

# Theoretical explanation of balance of power



The concept of the Balance of Power can be a useful tool in explaining the behaviour of states. Mostly because it is founded on the theory that all states act to preserve their own self interest. If they are to do this they must prevent domination by any other state, which leads to the assumption that they must build up power and form alliances. Throughout history we can see the B. O. P. concept in action. The states of Europe held each other in balance through the first 300 years of the modern state system. The clearest example of the B. O. P. concept can be found in the Cold War. In the Cold War the two superpowers the U. S. and the U. S. S. R. held a stable world balance between them. Both states sought to deter domination by the other through a build up of arms and through the creation of strong alliance systems. Under the B. O. P. theory the logic of the Cold War strategies and alliances seems apparent, with the best method of security being strength.

In comparison with the era of the Cold War, we are now living in a constantly changing world. In recent years a number of emerging nations have been challenging the position of dominance of the old powers, which are dropping down the international pecking order. In economic terms, countries from the " South" now account for more than half of global GDP (Gross Domestic Product), are leading world growth -with growth rates above 11% (China) and 9% (India) -and consume more than half of the world's energy. It is forecast that in thirty years time, China and India will be global powers and that, along with the United States of America (USA), they will compete amongst themselves for world leadership.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been alone in the world; no state or combination of states provides an effective counterweight.

Moreover Globalization, Market forces and operation of non state elements without regard for national boundaries and loyalties have made the balancing phenomenon more complicated. Therefore, some recent studies in the field of International relations advocate that power politics including balancing of power has become obsolete and the theory of the balance of power has lost its relevance. This phenomenon has raised series of questions and just a few are picked out here:-

Question 1:

Historically why and how the states opt for International balance of power?

Question 2:

Is contemporary international politics devoid of balance of power and power politics?

Question 3:

Are traditional measures and sources of power losing their relevance in world?

Question 4

What is the effect of prevailing global security situations on International balance of power?

Aim of the Paper: The dual aim of the paper is to map the different trends that are shaping the senario for the future global power balance as well as to

offer a tool to better cope with the high uncertainty on how this landscape will evolve in the coming decades.

Research design:- This paper represents an attempt by five individuals to think collectively about the international Balance of Power (BoP), analyse past and current international setup to establish pattern of BoP and finally make futuristic prediction in this regard. A humble attempt has also been made to suggest a strategy for Pakistan to carving out its role and relevance in future global setting.

Relatively simple research design is used for this paper. It is in fact a historical, qualitative and an analytical appraisal of transformation of the global power balance that rests on the data extracted from both primary and secondary sources. This paper is mainly focused on studying the building blocks and mechanisms, by virtue of which the theories global power balance, are offering its scholarly and normative influence for contributing in predicting futuristic international scenarios. Three empirical gaps and theoretical arguments in the field of foreign/security policy and IR have been discussed in the study. For conduct of the research the paper would follow the standpoint of the realists' school. In the simplest form the realist paradigm claims that in International relations, 'sovereign states' are the key actors. In due process of International interaction among the states, their interests intrinsically come into conflict, mainly for gain of material power. Balancing thus occurs to protect/ promote its share in material gain.

Organization Of The Paper: Paper is organized in six parts. Part one is about theoretical explanation of balance of power. Part two discusses historical

perspective of BOP. Part three is comprised of Determinants of Rising power. Part four presents Shifts in Global balance of Power a myth or reality consequences and likely power counter in the next two decades alternatives to the balance of power as a basis for international order . Part five is focused on Challenges and Opportunities for Pakistan in likely future international settings. Conclusion and Recommendations are placed at the end.

## **THEORY OF BOP**

According to the “ balance-of-power theory” balance of power is a fundamental process of international politics, it is a kind of “ master law” of international relations. There is a long history to this “ Newtonian” conception of the balance of power. Yet in the European intellectual tradition it was, at least through the eighteenth century, a minority view. Much more common was the idea that prudent sovereigns ought to pursue balance-of-power politics. If they followed balance-of-power logic, they would preserve their own independence as well as prevent Europe from falling prey to an “ oriental-style” despotism. Thus the “ balance of power” was an important adjunct to European ideologies that rejected universal empire on normative grounds.

In contemporary international-relations theory, “ balance-of-power theory” is primarily associated with structural realism. Kenneth Waltz, the founder of structural realism, argues that because the international system lacks a common authority (is in a state of anarchy), it inclines states to behave in ways that, over time, produce recurrent balancing equilibria. Within

contemporary realism (broadly defined) there exist a number of approaches that reject this interpretation of the basic dynamics of world politics.

Both hegemonic-stability theorists and power-transition theorists argue that the natural equilibrium of international systems is unbalanced: that systems are characterized by the repeated emergence of dominant powers. In substance, the arguments of both camps are basically identical, although the former incline towards qualitative analysis and the latter towards statistical studies. They do adopt somewhat distinctive terminology, however.

Hegemonic-stability theorists generally view such systems as “ hegemony under anarchy,” i. e., the dominant power acts as a kind of quasi-world government, setting the rules for trade, war, and peace. Power-transition theorists, in contrast, tend to dismiss the notion that the international system is anarchical. In J. F. K. Organski’s view, the international system is characterized by a pyramid of power, with the dominant state at the top. This system is hierarchical, and has a great deal in common with domestic systems.

Advocates of both approaches tend to disagree with balance-of-power theorists that the best way to preserve peace between major powers is for states to achieve a balance of power between them. The logic is straightforward: when power is unbalanced, i. e., when a state or coalition of states is clearly superior to their potential rivals, then the former have no need to initiate wars to get what they want while the latter know they are likely to lose any confrontation. Wars between great powers, however,

happen when both sides believe they can win, i. e., when they at least perceive the existence of a rough equality of capabilities.

Hegemonic-stability theory – and particularly the work of Robert Gilpin – helped spawn a third variant of realism, often called “ neoclassical realism.” Neoclassical realism shares a great deal in common with the understanding of the balance of power prevalent in early modern Europe: balancing is a prudent policy, but there is no “ force of nature” that impels states to engage in balancing behavior.

In my view, behind all the interpretations of the balance of power lies the appeal to realism in the conduct of international affairs. Realism remains the best, perhaps the only persuasive, argument for restraint; and it is common ground that the doctrine of the balance of power is a device to promote restraint, whether it is argued that lack of restraint is wrong, or dangerous, or ultimately bound to fail. In that sense the balance of power in international affairs is clearly related to the idea of checks and balances within a government, which is equally a device to impose restraint on men who might otherwise, seduced by power, abandon it.

When Hans Morgenthau wrote *Politics Among Nations* in 1948, he was coming from the experience of World War II and his observations of the struggle for power and peace. He was very aware of the international system of the 19th century and how it changed through the first half of the 20th century. Then, as the Cold War settled in, he observed how a new bipolar world emerged from the former multi-polar world. He was very sure that an “ objective and universally valid truth” existed to explain the world politic and

that truth was “ accessible to human reason.” The Realist view of the world was born with Morgenthau (and others) with this view that to successfully navigate the treacherous world of international politics, one must have a very clear understanding of how the world “ really” operated.

Waltz, arriving on the scene a generation later and with more time to observe the apparent bipolarity established by the United States and the Soviet Union, decided that the early Realists were fundamentally correct. He posits that since the international world is anarchical and that power is the coin of the realm, states must make decisions based on the position they have relative to others. Therefore, the actions of states can, to some extent, be predicted based on their power position in the region and world.

States, in Waltz’s understanding of the World, remain the principal actor. Transnational, sub-national, and even a-national actors may arrive on the scene and even have effects in the international arena, but the state will always find a way to deal with the “ interlopers.” None of the other potential replacements for the state have the capability of providing what states can do for their populations.

Realists have a pessimistic view of the world; there is conflict, always has been conflict, and there always will be conflict. This view rejects the notion that one can differentiate morally between “ virtuous” and “ non-virtuous” states in the international system. Such a view of how the world really works does not easily admit that the system can be changed and that conflict can be avoided.



The Realist, then, is concerned with how the world actually operates and not with how the world ought to operate. The Realist sees the state as the fundamental actor in the international system, which is anarchical and amoral. As a result, actions taken by states that are not aligned with or do not at least take into account these “realities” are likely doomed to failure. Morgenthau was quite convinced that mistaken faith in Wilson’s liberal philosophy had taken the world to the brink of disaster. The attempt to use morals to decide on actions was not successful. Only firm decisions taken with a full understanding of the reality of the international system would bring successful foreign policy.

Fundamental to this system is the balance of power. Each state is concerned as to where it sits in relation to other states. When one state begins to gain power, other states will make decisions based on that power. Some will organize to counter those gains, either as an individual or by forming alliances.

Coming along a generation after Waltz, Stephen Walt added to the Realist paradigm the notion of the “balance of threat.” Really just another way of discussing the balance of power, he shows how threats are the means by which states communicate with each other, thus ensuring they are taken seriously so their interests are protected. Balancing of power is a two-sided proposition, though, meaning that a state, by its actions, can convince other states to either balance against them or with them. “Band-wagoning,” a process, by which states join with others, ostensibly to counter an aggressive state, is a mechanism Walt believes must be better understood and taken into account by leaders of states.

We may actually be seeing some of this going on in response to U. S. actions with respect to Afghanistan and Iraq. In the case of Iraq, by standing up to aggressive action on the part of Al Qaeda, most of NATO stood with the United States and remains with US in the fight in Afghanistan. The opposite occurred with Iraq, when the European states saw American actions as being aggressive, and have “band-wagoned” in opposition to the United States.

In order to promote a theoretical understanding of international relations and get answers of our research questions we will use realists’ approach of the balance of power. The realists’ theory provides answers to our questions as under:-

### Realists’ Theory

#### Question 1:

Historically why and how the states opt for International balance of power?

Against threatening (or powerful) states by forming alliance

#### Question 2:

Is contemporary international politics devoid of balance of power and power politics?

Balance of power is still relevant

#### Question 3:

Are traditional measures and sources of power losing their relevance in world politics?

They are still relevant

#### Question 4

what is the effect of prevailing global security situations on International balance of power?

After the disintegration of USSR, traditional international balance of power was disturbed because of US unilateral approach to the world's leading problems. After the current transitional flux, several poles are emerging and the traditional balance of power is going to be restored.

## **DEFINITION OF BALANCE OF POWER**

### **Political Dictionary: balance of power**

Probably the oldest concept in the study of International Relations going back at least to the work of Thucydides. It is closely associated with both diplomatic parlance and realist theory. Its logic derives from the self-help imperative of the international system's anarchic structure, in which states are obliged to give priority to survival and security. In pursuing this logic, states will usually join together to oppose any expansionist centre of power that threatens to dominate the system and thus threaten their sovereignty. Balance of power behaviour is central to conceptions of the national interest and to alliance policy. If successful, it preserves individual states and the anarchic structure of the system as a whole. Its opposite is 'bandwagoning', in which states seek security by joining with the dominant power. Realists conceive balance of power as an automatic tendency in state behaviour. In an international society perspective, balance of power is a conscious policy shared amongst a group of states, and serving as the principle by which they

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regulate their relations. Neither 'balance' nor 'power' are measurable, and their interpretation is much debated.

– Barry Buzan

### **Britannica Concise Encyclopedia:**

In international relations, an equilibrium of power sufficient to discourage or prevent one nation or party from imposing its will on or interfering with the interests of another. The term came into use at the end of the Napoleonic Wars to denote the power relationships in the European state system. Until World War I, Britain played the role of balancer in a number of shifting alliances. After World War II, a Northern Hemisphere balance of power pitted the U. S. and its allies (NATO) against the Soviet Union and its satellites ( Warsaw Pact) in a bipolar balance of power backed by the threat of nuclear war. China's defection from the Soviet camp to a nonaligned but covertly anti-Soviet stance produced a third node of power. With the Soviet Union's collapse (1991), the U. S. and its NATO allies were recognized universally as the world's paramount military power.

Balance of power, On Britannica. com

### **Columbia Encyclopedia:**

Balance of power is system of international relations in which nations seek to maintain an approximate equilibrium of power among many rivals, thus preventing the preponderance of any one state. Crucial to the system is a willingness on the part of individual national governments to change alliances as the situation demands in order to maintain the balance.

Thucydides' description of Greece in the 5th cent. B. C. and Guicciardini's

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description of 15th-century Italy are early illustrations. Its modern development began in the mid-17th cent., when it was directed against the France of Louis XIV. Balance of power was the stated British objective for much of the 18th and 19th cent., and it characterized the European international system, for example, from 1815-1914. After World War I the balance of power system was attacked by proponents of cooperation and a community of power. International relations were changed radically after World War II by the predominance of two superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, with major ideological differences between them. After the 1960s, with the emergence of China and the Third World, a revived Europe and Japan, it reemerged as a component of international relations. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the United States, as the sole remaining superpower, has been dominant militarily and, to a lesser degree, economically.

### **US Foreign Policy Encyclopedia:**

The balance of power appears at first sight a simple concept. It has been defined as “ a phrase in international law for such a ‘ just equilibrium’ between the members of the family of nations as should prevent any one of them from becoming sufficiently strong to enforce its will upon the rest.” Yet the phrase has always been of more use in political polemic than in political analysis. Like other phrases with a strong emotional appeal it is vague, and it would lose its appeal if it were more precise. Its obscurities are several, but the most important is that it blends the descriptive and the normative. The condition is one, the term “ balance” implies, toward which international life is forever tending. That is the descriptive element. But the condition is also

one that may be upset, and right-thinking statesmen should constantly be on the alert to preserve or restore it. That is the normative element. These two elements reinforce one another. Because such a balance will be established in any event, it is sensible and moral to work toward it.

## **PART-II**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

#### **OF**

### **BALANCE OF POWER**

### **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF BALANCE OF POWER**

4. Prehistoric and Medieval Periods. During the Period of the Warring States in China (403-221 BC), the development of large, cohesive states accompanied the creation of irrigation systems, bureaucracies, and large armies equipped with iron weapons. These Chinese states pursued power through a constantly shifting network of alliances. In ancient Greece during the Peloponnesian Wars (431-404 BC), the rising power of Athens triggered the formation of a coalition of city-states that felt threatened by Athenian power.

#### 5. Pre World Wars Period

a. In the 17th century the Habsburg dynasty, which ruled Austria and Spain, threatened to dominate Europe. During the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), a coalition that included Sweden, England, France, and The Netherlands defeated the rulers of the Habsburg Empire.

b. Early in the 19th century, Napoleon repeatedly made efforts to conquer large areas of Europe. A broad coalition of European states-including Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia-defeated France in a series of major battles that climaxed with Napoleon's defeat at the Battle of Waterloo in 1815.

c. The classical European balance of power system emerged thereafter in an alliance known as the Concert of Europe, organized in 1815 by Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich. This loose alliance between Britain, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and France ensured that a handful of great powers would coexist, with none able to dominate the others. Under this system, and with Britain playing a balancer role, peace largely prevailed in Europe during the 19th century. It is not an accident that the doctrine of the balance of power-alike in international and in domestic politics-received its classic and most rigorous statements at a time when foreign policy was largely a matter for rulers who could use the war potential of their states for their own aggrandizement. It was because a ruler had to be able to wage effective war that he had to be allowed the armed force that contributed to his domestic control.

d. British reliance on a navy rather than on a standing army was important to the growth of British liberties-and later to American liberty. In a sense, therefore, the international balance of power was needed to check the pretensions of rulers who lacked any effective domestic check. The balance of power, however, although it may act to restrain the actions of those who believe in the doctrine, is in the first instance a device to restrain others.

6. Inter and Intra World Wars Period (1914-1945)

a. When World War I broke out, although all parties made some effort to maintain or protect the balance of power (which, of course, they interpreted differently), none of them could argue that governments, or princes, were behaving in the way that one would expect. German apologists had to contend that Germany was surrounded by malevolent foes and that the survival of Germany was at stake. The allies had to contend not merely that Germany was too powerful for comfort, but that German militarism threatened a European civilization that would otherwise be peaceful. The argument, in short, could not be cast in terms of the balance of power.

b. In order to contain Germany and its allies, a formidable alliance was formed in Europe. German threat was such that USA broke away with the centuries long stand of neutrality and joined the alliance against Germany. Status quo however, was maintained in Europe. Historians will long continue to debate the causes that finally brought the United States into the war.

c. Same was the case in World War II, where, a status quo was required to be maintained and German advances were to be stopped, alliance on the lines of World War I was formed. The alliance completely decapitated German led axis powers. In both the World Wars, the entry of the United States so quickly and completely tilted the balance of power in favor of the side it joined. Had the United States been regarded as an element in the balance; the wars in the form they took would never have broken out and it is here that the world saw the introduction of WMD.

## 7. Cold War Period



a. It was well recognized that the United States and the Soviet Union were in direct and unique competition. The appalling consequences of nuclear war introduced a new kind of stability. The so-called balance of terror or balance of deterrence ensured that each nuclear power was anxious not to give the other power any sort of signal that would justify an attack, and was also anxious not to identify such a signal. This caution was compatible with, and even required, an arms race.

b. The ideological struggle reflected the knowledge of both great powers that they contended in a fast-changing world; and the Cold War began to lose intensity, not when the protagonists decided to abandon it but when world circumstances changed and new elements began to contribute to the balance.

c. It became almost conventional to speak in terms of a world of four poles—the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe and Japan.

d. US led West used all means and opportunities to balance Soviet military power and kept on trying to contain Soviet Union. On the other hand Soviet Union formed an alliance with the opposite block countries to counter the US. Struggle of countering each power continued till the Soviet Union finally collapsed. With the subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union, the United States became incontrovertibly the world's dominant power.

## 8. Post Cold War

a. After the disintegration of Soviet Union, USA emerged as sole global power hence as per the ground realities, the entire world had to align its policies

with the US. Without an apparent foe to challenge its security, the major question confronting U. S. foreign policy was what would succeed the Cold War's bipolar balance of power.

b. The issue among academics and political commentators was whether the United States should emphasize its dominant position as a "unipolar" global power, or seek a leading role in a tripolar or multipolar system.

9. Conclusions from Historical Perspective. In nut shell post cold war power balance is categorized by US unilateralism, West's political, economic and social control to the extent that the situations symbolize with that of eighteenth and nineteenth century's colonization. Striking conclusions of the post cold war power balance are as under:-

a. The end of the Cold War in US and Europe and the ongoing integration of the European economies alongside attempts at greater political integration in the continent have given rise to a view that traditional concepts of security are no longer relevant. There is a powerful perception that the idea of the state and its sovereignty has been made irrelevant by processes that are taking place at both the global and local level. Concept of security has been widened to the extent that currently it includes everything under the sun.

b. Concept of Balance of Power has also been changed from the known enemy threat to fear of unlimited unknowns. Interpretations of the balance has also been changed from balance among nation states to balance among civilizations and much beyond.

c. Post cold war era reintroduces the phenomena of colonization with changed face of chaining the third world through economic, trade and technology transfer policies under the umbrella of IMF, world bank, various technological regimes and UN.

### **PART III**

#### **DETERMINANTS OF RISING POWER (ELEMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER OR ANY OTHER FACTORS DEEMED NECESSARY TO QUALIFY A POWER TO BE THE “ RISING POWER”)**

The international system is characterized by several unique features which colour the entire pattern of interstate relations and international politics.

These features may be summarized as follows:-

The central fact about the international system is that it consists of sovereign and independent nation states.

These nation states act in their several interests. Their actions are the result of such factors as the judgments of the individual state authorities.

The international system has no central political organ capable of enforcing uniform laws and standards of behavior. The United Nation is too weak to perform the task.

There are very few universally accepted rules of the game. Generally recognized sources of these rules are four:-

Diplomatic practices, (b) International law, (c) Morality and

(d) World Public opinion. The significance of morality and world public opinion in international politics is hard to determine. The laws and principles flowing from other two sources are not properly codified and states individually interpret them in their interest.

(5) Various states differ in their historical experiences, political ideologies and economic systems. Again they follow different religions, belong to different cultures and value systems. It is the complicated interaction between these various factors that colours their entire outlook.

(6) The different states vary with respect to such vital factors as size of population and territory, character, political systems, resources, ideology and judgment.

(7) The power distribution of the world is very odd. Between super powers (like the USA and the Soviet Union) and small powers (like Peru, Ethiopia, Srilanka, Sudan etc) there are a number of powers-medium, secondary and lesser powers.

(8) Despite the fact of unequal power distribution each state by virtue of being independent and sovereign is regarded as equal and claims equal rights. In the absence of any central organ capable of guaranteeing these equal rights, the protection of these equal rights becomes the concern of each individual state. They are free to select and apply their own methods to protect their status and rights. The result is the international political activity.

(9) The cumulative result of all the above factors is the emergence of a typical system which unlike community lacks common values and goals, has no universally accepted procedures and code of conduct where because of these factors resort to arms to resolve disputes is not uncommon.

## **NATURE AND ROLE OF POWER**

The word power refers to one's capacity to control. As man endeavours to control the various aspects of his environment, his capacity to control these aspects manifests itself in different ways. It is his scientific knowledge (power) through which he controls nature whereas his capacity to control the means of production and distribution is called his economic power. Political power is different from these. It is man's power over the minds and actions of other men.

Two questions arise in this connection-first, why men want to control and direct the activities of others and second, what are the sources of this power. One probable answer to the first question is that the best way to avoid control over one-self by others is to control all others. Perhaps controlling all others is the only surest means for avoiding possible control by them over one-self. Diving deeper into this line of analysis leads one to the Hobbesian conception of human nature. Another answer is that man wants to control others for material benefits. Thus economic needs of man become the principal driving force behind all his political activity.

As regards the sources of power, too, there is a wide divergence of opinion. The different views can broadly be categorized into two- the classical view and the modern view. According to the classical view the sources of political

power are economic and physical strength, which one can exert on others. It exerts through orders, threats etc., and operates by creating either an expectation of benefit or the fear of disadvantages. In the modern sense power is more a spiritual and intellectual leadership. It is the capacity of a leading state to invite confidence, support and co-operation from lesser states through its championship of promising political principles or a value system. This type of power is based on a kind of 'concensus in shared values'. It assumes the form of voluntary agreement among states to follow a given course of action. It is exerted not through orders and threats but through persuasion. It is tutelage in principles and values through which the powerful try to identify their aims with the aspirations of the lesser powers. It is because of this that it is some times called an 'ideological contest' or