

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE					<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>							
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PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.												
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 23-03-2018		2. REPORT TYPE Master's of Military Studies			3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2017 - APR 2018							
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Balance of Power Theory: Why it Doesn't Work for the US in 2018					5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A							
					5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A							
					5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A							
6. AUTHOR(S) Owens, Justin D., Major, USMCR					5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A							
					5e. TASK NUMBER N/A							
					5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A							
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068					8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A							
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)					10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) Dr. Jonathan Phillips							
					11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A							
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.												
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES												
14. ABSTRACT Since the end of the Cold War the United States has found itself with no near peer competitors and the lone global super power. The US has established itself as a global hegemon with economic and military dominance in what is now a unipolar system of global powers. For these reasons the balance of power can no longer can be applied to the US in 2018. This paper will lay out three separate positions showing how the US in 2018 does not fit with the balance of power theory and a new more flexible and hierarchical theory should be established to better predict future international relations with regard to the US. Counter arguments against this include the rise of China and Russia over the past two decades as well as an argument against the claim that a global hegemon can exist but rather regional hegemons are the pinnacle of the international system. Lastly, this paper will introduce and offer a different theory, known as the structure of power theory, as an alternative to the balance of power theory in 2018.												
15. SUBJECT TERMS Balance of Power Theory; Global Hegemony; United States; Unipolar international system; Realist												
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: <table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse; margin-top: 5px;"> <tr> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">a. REPORT</td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">b. ABSTRACT</td> <td style="width: 33%; padding: 2px;">c. THIS PAGE</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclass</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclass</td> <td style="text-align: center;">Unclass</td> </tr> </table>			a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE	Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT UU		18. NUMBER OF PAGES 30	
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE										
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			19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON USMC Command and Staff College									
			19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330									

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

The Balance of Power Theory: Why it Doesn't Work for the US in 2018

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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3-7-18

Executive Summary

Title: The Balance of Power and Why it Does Not Work for the United States in 2018

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Thesis: Given the overwhelming economic and military dominance of the US over all its competitors and its unilateral actions on the world stage, the question arises as to the validity, applicability, and basis of the balance of power theory when applied to the United States in 2018. The US's position as an already established global hegemon, its standing as a maritime and economic power, and the lack of substantive balancing actions against it make it incompatible with the balance of power theory in its current condition and application to the US in 2018.

Discussion: Since the end of the Cold War the United States has found itself with no near peer competitors and the lone global super power. The US has established itself as a global hegemon with economic and military dominance in what is now a unipolar system of global powers. For these reasons the balance of power can no longer be applied to the US in 2018. This paper will lay out three separate positions showing how the US in 2018 does not fit with the balance of power theory and a new more flexible and hierarchical theory should be established to better predict future international relations with regard to the US. Counter arguments against this include the rise of China and Russia over the past two decades as well as an argument against the claim that a global hegemon can exist but rather regional hegemons are the pinnacle of the international system. Lastly, this paper will introduce and offer a different theory, known as the structure of power theory, as an alternative to the balance of power theory in 2018.

Conclusion: The balance of power theory is not applicable to the United States in 2018 primarily because the US is an already established hegemon. A different more applicable realist theory such as the proposed structure of power theory should be considered as a better model for international relations in 2018.

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Preface

The paper seeks to address what I feel to be a short coming in the application of an established and well know International Relations Theory, Balance of Power, to the United States in 2018. Given the exponential rate of change in the concept and application of power, specifically soft power, in today's geo-political environment and the unipolar system that exist following the Cold War; a different and more up-to-date realist theory must be tested. A majority of this paper will argue why the balance of power should not be applied to the US in 2018 and conclude with a brief conceptual introduction into a proposed and revised structure of power theory. The intent for this paper is to provoke thought and discussion of other theories that may not fit the mold any longer which also need to be revisited in today's current state of affairs and possibility an avenue for further work and research into the proposed structure of power theory.

I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all of the instructors and staff at the USMC Command and Staff College with special thanks to Dr. Johnathan Philips, CG-6 Civilian Faculty Advisor. Dr. Philips introduction of the International Relations Theories and Balance of Power were intriguing and though provoking. His questions during seminar and encouragement of my critical thinking towards this subject were the reasons behind my choice of Master's thesis.

The Balance of Power Theory: Why it Doesn't Work for the US in 2018

Has the United States' position as the leading global super power and overarching military and economic powerhouse since the end of the Cold War fundamentally changed International Relations Theories? Has the ever-widening gap between the US and any near peer competitor altered how a realist must view today's geo-political realities and their application of the balance of power theory? If so, is there an alternative theory or variant to the balance of power theory that could be more effective in predicting US International Relations today? The answer to all of these questions is a resounding YES. For more than 25 years, the US has been able to operate with unparalleled success and uncontested worldwide reach with little to no opposition from other large state actors. This trend would seem counter-intuitive to most realists who rely on the balance of power theory to anticipate the future actions of states on the world stage and the subsequent consequences of such a concentration of power.¹ The balance of power theory is often the most recognizable, taught, and often debated theories in international relations. This theory has many variations and underlying assumptions that have become highly contested following the end of the Cold War and the United States rise to become the lone super power. Mark R. Brawley writes, "Many theorists agree that the balance of power theory does not perform well in the post-Cold War era ... most responses have been to generate rival theories, add ad hoc addenda to the theory's core assumptions, or modify those assumptions significantly."² Given the overwhelming economic and military dominance of the US over all its competitors and unilateral actions on the world stage, the question arises as to the validity, applicability, and basis of the balance of power theory when applied to the United States in 2018.

¹ Hans Morgenthau, Jack Levy, James Wirtz, Stephen Waltz, John Mearshimer ... etc.

² Paul, T. V, James J Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann, eds. *Balance of Power : Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Stanford (Calif.) (Stanford University Press, 2007), 77-78.

The US's position as an already established global hegemon, its standing as a maritime and economic power, and the lack of substantive balancing actions against it make it incompatible with the balance of power theory in its current condition and application to the US in 2018.

In 2018 there already exists a large body of academic work with regard to the inadequacy and non-linear fit of the balance of power theory to today's leading global powers. Most of that work revolves around altering the current construct of the balance of power theory and making fringe adjustments to try and model the current state of geo-political realities. While this may seem like a logical step it has proven to be ineffective in addressing the realities of 2018 and the actions of global super powers. This paper will offer substantive reasons why the balance of power should not be used in its current or altered form for the US in 2018 and will simultaneously offer a new theory which can more effectively and accurately predict actions of global states within the international system. The paper will begin by framing a common starting point and definition of *balance of power* theory from which to reference throughout each section. Each section will attempt to explain three separate but interrelated positions for arguing the inapplicability of the balance of power theory to the US at present day. The first position will argue that balance of power theory does not address currently existing hegemons but rather only deals with the actions that states may take to prevent them. Position two outlines how the balance of power theory is not applicable to global maritime powers, as others have noted, but rather was intended for closely located continental states and does not consider the great stopping power of water and its influence on power projection. The third position will list multiple, harder to empirically prove, standpoints on why the balance of power theory's balancing actions may not be seen in today's current geo-political environment towards the US. The next section will present counter-arguments to the thesis and their relevance in 2018 and beyond while the last

section will attempt to present, in a short concise manner, a new concept of the balance of power theory given today's geo-political breakdown. It is also worth noting that while the principles of balance and power can be applied on several levels such as global powers, regional alliances, and small state actors, the following positions will deal solely from the aspect of global powers on the international stage. The considerations, assumptions, and applicability of how these positions pertain to regional alliance and small state actors is beyond the scope of this work, but overall theory relevance is universal when referring to the concepts in balance of power theory.³ It can be posited that a certain bias may exist given the US origin of the author and that the paper will attempt to persuade the reader of US global supremacy in all aspects of geo-political power; however, each of the following arguments are based primarily on the aspects of the balance of power theory and not solely on where the US resides within the world power rankings of military, economic, and trade dominance. Lastly, it must be noted that these arguments rely heavily on the current state of affairs as of 2018 and does not attempt to project if and when the circumstances may or may not change which would lead to either a strengthening of these arguments or ultimately erode them with the passage of time and unforeseen events.

Balance of Power Defined

To contend that the balance of power theory does not apply to the US in 2018 requires an acceptance of a common framework of the theory, its underlying assumptions, and a widely accepted definition in its totality from which these arguments can be based. Given the multiple definitions, variations, and differing postulations that exist, the following definition, taken from

³ Owens, Justin D. "Balance of Power Theory: Defining Balance and Power" (unpublished manuscript, Dec 4, 2017)

Wohlforth et al., “Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History”, will be used as a jumping off point:

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).⁴

The above definition highlights two key points that will be expounded upon in later paragraphs and used as points of contention with regard to the application of the theory against the US.

First, units will check dangerous concentrations of power (hegemony) and secondly, aggregating capabilities with other units (external balancing). These two concepts underpin the broad understanding of states in an anarchic system and seek to foretell those states’ actions. Jack Levy and William Thompson also provide a good starting point in noting, “... nearly all balance of power theorist would accept the following set of interrelated propositions: (1) the prevention of others from achieving a position of hegemony in the system is a primary security goal of states; (2) threat of hegemony generate great-power balancing coalitions; and (3) as a result, sustained hegemonies rarely if every form in multistate systems.”⁵ This definition and framework coincides succinctly with the *Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History* definition in the two key points of checking the development of a dominate hegemon and the act of balancing to prevent such a development. As has been noted previously, there are many varying definitions of the balance of power theory and their application criteria and assumptions are just as numerous; however, the above definitions are broad and simple enough in their underlying context to be considered generic and overarching in the broader context of most realist and thus

⁴ Wohlforth, William C., Richard Little, Stuart J. Kaufman, David Kang, and et al. 2007. "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History." *European Journal of International Relations* 13 (2): 157. <https://search-proquest.com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/211958759?accountid=14746>

⁵ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 12. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

do not constitute a narrow view of the theory from which to argue opposing viewpoints. It can readily be seen from the standard definition of balance of power theory that an underlying theme of hegemonic prevention is rudimentary and an assumption of a currently balanced system is present; however, this is where the first argument can be made to the theories inapplicability to the US in 2018.

The US as a Global Hegemon

To argue this stance, it must first be established that the US is a hegemonic state, both from a regional and global standpoint. It is not hard to argue the US's current premier standing on the global stage in terms of military and economic power regardless of your country of origin or thoughts on the existence of other current powers such as Russia and China and the power they possess. However, some scholars content, as does John J. Mearsheimer, that the US is not a global hegemon but a hegemon only in the Western hemisphere. Mearsheimer states that, "A hegemon is a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the system ... a state that is substantially more powerful than the other great powers in the system is not a hegemon, because it faces, by definition, other great powers."⁶ He bases this argument primarily on the idea that Russia and China, the other great powers within the system, have nuclear weapons and the ability to thwart a US invasion if required.⁷ These assumptions and arguments against global hegemony however are solely based upon hard power and do not consider the impact of soft power and economic dominance by the leading super power. In regard to international relations, system theory, and in contradiction to Mearsheimer's claim of regional

⁶ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. The Norton Series in World Politics. (New York : Norton, 2001), 40.

⁷ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. The Norton Series in World Politics. (New York : Norton, 2001), 381.

hegemony this implies a state of balance in which one group (or political state) has achieved a level that exceeds others within the system. This condition of global hegemony and dominance has existed since the end of the Cold War from which a bipolar system of powers dissolved into a unipolar system and the US was left with no rival states within the global system of power states from which to contend. It is from that point that the balance of power theory begins to lose its applicability because the tenants of internal and external balancing have not succeeded in accomplishing the prevention of a hegemon, in this case global hegemon. Balance of power theory (defined in the previous paragraph) assumes that this supremacy by one state has not occurred and is the very antithesis of what is trying to be managed and avoided by the balancing actions of other states within the system. Levy and Thompson argue this point in surmising that the restricted domain of the balance of power theory stems directly from the theories' development under European and British scholars where for twelve centuries the absence of a sustained hegemony in Europe prevailed ... most balance of power theorist do not explore what happens under a hegemony. At this point, a key word must be highlighted from the definition in *Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History* when it refers to a *dangerous* concentration of power. This added adjective in the definition should be taken into account in later positions and counter-arguments of the US's current accumulation of power. The balance of power theory in this case not only fails to address existing hegemonic states but the actions of states against power concentrations that are not deemed *dangerous*. An argument can be made that 25 years is not long enough to ascertain whether the balance of power theory and its tenets are not working to affect the current unipolar state, but the overarching evidence would suggest that the current trend of US domination on the international stage is not declining and thus a re-evaluation of the balance of power theory might be warranted. This re-evaluation might be as simple as an

addendum to the current theory in which the theory itself should not be applied beyond a regional system. Or perhaps a hierarchical approach to the global system would be more forthcoming in predicting power balancing actions in the 21st century. Evelyn Goh writes about hierarchical order in Southeast Asia with respect to regional balancing actions for and against US hegemony and China's attempt to become a regional hegemon. Goh's analysis of a hierarchical system in which China resides as a regional power below that of the US is a prime example of using the hierarchical model from a regional perspective. This model can also be extrapolated to a global hierarchical structure in which one great power or power alliance resides over several lower tiers of national powers and alliances within the same system. The balance of power theory is somewhat constrained to a model in which all states reside on a level playing field working to balance or act against one growing state. While the balance of power theory can be applied to global, regional, and small state systems there does not exist a further demarcation within those systems. Goh's regional hierarchical example of the US residing above China within the Southeast Asian system of power could also be put into the global context and system in which the US appears to exist above all of the other global powers and alliances. Goh explains the reason for this hierarchical approach by stating, "Instead of forming counterbalancing alliances, established powers seek to restore system equilibrium by adjusting the international hierarchy of prestige and the division of territory in accordance with the new global balance of power, while at the same time maintaining the formal institutional arrangements and informal rules of the system."⁸ This approach seems to suggest that once an equilibrium has been met, regardless of whether a hegemon exist, states will seek to gravitate to a tiered hierarchical system to maintain peace and stability. This also would suggest that the system is beneficial to a majority of those

⁸ Goh, Evelyn "Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in Southeast Asia: Analyzing Regional Security Strategies" *International Security* 32:3 (Winter, 2007/2008), JSTOR, 149.

states within it or else some act of counter balancing would occur. While the hierarchical system can be overlaid onto the balance of power theory and aids in explaining the current system, it fails to account for how the system evolved into its current state. The actions, or lack thereof, that allowed a single state within the system to attain a hegemonic position and the lack of balancing against the rising of that state's power is not addressed or accounted for any variation of the current balance of power theories. While the entirety of this argument is based on the precept that the US, in its current standing as a global hegemon, falls outside the bounds of the balance of power theory and its underlying assumptions ... the next position will show that the balance of power theory cannot be applied to every state and global power system and was originally designed with a much narrower scope of originating conditions; i.e. continental systems vs transregional maritime systems.

Maritime Powers

Like nearly all social science theories, the balance of power theory is bound by certain scope conditions from which a deviation will alter the applicability and suitability of the theory itself.⁹ This is where we find the balance of power theory and its application to the US in 2018 given the US's maritime power and geographic isolation in the Western Hemisphere. Jack Levy and William Thompson write, "A distinction must be made between autonomous continental systems, where land-based military power is dominant, and transregional maritime systems, where naval strength and economic wealth are dominant."¹⁰ A vast majority of scholars and theorists when presented with the balance of power theory are normally drawn to examples of

⁹ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

European coalitions against land-based military powers.¹¹ Such examples include: Habsburg under Charles V in the early sixteenth century, Philip II at the end of the seventeenth century; and the combined strength of Spain and Austria in the Thirty Year's War; against France under Louis XIV and then Napoleon; and against Germany under Wilhelm II and then Hitler.¹² This list of examples excludes regional if not global hegemonic states of the Netherlands, Britain, and the US, all three of which are dominant maritime powers in their respective time and region. This propensity for historically restricting examples of the balance of power theory to continental land-based powers gives credence to the narrow scope of which the theory was originally designed and best suited. Because the original intent of the theory was meant to predict state actions of those continental land-based militaries, the application of the theory to non-land-based military powers comes into question. To illustrate this point, refer back to the base definition of balance of power that was presented at the beginning of this paper; the first key component articulated was that of states within the system seek to maximize their long-term odds on survival (security). This implies that a state's top priority is the responsible defense of its territory and constitutional integrity.¹³ While this priority can obviously extend to any state within any system, it becomes most applicable to continental powers with close, geographically located possible adversaries. A state relies heavily on the ability to allocate resources for building internal military power to facilitate its own defense. This buildup of military power is put towards guarding/protecting borders and to possibly expound current territorial reaches as a show of strength in deterring would be regional aggressors. By increasing military power these

¹¹ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>., 14.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

states pose a possible threat to other great powers as well as to less powerful states in their sphere of influence.¹⁴ This in turn requires neighboring and regional states to re-inforce their capabilities to stay in line with fellow growing military states within the system ... a self-perpetuating ratcheting effect. Levy and Thompson note that, "Maritime power have smaller armies, fewer capabilities for invading and occupying, and few incentives to do so ... they pose significantly weaker threats to the territorial integrity of other states."¹⁵ This perception of a reduced threat makes it increasingly less probable that other states will attempt to balance against strong maritime powers as opposed to strong land powers for which they may perceive as a threat. Another reason why land powers tend not to balance against strong maritime powers is that the strongest sea power states are usually the leading economic power, most other great powers see more benefit from allying with the economic leader than attempting to oppose or balance them.¹⁶ The same reasoning for individual powers not to balance against leading maritime powers also applies to broad alliance coalitions and the lack of balancing actions against maritime powers. This lack of balancing against a strong concentration of power, maritime or land based is opposite of what the balance of power theory predicts. Levy and Thompson articulate this point well by saying, "This stands in contrast to balance of power theory, which suggest that hegemonic threats deriving from high concentrations of power should generate not only a counterbalancing coalition, but a coalition involving several great powers rather than just two."¹⁷ The incentives for allying with the leading economic power, and in virtually every case, this is the same maritime power, vastly outweigh the implications for allying against primarily because

¹⁴ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of the trading and economic benefit which can be gained. This reasoning also adds to the stability of a system in which conflicts tend to have an adverse impact on economic solidity. In addition, most land-based states recognize the potential expansion of neighboring continental states within their regional system not only pose a territorial threat but economic imbalance that maritime expansions does not.¹⁸

It is worth noting that there exist an international relations theory which attempts to addresses a state of equilibrium and economic stability when it occurs within the larger international system, the Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST). From *Exploring the Myth of Hegemonic Stability Theory*, Isabelle Grunberg states, “[HST] basically holds that cooperation and a well-functioning world economy are dependent on a certain kind of political structure, a structure characterized by the dominance of a single actor ... which constitutes the optimal situation for ensuring and maintaining an open and stable world economy.”¹⁹ Two distinct examples of this theories application are the British empire at the beginning of the 20th century and the US following WWII. Some may also argue that this theory holds today following the end of the Cold War for the US. While HST makes a strong case for a more prosperous international system based on a leading economic actor (global hegemon), it does not address what would cause other actors within the system to change the agreed upon state of equilibrium, how the system evolved into its current state, the structure beneath the leading actor, or available mechanisms to accomplish a change in structure. Thus, a more robust and agile theory may be more applicable given today’s ever-changing dynamic geo-political landscape.

¹⁸ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

¹⁹ Grunberg, Isabelle. "Exploring the "Myth" of Hegemonic Stability." *International Organization* 44, no. 4 (1990): 431-477. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706850>., 431

Other Reasons for Lack of Balancing

The first two positions dealt primarily with the assumptions and underlying concepts in regard to the balance of power theory and its applicability to the US; however, the third position seeks to show three separate but equally strong alternative reasons for the lack of balancing and normal balance of power actions against a dominant hegemon and not of the theory's incompatibility to the US in 2018. The first alternate reason deals with time. This is possibly the hardest and most difficult argument to make given the fact that theorists can only rely on historical data to prove a theory which attempts to forecast actions. The only way to prove and/or disprove this argument is time itself which makes the argument recursive and redundant but none the less still feasible. While the relatively short amount of time since the end of the Cold War can be listed as a reason for the absence of balancing it fails to account for and predict how long this current state of equilibrium will and can exist. Depending on how one perceives power and its accumulation in a mathematical sense, linear or exponential, the more time that elapses without an act of balancing potentiality makes the hegemon's power more concrete. However, this implies that there is a correlation between time and the actions of others within the system. The more time that elapses could either increase or decrease the willingness of others within the system to act as a counter; the balance of power theory fails to account for this possibility. This leads to another argument of time in which time is an irrelevant variable in the equation of international relations theory, more specifically for the balance of power theory. Because no state can maintain absolute power indefinitely and future world events cannot be predicted, using time as a basis for theory is not conclusive or productive; therefore, the balance of power theory should not be used to predict actions over time.

The second alternative reason for the absence of balancing actions is focused around the idea of the US's relatively benign intentions. Levy and Thompson note, "... the relatively benign intentions and accommodative policies of the United States significantly reduce any perception by other states of a US threat to their vital interest."²⁰ This concept of threat speaks directly to the first part of the definition of balance of power theory when it states that anarchic systems will seek to maximize their own security. If states within a system do not perceive their own security being threatened by another state within the system, regardless of the other states' current power standing, there isn't an apparent threat and no need for balancing actions or alliances. The US's ability to project soft power also assist in the notion that the US has benign intentions. Hard power has been the predominate example of power in the balance of power theory; soft power has grown to be more persuasive and effective in regard to acts of balancing. The US's maritime and economic pre-eminence allow it to influence global and regional systems without threatening the vital interest of the states within those systems.²¹ The use of soft power to alter the balance within a system leads to a less threatening perception and thus disengages the fundamental aspects of balance of power theory and the balance of threat theory. This use of soft power by the US can also be perceived as a benefit from which other states can benefit, primarily economically but also in security alliances. More states will bandwagon with the US and reap the spoils of its material wealth and strong military than act to balance against it. As mentioned in the second position earlier in the paper, geographic isolation also helps to reinforce the idea of relatively benign intentions of the US. The US does not and is not required to guard its borders against invasion or attack from that of a conventional military threat and can be seen to have a

²⁰ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

²¹ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

more relaxed appearance when it comes to their overall domestic military posture (while this idea is plausible in theory, it can also be argued that the military power projection of the US Navy can be taken as not benign regardless of propaganda and media spin to that regard). Levy and Thompson write, “The emergence of a security community among advanced industrial states helps to retard the development of security dilemmas that lead to conflict spirals and in turn help to portray the US’s benign intentions.”²² Lastly, the most compelling argument of this alternative is the lack of territorial conquest by the US and its intentional actions to not be perceived as *occupiers*. Some may argue that the US has left troops all across the world after each major conflict, minus Vietnam, and this in and of itself constitutes a plausible territorial occupation. However, it is far easier to reconcile that the US has not obtained territories for its own expansion but rather seeks to influence the global system by its presence across the world short of occupation and territorial gain. It is reasonable for other states within the global system now to assume that even though the US may influence or interdict in affairs outside of its own borders, there will not be any attempt to occupy or colonize any new territory regardless of the outcome of any conflict in which the US is heavily engaged. No matter what the actual intentions of the US decision makers are within global system, as long as other players within the system continue to perceive the US as having benign intentions, the mechanisms of balance of power will not engage.

A third alternative reason for the lack of balancing actions against the US is the sheer risk involved with attempting to balance against an already established global hegemon. The risk verses reward analogy works well in this case because almost every state within the global

²² Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea : Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 10. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>.

system can benefit more from an alliance with the US than to act against it. An act of aggression or perceived aggression against the US would trigger a reciprocal reaction not only from the US but from those allies who seek to lose if the US's position in the global system were reduced. The cost of trying to overthrow an already established hegemon would be staggering and the process would not go unchecked by the US or its allies. This concept is what perpetuates the US's standing in today's geo-political environment. The US is constantly working to check rises in power of other states such as Russia and China not only through its use of soft power but through the use of its alliances. As long as the US can keep Russia and China isolated within their respective regional systems they will not pose a significant threat to the US or the US's alliances. Because other states within the global system have to compete within their own region for supremacy, the US can influence the global system to its benefit and to the benefit of its partners within their respective alliances. The US currently does not face the issue of regional supremacy as it has been the top of the Western Hemisphere system since the end of the Cold War with no rival states it must contend with. The bottom line is that as long as states such as Russia, China, and Iran are required to expend resources in an attempt for regional supremacy, the US will have the opportunity and resources to check and subvert those attempts and ensure that any act of balance against them would be far too risky.

Reasons Against

The previous positions attempt to argue that the balance of power theory does not apply to the US in 2018, but there also exist many counter arguments to this line of thinking that are continually debated and expounded every day. These counter arguments primarily focus around two distinct issues. The first is the rise of China and Russia as global super powers and near peer competitors to the US. The rise of these two powers contradicts the stance of the US as a global

hegemon and that the global system has already established into a multi-polar vs unipolar system. The second issue is time and its importance and implications to the theory of balance of power specifically in regard to how time is regarded with respect to power. As articulated previously, it is difficult to argue that the US does not hold a state of military and economic superiority, although significantly less than it did in decades previously. The 2017 US National Security Strategy hints at this slow demise of power during its opening pages:

Following the remarkable victory of free nations in the Cold War, America emerged as the lone super-power with enormous advantages and momentum in the world. Success, however, bred complacency. A belief emerged, among many, that American power would be unchallenged and self-sustaining. The United States began to drift. We experienced a crisis of confidence and surrendered our advantages in key areas. As we took our political, economic, and military advantages for granted, other actors steadily implemented their long-term plans to challenge America and to advance agendas opposed to the United States, our allies, and our partners.²³

These other actors mentioned above have arguably been predominantly China and Russia as they have grown in the recent years to challenge American power, influence, and interest.²⁴ The rise in Chinese power and perceived decrease in US power is brought out in Joseph S. Nye's power transition theory.²⁵ This theory portrays a changing of the guard in which power is moving from West to East on the global scale particularly after the economic crisis in 2008. Douglas Lemke and Ronald Tammen in *Power Transition Theory and The Rise of China* describe the implications of power transition theory to China and the US:

...power transition theory continues to generate such interest is that it offers falsifiable expectations about the future of world politics. For example, if China continues to grow in power as it has for the past few decades, it will surpass the United States as the world's dominant power sometime before the middle of this century. Such over takings among

²³ The White House. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/.../2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, 2

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Debin, Liu, Rizwan Naseer, and Musarat Amin. 2012. "Withering Hegemony of US and Evolving De-Centered Globalism: A Theoretical Account." *Journal of Political Studies* 19 (2): 150. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1330860867?accountid=14746>.

great powers have corresponded with the major wars of the past centuries. These two observations represent the most important strategic calculation of the twenty-first century. They go to the heart of the issue of war and peace, cooperation, or conflict among the great powers. Should China surpass the United States as the world's most powerful state while having no substantial demands for change to the international system's organizing principles, power transition theory postulates that catastrophic war likely will be averted. In this case, China will emerge as a "satisfied" preeminent power, much as did the United States when the mantle of international leadership passed from the British. In contrast, should China challenge the United States in the mid twenty-first century, holding deep-seated grievances against the West, its culture, and its imposed international rules and norms, then the probability of war rises dramatically. Thus we see that power transition theory, at its heart, attacks the central issue of world politics—great power stability.²⁶

There are multiple indicators that illustrate China's rapid economic growth over the past two decades but none more significantly than its increase in GDP. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that China's GDP will increase by 6.5% compared to the US of 2.3% in 2017.²⁷ This increase in GDP which is nearly three times that of the US makes a strong argument for China's advancement to become the leading percentage of world GDP in the years to come. China's overall economy is the second largest in the world, second only to the US and vastly larger than that of Japan who resides in a distance third. Compare this standing to post WWII when the US accounted for 50% of the world economy and China a mere 2%.²⁸ China is also making strong end roads with respect to the growth of its military. China's defense spending has also risen to the levels of the US in the recent decade and its current activity in the South China Sea indicate no slowing of its military might and intentions on the world stage. Today there is no lack of materials and publication on the rise of China and the implications it represents not only

²⁶ Lemke, Douglas and Ronald L. Tammen. "Power Transition Theory and the Rise of China." *International Interactions* 29, no. 4 (Oct, 2003): 269-271. doi:10.1080/03050620390248080.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=syh&AN=11623200&site=ehost-live>.

²⁷ http://www.imf.org/external/datamapper/NGDP_RPCH@WEO/OEMDC/ADVEC/WEOWORLD; January 2, 2018.

²⁸ Debin, Liu, Rizwan Naseer, and Musarat Amin. 2012. "Withering Hegemony of US and Evolving De-Centered Globalism: A Theoretical Account." *Journal of Political Studies* 19 (2): 150. <https://search-proquest-com.lomc.idm.oclc.org/docview/1330860867?accountid=14746>.

to the US but to the remainder of the world. Jacques Martin the author of *When China Rules the World* makes a strong case for China as the world's dominant power in the years to come and Beijing's role in formulating its own terms of rule.²⁹ While the Russian economy and military have not taken on such a drastic explosion over the past couple decades compared to China's, their influence on the international stage has resurfaced with vibrato. Russia's long standing within the United Nations has continued to allow them a seat at the table in international political affairs and a voice to echo their discord with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Europe Union (EU) as threats to their national security.³⁰ Most of the late 1990s and early 2000s were spent rebuilding their economy and modernizing their military compared to the downsizing of the US military throughout the late 1990s. Russia's military strength today has regained the attention of the national security thought process as seen in the 2017 NSS, "Russia is investing in new military capabilities, including nuclear systems that remain the most significant existential threat to the United States."³¹ The Russian longing for super power status has not diminished and their aim continues to be a diminished US influence in the world and division amongst the US allies.³² This intent was no more evident than by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and subsequent occupation of Crimea in 2014 by President Putin. Russia was able to accomplish this military action with no opposition from either the US or the UN which sewed discourse among the US and its allies. The rise of China and the resurgence of Russia both call into the question the level of influence and global domination that the US is said to have as a

²⁹ Ibid., 151.

³⁰ The White House. *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*. (Washington, DC, 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/.../2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, 25

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

global hegemon. Each of these two states have risen in power with little or no balancing from the US and the stance of a unipolar environment drastically stands in question.

The second counter argument, which was discussed previously as a reason for the lack of balancing against the US, is time and its influence on geo-politics. Time alone can be argued to be a balancer itself irrespective of the actions of the states within the system and their attempts to affect the system; time will ultimately have the final say in which nation states rise and fall from power positions. For the past 25 years since the end of the Cold War, the US has enjoyed unfettered access and economic dominance on the world stage with no great rival or powerful alliance to oppose it. But it is hard to argue that a mere quarter century is long enough to disprove or otherwise prove an alternate theory of balance of power theory or that this small timeframe is simply an anomaly for which no further explanation is required. Anything can be disproven over time and thus is the case with the US and its claim as a global hegemon. At some point, nearer or farther, in the future the US will not be the lone super power or even a super power altogether. But trying to predict that timeline is a fool's errand for which anyone who says they can predict is kidding themselves; although many try and many will continue to try, the ability to predict the future state of geo-politics is akin to playing the lottery or betting on cryptocurrencies. Grand theories of realism and international relations are judged on scales of centuries, 25 years may simply not be enough time for balancing actions against the US to have occurred or be noticeable and recognizable. Kenneth Walt and Christopher Layne both content that "it is just a matter of time" before the act of balancing against the US occurs.³³ Both gentlemen base their predictions on the unrepresented power of the US and the logic of balance of

³³ Levy, Jack S. and William R. Thompson. "Balancing on Land and at Sea: Do States Ally Against the Leading Global Power?" *International Security* 35, no. 1 (2010): 9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40784645>

power theory.³⁴ While it is hard to argue their point based on historical trends over the centuries, the first two positions listed in this paper starkly contradict the ability for the past use of balance of power theory to be applied to the US in 2018. Walt and Layne both base their predictions on the US's unpredicted power which in itself almost wholly disproves the underlying concepts of the theory itself. With that said, only time will tell whether the US's current position is a paradigm shift within international relations theory or simply a bump in the road that will be relegated to a footnote in a historical archive many years from now.

A Different Twist on Balance of Power

The intent of proposing a new twist on the balance of power theory does not seek to discredit the theory's usefulness or utility in the correct aspects or intended scope as discussed previously. The proposition of a new theory looks to help improve and build on the already established concepts in the realist area of International Relations. Because the balance of power theory seeks to have each system begin and end in a state of balance or equilibrium, it fails to consider that the most stable and economically prosperous system may be one of imbalance. The balancing mechanisms associated with the balance of power theory are only triggered and acted upon when states within the system feel that their might be an imbalance of power or a perceived imbalance of power which could pose a threat to one's own national security. This fundamental assumption of actions to prevent imbalance is where a new theory can begin. In the first section, US as a Global Hegemon, the concept of a hierarchical system was introduced as a method to explain the standing relationships between existing states in the global system. The hierarchical structure in itself supposes imbalance from a structural perspective with one or more

³⁴ Ibid., 10.

states residing in different tiers within the structure. A different theory and approach, which will be referred to as *structure of power* for the remainder of the argument, postulates that a hierarchical system with the leading global economic power residing at the top of the structure is far more stable than one in which all players within the system co-exist on the same tier. The structure of power theory states that the previously cited balancing actions of the balance of power theory are more likely to occur when states attempt to move between tiers within the hierarchical structure and less so when movement occurs along the same tier. While the ultimate goal of each state within the system is still to maximize its own long-term survival, this does not imply that states will attempt to check concentrations of power as theorized in balance of power theory. Unlike the balance of power theory which assumes a concentration of power and potential hegemon is dangerous, structure of power assumes that each state can maximize its own economic and national security by benefiting from states that exist in higher tiers within the hierarchical structure. Alliances therefore can also exist up and down the tiered system and within an already established tier. States who fail to utilize and profit from the alliances are more likely to fall down the hierarchical scale to the point of becoming a non-global power and simply reside in a regional hierarchical system. Emulation then becomes a more common practice among states within a system which aids in maintaining the current structure and balance. The structure of power theory also postulates that states can exist in multiple systems at the same time. For example, the US can reside as the top tier state within the global system and also co-exist on the top tier of an Asian Regional power system with China. The structure of power does not attempt to define or put limits on tiers within a system other than to imply that the qualifiers for each tier is power itself. Because power is difficult to define and varies significantly between systems setting left and right lateral limits for any tier is not feasible. It is also worth noting that

unlike the traditional balance of power theory which is predisposed to the concept of hard power, the structure of power does not limit the notion of power to military but rather is open to any and all forms/combinations of power that exist. The structure of power theory can therefore be summarized by three key points. The first: that imbalance in a system of states can be more beneficial and increase national security and prosperity more than a balanced system in which all states aspire to exist on the same level playing field. The second: states within a system reside in a hierarchal structure in which tiers are assessed and measured by degrees of power and the leading tier is most notably defined by the leading economic power within the system. The third: balancing actions do not occur against concentrations of power but are initiated when states within a system attempt to increase power and move between tiers within the hierarchal structure to the detriment of others within that tier.

Conclusion

The previous positions and arguments have sought to answer the original questions posed at the outset of this paper with historical and current trends within the geo-political settings of 2018. It has been shown that since the end of the Cold War the US has fundamentally changed how theorist and academics must look at international relations theory and more specifically with regard to the balance of power theory. Because of the economic and military dominance the US has been able to achieve over the past three decades, the balance of power theory should no longer be used to predict balancing for and against the US in 2018. No theory is without flaws and application error and to insist that any theory is absolute would be woefully inaccurate. This is the case of the balance of power theory as applied to the US in 2018. The balance of power has its unique and narrow scope of correct application for which it was intended and the attempt to extrapolate it beyond that yields significant errors and miscalculations. Because the underlying

assumptions of power concentrations and balancing actions do not directly correspond to the US in 2018 a more appropriate theory, such as structure of power, must be hypothesized and debated to help in providing predictions of state actions within today's geo-political environment.

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