	Unimportant	Unimportant	Necessary	Necessary	Stable Hegemon
Aztecs	Contributing	Contributing	Contributing	Necessary	Necessary	New Hegemon
Incas	Contributing	Contributing	Contributing	Necessary	Necessary	New Hegemon
Necessary	2	3	3	6	6	
Contrib.	3	3	2	2	2	
Unimport.	3	2	3	0	0	

Codings

Necessary: A necessary condition for hegemony in this case; absence or large change in value of this variable makes hegemony unlikely.

Contributing: There is evidence of this factor playing a role in events, but evidence also suggests outcome might have been the same even if it had not impeded the balancing processes.

Unimportant: This factor does not play an important role in explaining the outcome in this case.

Variables

Threat Uncertainty: Uncertainty about the identity/power of the state most likely to establish hegemony.

Free-Riding: Defections from potential balancing coalitions.

Emulation Failure: Failure of the opponents of the rising hegemon to emulate the hegemon's or each other's self-strengthening reforms.

Leader's Administrative Capacity: Hegemon's improved administrative capacity, including ideological innovations that increased the legitimacy of its rule.

System Border Rigidity: Degree to which system could expand spatially or numerically.

try to oppose the rise of almost every hegemon. But in almost all cases behavior predicted by the theory of collective goods and new institutional theory undermined the effectiveness of balancing. Pervasive free-riding by prospective balancers allowed Assyria, Persia, Rome, Qin, Magadha and Spain to employ a divide-and-rule strategy against their adversaries. And in nearly every international system we studied, domestic impediments to change ruled out or rendered prohibitively costly internal balancing via self-strengthening reforms. In many cases, notably Rome and ancient China, uncertainty about which state presented the main hegemonic threat undermined balancing either independently or in conjunction with the problems of free-riding and domestic institutional rigidity. The two millennia of evidence presented here decisively undermine the notion that processes endogenous to international systems work to prevent hegemony and that balance-of-power theory can thus take explanatory precedence over other theories.

The third finding concerns the explanation for the variance between uni- and multipolarity. The salience of uncertainty, free-riding and domestic institutional rigidity varies across systems for a variety of case specific reasons (see Kaufman et al., 2007). As Table 1 shows, however, most of the explanation for why systems become more or less concentrated lies in the leader's administrative capacity and the system's spatial parameters. In six out of eight cases, administrative capacity of the rising hegemon was a necessary condition of balancing failure, and it played an important contributing role in the other two cases. In other words, a major explanation for 'balance' (that is, the prevention of unipolarity and/or hegemony) is not balancing but limits on the putative hegemon's ability to cumulate power. Thus Assyria under Shalmaneser III was unable to administer conquests effectively so they would add to its power; it took Tiglath-Pileser III's reforms to make that possible. Similarly, Qin, in its self-strengthening reforms, developed the most penetrating administrative bureaucracy in its international system, and the Romans were unsurpassed in incorporating new lands into a durable imperial structure.

In six cases, system closure was a necessary condition of balancing failure, and it played an important contributing role in the other two cases. In other words, systems remained hegemonic if they did not expand in size, but sometimes became less so if they did expand. For example, Assyrian hegemony ended when the Medes created a state on the Iranian plateau, including regions that previously did not interact with Assyria; and while Persia was hegemonic in an even larger area than Assyria had dominated, its failed expansion into Greece made the new, larger system unipolar rather than hegemonic. In other cases different international systems merged, sometimes yielding balance (as when the Europeans ended Chinese hegemony in East Asia) and sometimes a new hegemony (as when Rome conquered the eastern Mediterranean system). In sum, when the leader can administer conquests effectively so they add to its

power — that is, when power is cumulative — and when the system's borders are rigid, the probability of hegemony is high.

The implications for balance-of-power theory are devastating. The theory generally presumes that power is cumulative: the cumulativity is why balancing is supposed to be so important in preventing hegemony. We find, by contrast, that when cumulativity is high, hegemony is likely. In other words, when the initial conditions of balance-of-power theory are present, hegemony is likely. The main countervailing forces are not balancing but factors that have been excluded from all recent renditions of balance-of-power theory, and indeed most International Relations theory: system expansion and administrative constraints. Evidence from nearly two millennia shows that hegemony is likely whenever an international system's spatial parameters are constant and power can cumulate.

Conclusion

Industrialization, democratization, globalization, the spread of nuclear weapons, and utterly different collectively held ideas have doubtless altered patterns of interaction today from those that characterized past systems. But the question is, alter from what? Implicit in arguments about the causes of systemic change is some baseline expectation about how multi-state systems work. For nearly three centuries, that baseline has been provided by balance-of-power theory. This article shows that this practice is no longer tenable. Concentrated power is simply not 'unnatural'. The unipolar structure of the current international system is neither historically unusual nor theoretically surprising.

Our examination also suggests promising lines of further inquiry. While the evidence decisively undermines the notion that balance-of-power theory can explain patterns of systemic outcomes over centuries, neither does it support the null hypotheses that these patterns are random or chaotic. Systems vary between rare extremes of empire and fragmentation in response to theoretically and empirically tractable processes, especially the distribution of institutional innovation among states and the system's spatial parameters. Balancing does occur and can matter, but its effect is always impeded by the collective action problem, and is frequently overwhelmed by that and other factors.

Given well-developed literatures on institutional innovation and change, as well as the relative ease of measuring the geographical parameters of international systems, a coherent, theoretically derived general explanation for patterns of hegemony and balance over the millennia is a realistic goal for scholarship. Progress toward that goal will require much more sustained attention to efforts at integrating largely unit-level processes into theories of systems change. The payoff will be to recast scholarly inquiry about the European and contemporary international systems in more productive ways.

Notes

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1. Between 1991 and 2001, for example, citations of the chief contributions to the balance-of-power literature dwarfed those concerning all the other major propositions in conflict studies, including the democratic peace (Bennett and Stam, 2004).
2. Each of the case studies below is drawn from the larger studies in Kaufman et al. (2007). All case study authors in the book manuscript contributed to this article.
3. Scholars continue to contest the extent to which the theory actually explains the repeated failure of hegemonic bids in Europe. See, e.g. Vasquez and Elman (2003).
4. Our research team's estimates, combined with the data set produced by David Wilkinson (Wilkinson, 2002, 2004), yields roughly 10,000 system-years, of which 40–45% appear to have been hegemonic or unipolar. Considerable uncertainty remains concerning the boundaries of various systems and the distinction between multipolar and fragmented systems. The 40–45% figure represents conservative coding rules on both issues. For more, see Kaufman et al. (2007).
5. For more on degrees of systemic hierarchy within anarchy in these systems, see Kaufman et al. (2007), and, in general, Watson (1992).
6. Inadequate sources make it difficult to assess the impact of balancing before this period. On the Greek polis, see Morgens (2003: 257–82). For Greek–Persian relations, see Balcer (1995); Green (1996); Georges (2000); and Lewis (1973). For relations among Greek city-states, see Amit (1973); Forrest (1986); and Pomeroy et al. (1999). For the Athenian Empire, see Meiggs (1972). For the Peloponnesian War, see Cawkwell (1997).
7. Here we follow Green (1996: 82–3); also see Burn (1962).
8. Thucydides failed to identify any threat from Persia when he began his account of the Peloponnesian War, though Cawkwell (1997: 17) perhaps goes too far in calling this failure 'a scandal'.
9. On the system and the chief actors, see, Walbank (1981). On the distribution of capabilities, see Ager (2003). On Hellenistic militarism, see Austin (1986).
10. Evidence includes passages in the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya, translated in Kangle (1972), as well as sayings attributed to the Buddha, discussed in Walshe (1995). On 'co-binding' by republics, see Deudney (2006).
11. For sources on ancient China, see generally Rui, 1995; Hsu, 1999; Sanjun daxue, 1976; Sawyer and Sawyer, 1994: 29–162; and Yang, 1986. For an extended comparison of ancient China and early modern Europe, see Hui, 2005.
12. This account rests on a number of standard sources, especially McEwan (1996).
13. A systematic study of international systems in the last 35 centuries yields the same finding: balanced systems, including bipolar and multipolar ones, are about equally as common as are unbalanced, unipolar or hegemonic ones (Kaufman et al., 2007).

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