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Is Soft Balancing the Driving Force Behind Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia?

An Empirical Test of the Soft Balancing Theory

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Abstract

In an age of American unipolarity it is not surprising that questions regarding the perseverance of the current international structure constantly recur in contemporary international relations debates. As the discussion about whether the balance of power theory vanished with the Cold War continues, soft balancing has become a popular way to describe second-tier states' use of non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. Problematic, however, is to define what differentiates soft balancing from typical diplomatic friction. Furthermore, if other states' actions are not responses to American power, then it does not make sense to invoke either traditional balance of power theory or the soft balancing argument. These concerns have been raised by critics of the theory, yet no one seems to have conducted a rigorous empirical evaluation of the soft balancing theory by putting it side by side with alternative explanations. In this article I remove this bias by discussing four alternative explanations to the theory in one case typically framed as soft balancing: Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia. I conclude that the simplicity of the balance of power theory and its soft balancing addendum makes them easy to adopt, but also easy to overuse.

Key words: Balance of Power, Soft Balancing, Hegemony, United States, Russia, China, Central Asia, Unipolarity, Waltz, Neo-realism

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1 Introduction

The end of the Cold War ended bipolarity and we have now entered the age of American unipolarity. With this recent shift of systems, it is not surprising that questions regarding the stability and the perseverance of this new unipolar world constantly recur in contemporary international relations debates. Will any state challenge the power of the United States? If so, what system will follow? As a consequence of this interest, the behavior of the superpower and other powerful states are constantly being scrutinized and analyzed. Has the shift of systems made them act differently? Furthermore, how can different theoretical perspectives of international relations help us explain their actions?

One of the biggest puzzles deriving from this debate is whether the balance of power theory vanished with the Cold War. The balance of power theory envisages that second-tier major powers¹ such as Russia and China should start to assemble forces based on arms buildups and countervailing alliances in order to keep the power of the U.S. in check. Today, the absence of overt counter balancing at the systemic level has made scholars question the relevance of the balance of power theory and its ability to explain state behavior in the post-Cold War world. In the last couple of years however, potential explanations to this irregularity have started to occur. Today, scholars believe that second-tier states, at least until recently, have refrained from balancing the power of the United States since they do not regard the country as a threat.

This new turn, in connection with a growing literature on American aggressive unilateralism after 9/11, has made scholars foresee a new kind of state behavior. Even though second-tier states do not want to challenge the U.S. directly, they are increasingly using non-military tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies. The most prominent examples of this behavior are: Sino-Russian rapprochement, the Russian-Iran alliance, the defense cooperation of European Union, and the anti-American coalition before the Iraq war. As a result, the conventional wisdom started to change and “soft balancing” became a way of describing this kind of state behavior. The soft balancing argument rests on the same assumptions as neo-realism’s balance of power theory and is not only seen as a subtler form of this behavior but also as a precursor to

¹ Throughout this article, Paul’s definition of Second-tier major powers is used. According to this definition second-tier states are states that “possess the actual or potential capabilities to engage in balance-of-power coalition building against the United States. In addition to China and Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, India, and Japan can be included in this group” (2005, p. 46).

“hard” power balancing. In other words, states that chose to soft balance can, at any time, change their minds and start balancing the U.S. in the more traditional sense.

Why is this new turn interesting? Today the soft balancing theory is becoming increasingly popular to describe state behavior. A problem with this is that almost every state-cooperation where the U.S. is not a party is seen as soft balancing or an epoch-making axis. This has made it difficult to estimate how far a state has gone toward challenging the position of the sole superpower when it acts in ways contrary to U.S. interests. What is the difference between balancing, soft or hard, and a typical diplomatic dispute? This question has been raised by critics of the theory, of whom some have put forward alternative explanations. Yet no one seems to have conducted a rigorous and comprehensive empirical evaluation of the soft balancing theory by putting it side by side with those alternatives. In this article I remove this bias.

My aim with this thesis is to apply the soft balancing theory in a situation commonly referred to as a perfect example of soft balancing: Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia. Today, the scholarly conventional wisdom is that Chinese and Russian deepening rapprochement, to a large degree, has its roots in the growing unilateralism of the United States. I will challenge this prevailing view by arguing that scholars might have been too keen to describe Russian and Chinese rapprochement as soft balancing. If it can be shown that other states’ actions periodically end up constraining the U.S., but where those actions have little to do with United States’ use of its power, the assumptions of the soft balancing theory are challenged. My thesis is that if the theory fails to explain Sino-Russian behavior in Central Asia, soft balancing might fail to explain other intra-state collaborations as well.

One possible, and reasonable, objection to my methodology could be that generalizations should not be based on one example. Even if I can show that the soft balancing theory *alone* fails to explain the behavior of Russia and China in Central Asia, why is this significant? What can be said about balancing behavior in general? A straightforward answer to this is that Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia is seen as one of the strongest arguments for soft balancing. The SCO - the organization making up the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia - involves coordination between states in areas directly related to security. Furthermore, it involves two of the world’s most powerful states after the U.S., and lastly, it features state actions that are seriously limiting American ability to pursue its foreign policy objectives. If the soft balancing argument fails to explain the behavior of Russia and China, then this article provides further evidence of the need of political scientists to develop new theories explaining state behavior in today’s unipolar era.

I have structured the article as follows: The first section discusses the background of the reemerging Sino-Russian relations and especially their cooperation in

Central Asia. I then assert the balance of power theory and its theoretical ties with the soft balancing argument. After that I assess why the soft balancing theory can be one way of describing Russian and Chinese cooperation in Central Asia. From this part I turn to a discussion that concludes that Russia and China indeed periodically take actions that are limiting United States' freedom of action. Yet just because their actions sometimes constrain the exercise of U.S. power, it does not mean that soft balancing explain their behavior. Lastly, in the concluding part, I discuss implications of my findings.

2 Background

2.1 Russia and China – From Cold War Rivals to Strategic Partners

Recent changes in the international political system have altered both the possibilities and the strategies of second-tier states such as Russia and China. Soviet / Russia has gone from being one of the two superpowers to just one among a number of potential great powers. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia experienced innumerable economic and political reforms and a state system based on communism gave way to one promoting democratic ideals (Li 2007, p. 488). Today, Russia is occupied with making up for its loss of pride, self-confidence and spheres of influence it feels that it lost at the end of the Cold War. How far this search for status as a great power has come is open for debate. One can, as Macfarlane argues, say that the Russia of today is not an emerging power² in a traditional sense but “*more probably seen as a state that has recently experienced damage and is attempting to stop the bleeding*” (2006, p. 43). On the other hand one can, as Richard Sakwa notices, listen to the increasingly strident criticism of the United States coming from the Kremlin and ask whether a new Cold War between Russia and the U.S. might be in the making (2008).

If the end of the Cold War transformed Soviet / Russia, the economic reforms towards market economy in the end of the 1970s paved the way for unprecedented change in China (Mandelbaum 1995, p. 9). After years of strong economic development, China has emerged as a wealthy country with a new and strong self-confidence in international politics. Since the 1980s, the Chinese strategy has been to insert itself into the existing world order and to stand out as a responsible great power (Ferdinand 2007, p. 842). Today, China is widely seen as the rising star in international politics with the U.S. as its main opponent (Lo 2004, p. 301). At the same time, China seems neither able nor willing to challenge U.S. hegemony directly. As one commentator concludes, the China of today unduly avoids antagonizing the U.S. while biding her time, preparing for a world order in

² The characteristics of an emerging power includes, according to Macfarlane, regional preponderance, aspiration a global role, and the contesting of U.S. hegemony (2006, p. 41).

which the country will play a much more prominent role than today (Foot 2006, p. 93).

Cold War Sino-Soviet cooperation was tenuous at best, but the collapse of the USSR initiated an improvement in relations. Mao's and Stalin's strategic alliance of 1950 soon turned into open rivalry due to unsolved border disputes and contradicting interpretations of Marxism-Leninism (Li 2007, p. 484). After China chose to align with Washington in the late 60s, the two communist powers had a hard time mending fences again (Mandelbaum 1995, p. 3). Throughout the Cold War, Sino-Soviet border disputes continued to produce tensions and as a result the 4300-kilometer long border became one of the most military-dense regions in the world (*ibid.* p. 480). The disintegration of the USSR and Yeltsin's embracement of Western values first left the Chinese leadership perplexed. However, after some tentative cooperation efforts in 1992-93, the relations soon improved. In 1996, the Shanghai cooperation (see below) was initiated and the year after, the two presidents - Yeltsin and Zemin - announced a commitment to develop a strategic partnership (Lo 2004, p. 295). Suddenly half a century of prejudices and suspicions were giving way to cooperation based on common interests in the political, security and economic spheres. In 2001, *the Treaty of Good Neighborly, Cooperative and Friendly Relations* confirmed the deepening rapprochement between the two countries (Li 2007, p. 478).

Today, the intensifying cooperation between the two Cold War-rivals is one the more important phenomena in contemporary international politics. Russia and China's good relationship originates in a common view on international relations: they both advocate an enhanced role of the U.N. in global decision-making, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the precedence of sovereignty over humanitarian intervention, and would both prefer a shift to a multipolar and a more democratic³ international order (Ferdinand 2007, p. 856; Lo 2004, p. 296). Those standpoints have made China and Russia develop similar policies on many contemporary political issues, for example, their joint opposition at the U.N. to the proposed American-led invasion of Iraq, their discontent with U.S. unilateral use of its power, and their endorsements of each other's policies on "separatist movements" in Chechnya and Taiwan (Li 2007, p. 483). Today, the deepening Chinese and Russian collaboration include an increasing rate of high-level meetings, official visits, joint energy agreements, and technology cooperation. But the cooperation has also reached security related spheres such as import and export of advanced military equipment (Li 2007, p. 482). Furthermore, in 2002 Russia and China conducted their first joint military maneuver since the 1950s. The drill was followed by a second and a third one in 2005 and 2007 (Ferdinand 2007, p. 854).

³ A more democratic word order according to Russian and Chinese leaders is a multipolar order where states such as the United States, Russia, China, Western Europe, and Japan make the big decision in concert, conveniently in the U.N. structure where both states have veto power (Lo 2004, p. 296)

2.2 Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia – From Solving Border Disputes to Fighting Terrorism

One centerpiece in Russia-Sino rapprochement is their cooperation in Central Asia⁴. In Central Asia, Russian and Chinese collaboration is institutionalized through a regional security and economic cooperation organization, the *Shanghai Cooperation Organization* (SCO). The SCO originates from the time after the collapse of the USSR and the power vacuum created in the Central Asian region at that time. Between 1992 and 1995, Russia and the three Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan become engaged in delineation, demarcation and confidence building talks with China, a country which they all share border with (Chung 2004, p. 990). The talks had the intention of hindering China from pressing for territorial claims in the wake of the Soviet dissolution (*ibid.*). In 1996 the leaders of the five countries met in Shanghai and managed to settle a number of border disputes and in 1997 they reached an agreement to demilitarize their respective border regions (SCO 2001).

If the Shanghai Five, as the cooperation came to be called, initially functioned as a rather simple meeting forum where the leaders of Russia, China and the three Central Asian states could meet to discuss border issues, the cooperation soon grew deeper. In 1998, the fight against the “three evils” of separatism, fundamentalism and terrorism became an especially important cause of the organization. One of the underlying reasons to this was the threat posed by the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan. The Talibans had come to power in 1996 and were supporting and inspiring Islamist groups all over Central Asia, as well as in Chechnya and China’s easternmost province of Xinjiang⁵ (Guang 2007, p. 238). As a result, SCO’s intensifying fight against regional terrorists became something that all member states could gain from. The political elites of the Central Asian states wanted to crack down on opposition groups but lacked the

⁴ This region, located between the Caspian Sea to the west, China’s Xinjiang province to the east, Russia to the north and Iran and Afghanistan to the south, consists of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all independent states of the former Soviet Union. In some accounts, Afghanistan, parts of Russia and China is seen as a part of Central Asia. However, throughout this article, the use of the term implies the five countries mentioned above.

⁵ At this time radical Islamist groups had started to occur in the region and some of the groups were reportedly striving to set up an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia, involving both Chechnya in the west and Xinjiang in the east (Shaihutdinov 2005, p. 274). The revival of Islam in Central Asia has its roots in the 1980s as Moscow’s hegemony unraveled and 70 years of official atheism suddenly disappeared. This latter development gave rise to a religious opposition in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Malashenko 2007, p.94). A civil war in Tajikistan soon after its independence between a secular government and a more radicalized Islamic opposition made the four other states in the region outlaw almost every party and movement that potentially could topple their regimes (Cornell & Spector 2002, p. 196). After the American 2001 oust of the Taliban regime, the threat of radical Islamist groups in Central Asia has been on the decline. However, the imprecise definition of terrorism has made it possible for the member states of the SCO to designate every inconvenient opposition as “Islamic terrorists” (Malashenko 2007, p. 101).

resources. Simultaneously, Russia and China wanted to sweep the region from terrorism since instability could produce negative repercussions in their own countries (Chung 2004, p. 995).

In 2001, the SCO was founded when Uzbekistan was brought into the cooperation. In the founding document, the six heads of state praised the positive role that the Shanghai Five had played and declared that the governing norms⁶ of the new organization were going to be "*mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multicivilisations, [and] striving for common development*" (SCO 2001). However, it was another event the same year that came to influence the cooperation far more. The September 11 terrorist attacks and the ensuing American presence in Central Asia radically changed the conditions of the SCO cooperation. First of all, after the U.S. had toppled the ruling Taliban regime in Afghanistan, one of the threats that had stimulated the development of SCO's anti-terrorist efforts was gone. As a result of this new turn, two different developments took place. On one hand the regional states (Russia and China included) signed bilateral agreements with the U.S. in its War on Terrorism. All parties complied with American demands for support; in form of territorial space (military bases) in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and in intelligence sharing mechanisms from Russia and China (Guang 2007, p. 234). On the other hand, SCO continued to step up its own anti-terrorist efforts in the region. Among other things, an anti-terrorist structure with an aim to gather and share intelligence in the fight against terrorism was established in 2004 (Chung 2004, p. 995). In addition, the countries have continued to hold joint counterterrorist maneuvers in their respective border zones. These two, somewhat ambiguous developments, are still important factors for understanding of the sometimes sudden shifts of cooperation and competition among the regional states and the three powers of Russia, China and the United States.

⁶ The declaration stresses the equality in the decision-making process, i.e. every state must agree. Furthermore, the SCO is not a collective security organization since no state has promised to come to the aid of any other member state under attack.

3 Theoretical Framework

In order to analyze Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia, I will now turn to one of the most influential perspectives on state behavior in the study of international relations: realism and its balance of power theory. The balance of power theory has, arguably, “*attached more scholarly effort than any other single proposition about international politics*” (Wohlfarth et al. 2007, p. 155). Either its assumptions are being accepted, challenged, or derided; it constitutes the leading principle of contemporary IR debate. Furthermore, the conventional wisdom in international relations today is that Sino-Russian rapprochement after the Cold War, to a large degree, has its roots in changes within the international system⁷.

3.1 Realism and the Balance of Power Theory

According to structural neo-realist thought⁸ states are self-interested entities who, “*at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination*” (Waltz 1979, p. 118). This behavior rests on the assumption that the international system is anarchic – a realm where no state exercises legitimate power over another – and where each and every state has to provide for its own protection (*ibid.*, pp. 102-104). In Mearsheimer words this perspective paints a rather grim picture of the world: “*the international system is portrayed as a brutal arena where states look for opportunities to take advantage of each other, and therefore have little reason to trust each other*” (1994, p. 10). States are constantly concerned about maintaining its security and to survive. Ironically, this *self-help system* does not necessarily result in a safer environment for the state: “*states are caught in a situation known as the security dilemma. The efforts of states to seek security generate a permanent struggle of all against all, which always harbors the possibility of the use of force*” (Rittberger & Zangl 2006, p. 15).

⁷ See, for example Paul 2005; Pape 2005; Li 2007; Ferdinand 2007; Yinhong 2007.

⁸ Neo-realism is a structural theory in that it sees the origins of states’ self-interested behavior as a response of the anarchical structure of the international system. Traditional realists, such as Morgenthau, attribute this behavior to the human nature (Nardin and Mapel 1993, pp. 62-64). Structural neo-realism can be further divided into Waltz’s defensive school, which holds that states only want to survive and therefore seek security and Mearsheimer’s offensive school, which holds that states seek hegemony for security (cf. Waltz 1979 and Mearsheimer 1994)

A cornerstone of realist thought is the balance of power theory: “faced with unbalanced power, states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance” (Waltz 1997, p. 915). Accordingly - in any system - there is always a general tendency towards balancing at the systemic level. Since states want to secure their own territorial existence, they balance against concentrations of power in general and states with hegemonic intentions in particular⁹. If the hegemonic state cannot be stopped through balancing or any other strategy, threatened states can resort to preventive war (Waltz 1979, p. 127).

According to the balance of power theory, the distribution of national capabilities - and more importantly - a state’s military capacity in relation to other states, is what gives a state its status in the international structure. According to Waltz, a bipolar structure is more stable than a multipolar since with more poles the uncertainty about potential cooperation partners increases (2000, p. 6). The least stable structure is unipolarity since the dominant state will be stricken with hubris and / or, “even if a dominate power behaves with moderation, restraint, and forbearance, weaker states will worry about its future behavior” (ibid., p. 28). At the same time, the concentration of power in unipolarity is seen as a serious barrier to the creation of balancing coalitions and this can therefore take time¹⁰. However, since balancing is regarded an almost inevitable phenomenon, the power of the unipolar leader will eventually be out-balanced and the unipolar system will give way to a new structure.

3.2 Modifying the Balance of Power Theory - Balance of Threat and Soft Balancing

If the assumptions of realism’s balance of power theory are true, what can it say about the current international structure? First of all, most scholars agree that we live in a unipolar system. By definition this is a system where no other state has enough power to balance against the hegemon alone (Pape 2005, p. 11). Furthermore, the most powerful state - the U.S. - is seen as an informal hegemon, i.e. a hegemon that sometimes shares responsibility with other states, in contrast to an outright imperial power, i.e., “one that is subduing other nations from formal institutional arrangements” (Tønnesson 2004, p. 330). Since the dominant state does not exert direct political control over other states, second-tier

⁹ Balancing is, however, not the only tactic of other states. According to Macfarlane, “small states generally bandwagon with threats, great powers tend to balance against them, ‘middle powers’ float in a post modern universe that is largely irrelevant [...]” (2006, p. 42).

¹⁰ Most of the second-tier state must participate and they have to overcome the problem of collective action (Pape 2005, pp. 11-12).

states of today have a potential chance of balancing collectively – if they can coordinate collective action.

Even though the balance of power theory predicts balancing to emerge slowly in a unipolar system, should we not be able find signs of balancing in the system today? The criteria for expecting balancing – concentration of power – is met by far. Today, the United States possesses nearly comprehensive superiority in terms of military resources¹¹. Accordingly, we should expect states like Russia and China to act in ways to contain the threat in order to hinder the U.S. from becoming an outright imperial power. Yet great power balancing, in Paul's words, has been "*conspicuously absent*" at the systemic level since the end of the Cold War (2005, p. 47).

If the lack of overt balancing coalitions first made scholars question the relevance of the balance of power theory, potential explanations to this soon started to occur. By examining the relationship between the U.S. and other great powers many scholars came to the conclusion that the non-balancing behavior of states like Russia and China was indeed rational. Some scholars believed that second-tier states, after the Cold war, had estimated that the U.S was not going challenge their sovereignty and that they therefore had refrained from countervailing behavior (Lieber & Alexander 2005 a, p. 111-113). Yet others thought that the reason was the reputation of the United States as a nonaggressive superpower¹² (*ibid*). Both those explanations rest of what Stephen Walt has described as "balance of threat", a modification of the balance of power theory that anticipate that second-tier states, at least until recently, have refrained from balancing behavior since they do not have perceived the intentions of the U.S. as aggressive (Walt 2006, p. 124). In other words, "[...] only states with aggressive intentions provoke others to balance against it" (Pape 2005, p. 19).

Walt's modification of the traditional balance of power theory is intertwined with a recent debate in IR analyzing the increasingly assertive unilateralism of the U.S. after September 11¹³. The connection between the two discussions lies in the way the U.S. has used its power and a new more unruly behavior -soft balancing-

¹¹ For an estimation of U.S. power resources in relation to other states, see Posen 2003.

¹² Other explanations exist: according John Ikenberry, for example, second-tier states –both liberal and non-liberal – refrain from balancing since they can influence U.S. foreign policy directly or through a variety of international institutions (paraphrased in Paul 2005, p. 48). Furthermore, different liberal theories of IR emphasize the increased amount of trade, investment and commercial flows with U.S. as a reason not to engage in balancing behavior (*ibid*.). William Wohlworth argues that the sheer preponderance of U.S. power makes other states afraid of balancing (1999, pp. 7-8). Lastly, John Mearsheimer, a structural realist, argues that the geographical position of the U.S. – in the middle of two oceans – poses little danger to other great powers (paraphrased in (Lieber & Alexander 2005, p. 112)).

¹³ U.S. strategy after 9/11 has according to Posen been "[...] unilateral, nationalistic, and oriented largely around the U.S. advantage in physical power, especially military power" (2003, p. 6). For an account on how American foreign policy has departed from liberal institutionalism during the leadership of George W. Bush, see Kupchan & Trubowitz 2007. For an overview of how other states have responded to this, see Walt 2006.

second-tier states. According to this view, second-tier states of today are increasingly using non-military tools to “*delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies*” (Pape 2005, p. 10). According to Paul, this behavior often involves “*the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes, especially at the United Nations, with the implicit threat of upgrading their alliance if the United States goes beyond its states goals*” (2005, p. 47). In the literature, the most prominent examples of this behavior are: Sino-Russian rapprochement, the Russian-Iran alliance, EU’s defense cooperation and the anti-American coalition before the Iraq war (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005, p. 75). The soft balancing argument rests on the same assumptions as the balance of power theory and is not only seen as a subtler form of this behavior but also, as Paul definition above emphasizes, as a precursor to “hard” power balancing. In other words, states that chose to soft balance can at any time change their minds and start balancing the U.S. in the more traditional sense.

The hitherto most ambitious attempt to operationalize the soft balancing concept has been done by Pape (2005). According to him the four most common soft balancing strategies used by second-tier states today are: *territorial denial*, i.e. refuse to give the U.S. strategic access to land, air, and water in order to reduce its strength; *entangling diplomacy*, i.e. to make it difficult for the U.S. to use the full capacity of its power through diplomatic maneuvers; *economic strengthening*, i.e. to act in ways to shift the economic power of the U.S. in favor of themselves and, *signals of resolve to balance*, i.e. try to overcome concerns that collective action among second-tier states will not be materialized by repeatedly act in ways to increase their trust in each other’s willingness to challenge the U.S. (2005, pp. 36-37). I will later apply these four strategies on the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia.

4 Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia – the Case for Soft Balancing

In order to test whether soft balancing is an appropriate way of describing Sino-Russian behavior in Central Asia, I will first consider what reasons the two countries may have to oppose U.S. foreign policy objectives. Secondly, I will use Pape's four strategies of soft balancing and try to find signs of this behavior in the empirical record of Sino-Russian actions towards the U.S. When doing this, I will also consider the perception of U.S. aggressiveness. According to Walt's modification of the balance of power theory and the logic of unipolarity, the number of "soft balancers" should slowly, yet increasingly, grow as states start to perceive the intentions of the U.S. as aggressive.

4.1 Reasons to Undermine U.S. Presence in Central Asia

When Russia and China accepted U.S. presence in Central Asia after 9/11, one condition was they should leave when their mission in Afghanistan was accomplished¹⁴. However, as Cornell argues, the importance of Central Asia in United States' security policy has gone from moderate to immediate and vital, which indicates that the U.S. will stay in the region for many years to come (2004, p. 240). From an American vantage point, the two bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan played a pivotal role in the initial phase of *Operation Enduring Freedom* (Cooley 2007, p. 68). However, disregarding the fact that the U.S. now can operate from bases within Afghanistan and other neighboring states, there are at least two good reasons for them to stay in Central Asia. First, a change of U.S. policy from a short-term objective of getting rid of the Taliban to a long term objective of diminishing the underlying conditions for terrorism. Secondly, a strong incentive to secure a share of the vast amounts of energy resources¹⁵ in the Caspian basin is holding them back (Cornell 2004, p. 240).

¹⁴ According to a statement by Secretary Rumsfeld and General Franks in 2002: "until the Afghan army and government can provide security and prevent the resurgence of 'terrorist organizations'" (Simons 2007, p. 279)

¹⁵ The region (including Russia and China) contains one of the world's richest and untapped energy reserves. According to one commentator, the proven reserves of gas of the SCO member states account for 30 per cent of the world's total and 8 per cent its oil (Brummer 2007, p. 187).

Both China and Russia are, at the same, increasingly showing dissatisfaction with the sudden shift of military-strategic balance of the region. There are some obvious reasons to this. First of all, U.S. presence is threatening the geo-political influence of China and Russia. Russia has recently become more aware of Central Asia's importance as a buffer zone and the country's attempts to strengthen their position in the region are not facilitated by the presence of American troops. Today, Russia's core objective in Central Asia is to, as Lo points out, "*re-establishing itself in a traditional sphere of influence*" (2004, p. 308). In a speech before a group of foreign diplomats in 2004, president Putin talked on the importance of improving the country's international prestige. He expressed that particular attention was going to be paid to the preservation of Russia's leadership role in its former republics (Sakwa 2008, p. 245). China, on the other hand, is most concerned that the U.S. is using the war on terror in order gain a strategic foothold in Central Asia. According to the Chinese leadership this could be a step to further encircle China from the West (Yinhong 2007, p. 169). Secondly, the American presence in Central Asia is threatening both counties' future national prosperity. Both Russia and China have strong geo-economic interests in wresting cheap oil and gas concessions from the Central Asian governments. Especially China sees the increased pace of American companies concluding oil and gas deals in the region as a threat to its long-term energy strategy (Azizian and Davis 2007, p. 6).

From this part I conclude that the American presence is threatening some of Russia and China's national interests. Furthermore, seen from a balance of power perspective, both military and economic recourses are obviously playing an important role. What one state has to give up in security and / or access to economic recourses is what the others can gain in relative terms. I will now, with Pape's framework in mind, provide further evidence supporting the soft balancing argument.

4.2 Testing the Soft Balancing Theory

4.2.1 Territorial Denial

"Superior states often benefit from access to territory of third parties as staging areas for ground forces or as transit for air and naval forces" (Pape 2006, p. 36).

Following a brutal crackdown on opposition groups in Uzbekistan in 2005, the American administration criticized the Uzbek government for human right abuses and called for an international investigation (Cooley 2007, p. 77). This move made the authoritarian regime estimate that their political control and oppressive tactics were threatened by the continued presence of U.S. troops in the country.

Accordingly, the leadership thought that aligning with China and Russia would be less of a threat (*ibid.*, p. 67). In Kyrgyzstan, at the same time, the Tulip-revolution in March 2005 made the new government demand a renegotiation of the contractual terms of the U.S. base (*ibid.*). *These two developments made the SCO in 2005 to call on the U.S. to set a timetable for the withdrawal from its bases in the Central Asian region* (Guang 2005, p. 503). Later the same year, the U.S. left the base in Uzbekistan and had to renegotiate a much more expensive deal with Kyrgyzstan (Cooley 2007).

4.2.2 Entangling Diplomacy

Another soft balancing strategy is to make it difficult for the U.S. to use the full capacity of its power through diplomatic maneuvers (Pape 2005, p. 36).

One Sino-Russian maneuver, which has entangled U.S. foreign policy objectives, has been to exploit the ambivalence of American democracy promotion in the region. The U.S. has been pending between a strategy aimed at developing deeper partnerships with the regional governments of Central Asia and an understanding that the repressive leadership of those governments in itself is creating Islamic radicalization (Simons 2007, p. 277). The elevation of democracy promotion in U.S. policy towards the region has made it impossible to overlook human right abuses (Rumer 2006b, p. 148). Consequently, the U.S. is pressing for political and economic reforms while trying to maintain good relations with the individual governments. A development that has not facilitated this strategy is the alleged American support for color revolutions in the larger region (Tulip in Kyrgyzstan, Rose in Georgia and Orange in Ukraine). Political stir-ups is not in the interest of the political leadership of the Central Asian states which are, as Torbakov notices, more interested in an ally that can provide security assistance for themselves (2007, p. 154). This development made Russia and China able to kill two birds with one stone. Both Russian and Chinese leaders share the Central Asian governments' concerns with regional instability, as well as their views on non-interference in states' domestic affairs. *In this way, China and Russia have been playing on the fear that local elites have of conditioned aid packages and persuaded them that the SCO and its much broader definition of terrorism, rather than a deeper partnership with the U.S., will help create stability in the region* (Cooley 2008, p. 67).

4.2.3 Economic Strengthening

“Military strong, threatening states that are the target of balancing efforts usually derive their military superiority from possession of great economic strength. One way of balancing effectively, at least in the long run, would be to shift relative economic power in favor of the weaker side” (Pape 2005, p. 37).

Both official documents of the SCO and estimations of future developments indicate that Sino-Russian cooperation might change traditional patterns of wealth in the international economic system. According to the founding document of the SCO, the organization “*will make use of the huge potential and extensive opportunities in the mutual beneficial cooperation in economic and trade fields among its member states*” (SCO 2001). Even though, as many commentators notice, the actions of the SCO are not directed against any third party (Ferdinand 2007, p. 855), two predictions about the future development are worth mentioning here. First, as one commentator puts it, with the current membership intact, if trends continue, the GDP of SCO’s member states will constitute one third of the world by 2020 (*ibid.*). Secondly, Sino-Russian cooperation might eventually decrease the status of the dollar as the most important currency: “*with China holding \$1 trillion in reserves and Russia also holding large reserves of foreign currency, the Russian and Chinese leaders have agreed to bilateral financial and trade agreements outside the sphere of the dollar*” (Cambell 2008, p. 96).

4.2.4 Signals of Resolve to Balancing

One problem of second-tier states when confronting the U.S. is estimating other’s will to act collectively: “*soft balancing, in addition to its direct usefulness in restraining aggression by a unipolar leader, may also address this problem by helping to coordinate expectations of mutual balancing behavior*” (Pape 2006, p. 37).

In regard to this tactic, the mere existence of the SCO has signaled that Russia and China can develop patterns of collaboration outside U.S. control. In the founding document of the SCO - before 9/11 - it was defined that promotion of multipolarity was the organization’s core institutional objective (Allison 2004, p. 478). Furthermore, it is also true that Russia and China is using the SCO as a mean to signal unity among other potential balancing partners. In 2005, India, Iran and Pakistan were given observer status of the SCO, which was another signal to the U.S. that the organization might step up its balancing efforts. Even if it is not sure whether these states will become permanent members or not, the SCO now - together with its observer states - contains all the nuclear powers of the region and have changed the relative distribution of military power against the U.S. (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005, p. 83). Official statements of the SCO also signal unity, such as the one at the 2002 St Petersburg summit reiterating the SCO’s call against “power politics” and unilateralism” (Chung 2004, p. 994). Although not in the interest of all SCO states, the organization has also taken the Chinese side in opposing any U.S. involvement in solving the Taiwan issue. Similarly, it has taken the Russian side on NATO’s eastward expansion (*ibid.*, 994-998).

4.2.5 Perception of U.S. aggressiveness

Even if the 9/11 attack made the two Eurasian powers set aside some of their own national interests in an international effort to fight the Taliban regime and Al-Qaida, it is obvious that the honeymoon-relationship with the U.S. is about to fade away. Both Pape and Paul - two proponents of the soft balancing theory - argue that Russia and China have increased their cooperation in Central Asia as a result of, what those countries believe is, U.S. increasingly aggressive intentions (2005; 2005). Other scholars have expressed the same view. Feng Shaolie argues that both U.S.-Russian and Sino-U.S. relations improved radically after 9/11. In 2002, a landmark deal was signed between Russia and NATO and the same year the two presidents of China and the United States expressed a will to build up a “*constructive cooperative relationship*” (2007, p. 210). However, he argues - a series of events - most notably the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the following attempts to dominate the Middle East, the color revolutions in the CIS states¹⁶, the fact that the U.S. is still in Central Asia, and NATO’s eastwards expansion, have enhanced Sino-Russian strategic relations (2007, p. 212).

For Li there is no doubt that there is a strong connection between American use of its power and a feeling of being threatened in Moscow and Beijing: “*intense examination of the developing trajectory of Russia-China relations reveals that it is external, rather than internal factors that constitute the primary dynamics to the deepening rapprochement between Russia and China*” (2007, p. 497). Of these external factors Li considers the American approval of NATO’s expansion in the boundaries of former USSR and its enacting of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act as best explaining the Sino-Russian rapprochement (*ibid.*).

Ferdinand argues, when commenting on the deeper understanding between Russia and China, that “*as for the impact of the U.S., there is no doubt that the repeated calls for multipolarity are a reaction against perceived American unipolarity, and that this has become stronger with the Bush administration*” (2007, p. 862). He continues by arguing that 2003 was a turning point in the relationship between the two countries. The main reason for this was that Russia, after having realized that the country was not welcome as a member state in either NATO or the EU, was forced into seeking partnership with other states (2007, p. 858).

Before moving on to the next section that adds to this reasoning, it is possible to conclude that both Russian and Chinese leaders have increasingly been starting to perceive American unilateralism in general and its anti-terrorist efforts in Central Asia in particular as a development which threatens their national interests. Furthermore, Russia and China have taken actions that have been constraining the foreign policy of the United States in the same region. Consequently, following

¹⁶ Commonwealth of Independent States

the logic of the theoretical framework discussed above, *there are signs of soft balancing in Central Asia.*

5 Sino-Russian Cooperation in Central Asia – the Case against Soft Balancing

5.1 Alternative Explanations

The realist perspective on state behavior has been widely contested. For example Hurrell argues that most of its literature is concerned with the policies that the U.S. have adopted or should adopt and that it may not “*correspond particularly closely either to policy options that have actually been adopted or to understanding of those choices within the second-tier states [...]*”(2006, p. 6). However, rather than offer a review of other grand theories of IR and their objections to realist predictions of state behavior, I will here focus on a few criticisms of the soft balancing argument that other scholars have put forward. By doing so, I’m also choosing not to focus on factors in U.S.-Russian or Sino-U.S. relations that is acknowledging why it is not in the interest of neither Russia nor China to balance the power of the U.S.¹⁷

In the literature there is one main critique of the soft balancing argument, namely, how should we define it? What is the difference between soft balancing and a typical diplomatic dispute? Lieber and Alexander’s conclusion on the matter is worth citing at length: “*Current trends also do not confirm recent claims of soft balancing against the United States. And when these trends are placed in historical perspective, it is unclear whether the categories of behaviors labeled ‘soft balancing’ can (ever) be rigorously distinguished from the type of diplomatic friction routine to virtually all periods of history, even between allies*” (2005 a, p. 139)

Brooks and Wohlforth, two other critics of the soft balancing argument, are also concerned with how to define this behavior. In their critique they are concentrating on the soft balancing theory’s underlying core assumptions: “*Other states obviously sometimes take actions that make it harder for the United States to advance its foreign policy goals, including its military security. Yet just because other states’ actions periodically constrain the United States does not mean that soft balancing explains their behavior*” (2005, p. 74). States that chose soft

¹⁷ For an argument supporting this view, see Foot 2006 and Macfarlane 2006

balancing as a strategy must believe that this behavior will help them to survive and to overcome the security dilemma. Hence, the balancing behavior must be a reflection of U.S. concentration of power and would not have been taken in the absence of the current systemic structure (*ibid.*, p. 78).

Brooks and Wohlforth put forward three obvious, but overlooked, alternatives to soft balancing: *economic interests, regional security concerns, and policy disputes*¹⁸. In addition to the three, I will discuss a forth explanation behind Sino-Russian cooperation that might have constrained U.S. freedom of action: Sino-Russian mutual containment. I will in the next section go through these alternative explanations in Central Asia. As we have seen in the last section, Russia and Chinese have periodically taken actions that have constrained the foreign policy of the U.S. However, if it can be shown that those states' actions have had little to do with U.S. as a potential threat; can we really label their behavior as soft balancing?

5.1.1 Economic Interests

A state may “*undertake actions that hamper the conduct of U.S. foreign policy not principally because they wish to do so, but rather to advance economic gains, either for the state as a whole or for powerful interest groups or business lobbies*” (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005, p. 79).

In both Russia’s and China’s case economic development is strongly connected to their external behavior, albeit for different reasons: “*the importance of raw material and energy in Chinese foreign policy*” and “*the role of energy exports as one of the most crucial bargaining tools within Russian foreign policy*” (Hurrell 2006, p. 17). From a Chinese perspective, deepening collaboration with Russia and the Central Asia states is crucial for its economic development. According to Chinese estimates, the country will import one-third of its oil from Russia and Central Asia by 2020 (20 per cent from Russia) and almost all its gas from Russia by 2010 (Ferdinand 2007, p. 852). Since the mid-90s, China has invested billions of dollars in different pipeline projects transporting oil from Central Asia (mainly Kazakhstan) into China. And as, Troush points out, “*theses multi-billion dollar projects had been impossible without China’s greater involvement in the security infrastructure of Central Asia*” (2007, p. 219).

Russia is also highly dependent on Central Asian energy for its economical development, especially due to its increasing export commitment. Today there is a strong connection between Russia’s economical growth and the increasing energy prices on the world market (Sakwa 2008, p. 246). As described above, China is

¹⁸ A forth alternative explanation –“domestic political interest”- is also mentioned by Brooks and Wohlforth (2005).

increasingly importing energy from Russia and in order to safeguard a continued flow of energy to the east (and money in the opposite direction), deeper collaboration over Central Asia has become an important factor: “*with Russia’s major gas reserves steadily depleting and the development of the untapped fields in the Arctic being extremely costly, Gazprom, Russia’s state-run energy monopoly, is increasingly turning its gaze to Central Asia’s gas riches*” (Torbakov 2007, p. 155).

Furthermore, Norling and Swanström argue that even though it is tempting to explain the SCO’s cooperation with Iran, India and Pakistan in terms of balancing U.S. hegemony, it is easy to find economical reasons as well. According to them, “*a main reason why the SCO is engaging with Iran, India and Pakistan is due to a favorable political and bilateral developments in Eurasia in the past 15 years and the fact that these states have legitimate concerns about coordinating trade and infrastructure developments*” (2007, p. 442).

5.1.2 Regional Security Concerns

“*[...] states routinely pursue policies to enhance local security that are unrelated to constraining U.S. hegemony*” (Brooks & Wohlforth 2005, p. 79). According to this view second-tier states sometime take actions, often in collaboration with other regional states against organized crime, terrorism, drug trafficking etc. that result in reduced U.S. freedom of action.

In both Russia and China’s case, the countries’ regional context strongly influences their respective foreign policy; not in the least by the emerging of new security threats (Hurrell 2006, p. 8). From a Russian vantage point, the war on terror had started before America came into the picture. When president Putin assumed the presidency in 1999, one of the most important tasks on his agenda was to hinder further loss of territory and the insurgency in Chechnya to spread to other groups inside the Russian sphere of influence (Macfarlane 2006, p. 47). In many ways, Russia considers Central Asia its “security belt” against northward expansion of terrorists, separatist and extremism (Yinhong 2007, p. 165). As a result of the growing threats of instability in Central Asia, Russia and the governments of the region is today cooperating on security and anti-terrorist related issues within both the SCO and the CIS structures, but also through the CSTO (the Collective Security Treaty Organization). However, despite its status as the most important external influence over Central Asia, Russia needed to share the burden of fighting militant Islamists in Central Asia with China, who had similar problems (Troush 2007, p. 220).

According to Yinhong, the determination to fight regional terrorism was the main objective of China to strive for cooperation with the Central Asian states and Russia in the SCO (2007, p. 165). In China’s westernmost region - the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region - Muslim Uyghurs, residing on both sides of the

Chinese border, have been striving for separation of Xinjiang from China for years (*ibid.*). An approximate estimation is that 500,000 Uyghurs reside in the Central Asian states (Kerr & Swinton 2008, p. 128). Since the Uyghurs receive arms, funding, and training from their brethren in the Central Asian states, China see the SCO as a mean to guarantee security by limiting terrorist, separatist and extremist activity from spreading into China (Chung 2004, p. 996).

5.1.3 Policy Disputes

“[...] states may undertake actions that constrain the United States not in response of the security threat presented by U.S. hegemony, but rather because they sincerely disagree with specific U.S. policies” (Brook & Wolforth 2005, p. 80).

Both Russia and China share the will of the U.S. to stabilize Central Asia. However, both countries have strong reservations about the way the U.S. is pursuing its policies in the region. The two countries see the democracy promoting strategy of the U.S. as naïve and subversive (Rumer 2006a, p. 1). In Russia some strategists think that U.S. democracy spreading in Central Asia will fail as they think it has in the Middle East. They see the American attempts as premature and lacking an understating that modernization must come before democratization (Torbakov 2007, p. 154). Sakwa is very much to the point: *“the fundamental object of Russian criticism of the U.S. is its politics, not its ontological status”* (2008, p. 250).

China on the other hand opposes the American democracy promoting strategy due to its own policy of non-interference in other states' internal affairs. Furthermore, from a Chinese perspective, the spread of ideas surrounding the color revolutions into China could seriously undermine the ruling elites hold of power and the future of the one-party system: *“Americans’ oft-expressed desire to proselytize the virtues of individual rights and democracy also appears to the Chinese as a form of domestic political inference that may subvert China’s social stability and its process of development through undermining the CCP regime’s control of the country”* (Chung 2004, p. 993).

5.1.4 Sino-Russian Mutual Containment

Another alternative explanation to why Russia and China have deepened their cooperation in Central Asia can be that they want to contain the threat from each other.

Since the fall of USSR, the two countries have been uncertain about how they have been evaluated in the other state's foreign policy. From a Chinese vantage point the question has been if Russia can be entirely relied upon. This unease has

its roots in Russia's occasional tilts to the West and uncertainties in the realization of proposed energy deals (Ferdinand 2007, p. 848). Furthermore, the question is if Russia will accept the "inevitable" fact that China's steady growth will eventually lead to its demotion to junior status in the relations between the two (Lo 2004, p. 303). From a Russian perspective, China is a strategic partner, competitor and a potential security threat at the same time: "*Many in Russia see a dynamically growing China as a serious threat to Russian control over Siberia and the Russian Far East, and to Russia's strategic position in the north-western Pacific. This perception creates a certain ambivalence in Russian policy towards China: is China a friend to be supported and strengthened, or is it a threat to be contained?*" (Macfarlane 2006, p. 55).

The border talks which the Shanghai Five group was founded on can be seen as reflecting a fear in Russia that China would press for territorial claims in Central Asia. Historically, China has had close ties to the region since the time of the Silk Road, 2000 years ago (Chung 2004, p. 990). For Russia, deeper relations with China over Central Asia can therefore be seen as a mean to contain that threat: "*Indeed, there is a compelling argument that the best way of neutralizing the 'China threat' is to tie Beijing more closely into trans-Asian energy and infrastructural projects, facilitating the transformation of the RFE into a commercially lucrative region in whose stability all parties have a stake*" (Lo 2004, p. 305).

From a Chinese perspective, deepening the cooperation with Russia in Central Asia can be seen as a way to hindering Russia from tilting even more to the West. As a consequence of Russia's partnership with NATO, the U.S. is now discussing security related questions in Central Asia directly with Russia in a setting where China is not a member (Chung 2004, p. 1006). China is also afraid that Russia is using the CIS and the CSTO structures to secure closer ties to the Central Asian states. This latter worry is adequately summed up by Kerr and Swinton: "*SCO exists more to restrict the political options of others than to extend the political options of China*" (2008, p. 138).

6 Conclusions

The aim of this thesis has been to evaluate the soft balancing theory by applying it in a situation which others have framed a typical example thereof. My research question has been: *is soft balancing the driving force behind Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia?* In other words, has the American way of using its power in the region provoked enough resentment in Beijing and Moscow for them to take actions that is making it harder for the U.S. to achieve its foreign policy objectives? According to the argumentation discussed above, this fear should origin in a worry that the U.S., with its immense power, is taking or will take actions that are threatening Russian and Chinese national interests. Seen from a Sino-Russian vantage point, the act that might have incited such a worry seems to be that the U.S. first promised to leave Central Asia when the job in Afghanistan was done, but now - due to whatever reason - is still there. The question is if the presence of U.S. troops, unsure for how long, in a region traditionally seen as Russian sphere of influence and a pivotal element in Chinese long-term energy strategy, has provoked those two countries to step up their cooperation efforts in the region? In other words, is the deeper SCO cooperation reflecting this worry and being used as a mean to constrain the Americans from further threatening Sino-Russian national interests?

The first analytical section of this article makes the argument that Russian and Chinese collaboration in Central Asia is a response to U.S. primacy. Both countries feel that their geo-political and geo-economical interests are at stake by the mere presence of U.S. troops. My analysis shows that Russia and China have, in one way or another, been engaged in making it harder for the U.S. to access land, constrained their ability to cooperate with the regional governments of Central Asia, declared a will to increase their economic cooperation in an economic bloc outside American control, and lastly, signaled that they might step up their cooperation by involving other regional powers. In terms of responses to U.S. aggressiveness, there seems to be a connection between Russian and Chinese disappointment with the foreign policy of the United States and the intensity in their relations.

The other analytical part of this article asks whether China and Russia might have had other legitimate reasons to deepen their collaboration in Central Asia. Contrary to the first section, I here argue that the two countries' economic interests, regional security concerns, dissatisfaction with the Bush administration's overall strategy of democratization, as well as a will to contain each other might have provoked their will to cooperate in Central Asia. At this point, rather than to ask which of the two analyses that have the most explanatory

power, I recall the aim of this thesis; to evaluate whether soft balancing succeed in explaining the behavior of China and Russia in one specific situation. As I have been trying to show, there are as many explanations to why China and Russia have chosen to collaborate in the region as different angels adopted. How do we know what part in their relationship that is a response to an American decision not to leave Central Asia and what is not? The two criticisms of the Soft balancing theory are useful in that they point at two flaws in the theory's underlying assumptions: (1) it fails in differing between actions taken to constrain the exercise of U.S. power and day-to-day diplomatic wrangling, and, (2) it fails in considering alternative explanations to state behavior. If Sino-Russian actions, taken in concert or not, can be regarded as diplomatic wrangling *and / or* are not responses to U.S. power, then it does not make sense to invoke either traditional balancing reasoning or the soft balancing theory.

Do states soft balance the power of the United States at all? Just because this article shows that there is a difficulty in deciding whether the behavior of two states is soft balancing or not, I'm not in the position to make generalizations about other cases. However, what I can say is that *if* soft balancing is a tactic of second-tier states at all, one could expect it to happen here. The Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia involves coordination between states in areas directly related to security, it involves two of the world's most powerful states after the U.S., and it features state actions that are seriously limiting American ability to pursue its foreign policy objectives. Furthermore, as we have seen, it involves actions taken by two states which are very critical to how the United States has used its power.

Having come this far, I conclude that soft balancing explains Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia to a certain extent, but that inherited flaws in the theory makes it impossible to say if other explanations might have played a role as well. I do not conclude that states never balance the power of the U.S., either it is hard or soft. In this I agree with Lieber and Alexander in their critical response to Brooks and Wohlforth's definition of soft balancing: "*by defining balancing in such a restricted way, they miss—and so will others if they adopt this definition—a lot of balancing behavior in international politics*" (2005 b, p. 138). States do certainly balance the power of the U.S. and the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia might be one case thereof. Important, however, is that before we conclude that a certain behavior is soft balancing, we have to understand what is balancing and what is not.

In this sense, this article is not criticizing the traditional balance of power theory, quite the contrary. I think that many pundits and political scientists have misunderstood the assumptions that the theory rests upon. Just because no overt balancing coalitions can be seen today, the theory does not fall. The problem with the theory is its indeterminacy in explaining *when* unipolarity will give way to another structure or *how* states will balance the power of the superpower. Hence the problem is out of reach of the theory itself. The soft balancing theory is an

outgrowth of this indeterminacy, not necessarily a bad one. However, the simplicity of the balance of power theory and the soft balancing argument makes them attractive and easy to apply. Yet by focusing too much on which country that will become the next to challenge the U.S. we might miss a lot of interesting activities in international politics. Before we conclude that states balance the power of the U.S., with any method, we must also consider alternative explanations to their behavior. Eventually, the power of the U.S. will be balanced. The soft balancing theory may, however, not be the best theory to predict either *when* or *how*.

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