

Soft balancing in the regions: causes, characteristics and consequences

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The decline and retrenchment of the United States is increasing the importance of regional dynamics across the international system. Over the past decade, International Relations (IR) scholars have described and conceptualized this development as, for example, ‘de-centred globalism’,¹ a ‘multi-order world’,² a ‘multiplex world’³ or a multicultural ‘no-one’s world’,⁴ but the links between the regional and global levels and the roles and functions of regional institutions in power politics continue to be poorly understood. The contributions to this special section use the analytical lens of soft balancing—that is, attempts at restraining a threatening power through diplomatic and institutional delegitimation—to explore these links. Soft balancing has been used extensively to understand developments at the great power level, but its focus on diplomatic and institutional strategies holds considerable potential for explaining how rising powers, middle powers and smaller states seek to navigate the international order in uncertain times. Contributors to the section discuss developments in the Indo-Pacific, central Asia, Europe and the BRICS group of countries,⁵ offering answers to questions such as: what are the characteristics of soft balancing in the regions? How do regional actors apply different soft balancing strategies? When and under what conditions will soft balancing strategies be effective? What is the impact of soft balancing on regional and global orders? This introduction offers an overview of soft balancing in terms of its theory and practice and their relevance to the world’s regions.

Soft balancing, as an innovative concept in IR, was introduced through an academic debate in *International Security*—one of the leading IR journals—in 2005

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¹ Barry Buzan and George Lawson, *The global transformation: history, modernity and the making of International Relations* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 273.

² Trine Flockhart, ‘The coming multi-order world’, *Contemporary Security Policy* 37: 1, 2016, pp. 3–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2016.1150053>.

³ Amitav Acharya, *The end of American world order* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014), p. 8.

⁴ Charles Kupchan, *No one’s world: the West, the rising rest, and the coming global turn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁵ The BRICS group was founded in 2009 by Brazil, China, India, Russia and South Africa; four new members (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates) were admitted in 2024, after which the grouping became known as ‘BRICS+’. Saudi Arabia is still considering the BRICS invitation.

against the background of other great powers' challenging behaviours—through non-military means—in response to US unilateral action in launching the Iraq War in 2003. Instead of supporting the US' (and United Kingdom's) decision to invade Iraq, France, Germany, Russia and China refused to authorize the US-led invasion at the United Nations. Scholars like Robert Pape and T.V. Paul labelled this behaviour 'soft balancing' because it 'balanced' against what the US wanted in a 'soft' way rather than via traditional hard (military) balancing means.⁶ In this instance, the purpose of soft balancing was to frustrate, delay and undermine US legitimacy, power and threatening behaviour under conditions of unipolarity.

Not only does the major contribution of the soft balancing debate in *International Security* lie in the academic insights and argumentations on states' behaviours under unipolarity, it is also reflected in the continuous efforts of some IR scholars to further conceptualize, theorize and analyse soft-balancing behaviours beyond unipolarity.⁷ Gradually, soft balancing has become a popular research programme in which scholars apply similar realist underpinnings to shed light on the non-military balancing of power behaviours in world politics. It has also evoked a fair amount of criticism. However, without a concept such as soft balancing, a sizeable proportion of states' balancing efforts—whether towards the US during the first two decades of the post-Cold War era, or towards a rising China until 2014—remain unaccounted for. As with other concepts like 'soft power' and 'soft international law', soft balancing has a place in IR, especially in terms of the myriad of strategies states adopt towards threatening powers in the international and regional systems. These other cognate concepts are also criticized for their imprecision or lack of punchiness, but several indicators exist to show their presence in international politics. In fact, many crucial elements of international law are of a soft variety and have created embedded norms for state behaviour over time without creating stringent enforcement mechanisms or the authority to enforce them. As such, they tend to rely on fluid interpretations and obligations on the part of states.⁸ Similarly, soft power—which, according to Nye, is 'the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion'⁹—is an imprecise concept, as measuring it is extremely difficult and its relevance and application may vary from one context to another. Both soft law and soft power can supplement and complement hard laws and hard power, and this may very well hold true for soft balancing and hard balancing alike.

⁶ Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 7–45, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894607>; T.V. Paul, 'Soft balancing in the age of US primacy', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 46–71, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894652>.

⁷ Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'If not soft balancing, then what? Reconsidering soft balancing and U.S. policy toward China', *Security Studies* 17: 2, 2008, pp. 363–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636410802098776>; Kai He, 'Undermining adversaries: unipolarity, threat perception, and negative balancing strategies after the Cold War', *Security Studies* 21: 2, 2012, pp. 154–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2012.679201>; Huiyun Feng and Kai He, 'Soft balancing', *Oxford research encyclopedia of politics*, publ. online 28 June 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.549>.

⁸ Kenneth W. Abbot and Duncan Snidal, 'Hard and soft law in international governance', *International Organization* 54: 3, 2000, pp. 421–56, <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081800551280>.

⁹ On soft power, see Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004).

Soft balancing expanded

The soft balancing research programme has flourished through three major dimensional expansions in the IR field. First, some scholars apply the soft balancing argument to historical cases beyond unipolarity.¹⁰ This represents a vertical expansion of the soft balancing scholarship from historical to current times. For example, in his book *Restraining great powers: soft balancing from empires to the global era*, published in 2018, Paul suggests that soft balancing is not a unique policy choice by second-tier states against the hegemon in a unipolar world. Instead, soft balancing as a security strategy has been practised throughout the modern era for more than two centuries.¹¹ Paul's book is the first systematic examination of soft balancing strategies from the Concert of Europe in the nineteenth century to the present US–China competition in the globalization era. Case-studies in the book included failed soft balancing efforts through the League of Nations against Japan, Germany and Italy in the 1930s; limited attempts, including during the Cold War era, by non-aligned and European countries; and soft balancing efforts against the US and Russia in the post-Cold War era.¹²

In a similar fashion to Paul, Friedman and Long employ soft balancing theory to examine Latin American opposition to the United States during the period between 1898 and 1936. They maintain that it is not only in the twenty-first century under global unipolarity that soft balancing has taken place—i.e. between second-tier powers and the unipole. Rather, they claim that it is more than a century ago that Latin American nations conducted a soft balancing strategy to develop new international norms, against military intervention from the United States. This soft balancing effort actually led to 'a tidal shift in U.S. policy on military intervention lasting from the 1930s into the 1950s and arguably thereafter'.¹³

Second, other scholars expand the soft balancing argument horizontally, from accounting for great powers' interactions to explaining small and middle powers' behaviours.¹⁴ More importantly, the United States—the hegemon or unipole in

¹⁰ For example, Ilai Z. Saltzman, 'Soft balancing as foreign policy: assessing American strategy toward Japan in the interwar period', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 8: 2, 2012, pp. 131–50, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-8594.2011.00146.x>; T.V. Paul, *Restraining great powers: soft balancing from empires to the global era* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Max Paul Friedman and Tom Long, 'Soft balancing in the Americas: Latin American opposition to U.S. intervention, 1898–1936', *International Security* 40: 1, 2015, pp. 120–56, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00212.

¹¹ Paul, *Restraining great powers*.

¹² Paul, *Restraining great powers*.

¹³ Friedman and Long, 'Soft balancing in the Americas', p. 122.

¹⁴ For example, Franz Oswald, 'Soft balancing between friends: transforming transatlantic relations', *Debate: Journal of Contemporary Central and Eastern Europe* 14: 2, 2006, pp. 145–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09651560600841502>; Alexandru Grigorescu, 'East and central European countries and the Iraq War: the choice between "soft balancing" and "soft bandwagoning"', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41: 3, 2008, pp. 281–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2008.06.004>; James Manicom and Andrew O'Neil, 'Accommodation, realignment, or business as usual? Australia's response to a rising China', *The Pacific Review* 23: 1, 2010, pp. 23–44, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512740903398322>; Mordechai Chaziza, 'Soft balancing strategy in the Middle East: Chinese and Russian vetoes in the United Nations Security Council in the Syria crisis', *China Report* 50: 3, 2014, pp. 243–58, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0009445514534126>; T. J. Pempel, 'Soft balancing, hedging, and institutional Darwinism: the economic-security nexus and East Asian regionalism', *Journal of East Asian Studies* 10: 2, 2010, pp. 209–38, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S159824080003441>; Wondeuk Cho and Sangsook Lee, 'US–China strategic competition and Vietnamese strategy toward China: from hedging to soft balancing', *The Journal of Northeast Asia Research* 35: 2, 2020, pp. 5–35, <https://doi.org/10.18013/jnar.2020.35.2.001> (in Korean);

the system—is no longer the only target of soft balancing by secondary powers. In other words, soft balancing becomes a general foreign policy practice adopted by states against external threats in the international system, instead of a unique behaviour against a unipolar US. For example, de Castro argues that the Duterte administration in the Philippines (2016–2022) adopted a policy of soft balancing in the South China Sea by ‘hedging on its alliance with the U.S., fostering a security partnership with Japan; and pushing for the immediate passage of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)–China Code of Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea’.¹⁵ Here, the target of the Philippines’ soft balancing strategy has been China’s assertiveness in the South China Sea, not the unilateralism of the United States under unipolarity. In a similar vein, but in a different region, Dursun-Özkanca suggests that Turkey adopted a soft balancing strategy to obstruct communication and coordination between the European Union and NATO.¹⁶ In Dursun-Özkanca’s analysis, soft balancing is employed as an institutional tool, working through the EU against NATO—another western institution. The target of soft balancing has expanded beyond individual nation-states to international institutions.

Last, but not least, other scholars go yet further, to re-examine the conceptualization of soft balancing and further theorize different soft-balancing behaviours. For example, He suggests that soft balancing theory is too broad to capture the nuances and dynamics of soft balancing in practice.¹⁷ Therefore, He proposes an ‘institutional balancing’ theory to specify why and how states can rely on multilateral institutions to pursue power and security in the anarchic international system.¹⁸ Further, He typologizes two types of institutional balancing strategies—inclusive institutional balancing and exclusive institutional balancing—which are employed to explain the post-Cold War institutional dynamics and competitions among the United States, China, ASEAN and Japan in the Asia-Pacific.¹⁹

Sebastian Biba, ‘Ganging up on Trump? Sino-German relations and the problem with soft balancing against the USA’, *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, vol. 25, 2020, pp. 531–50, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11366-020-09669-5>; Pavan Kumar, ‘India balancing China: exploring soft balancing through Indo-Pacific’, *Millennial Asia* 13: 2, 2022, pp. 339–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0976399621998274>; Bhubhindar Singh, ‘Japan’s responses to China’s rise: soft balancing in Southeast Asia’, *Asian Security* 18: 1, 2022, pp. 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2021.1942849>; Cristian Cantir and Ryan Kennedy, ‘Balancing on the shoulders of giants: Moldova’s foreign policy toward Russia and the European Union’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 11: 4, 2015, pp. 397–416, <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12051>; Javier Corrales, ‘Using social power to balance soft power: Venezuela’s foreign policy’, *The Washington Quarterly* 32: 4, 2009, pp. 97–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600903232285>.

¹⁵ Renato Cruz de Castro, ‘From appeasement to soft balancing: the Duterte administration’s shifting policy on the South China Sea imbroglio’, *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 49: 1, 2022, pp. 35–61 at p. 35, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00927678.2020.1818910>.

¹⁶ Oya Dursun-Özkanca, ‘Turkish soft balancing against the EU? An analysis of the prospects for improved transatlantic security relations’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 13: 4, 2017, pp. 894–912, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orw004>.

¹⁷ Kai He, ‘Undermining adversaries’.

¹⁸ Kai He, ‘Institutional balancing and International Relations theory: economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia’, *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 3, 2008, pp. 489–518, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066108092310>; Kai He, *Institutional balancing in the Asia Pacific: economic interdependence and China’s rise* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2009); Kai He, ‘China’s rise, institutional balancing, and (possible) peaceful order transition in the Asia Pacific’, *The Pacific Review* 35: 6, 2022, pp. 1105–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2022.2075439>.

¹⁹ He and Feng, ‘If not soft balancing, then what?’; He, ‘Institutional balancing and International Relations theory’; He, *Institutional balancing in the Asia Pacific*.

In addition, scholars highlight the role of diplomatic practices, institutions and norms in constituting soft balancing strategies. Kelley, for example, argues that ‘strategic non-cooperation’—a diplomatic practice—is a type of soft balancing strategy that can better explain the resistance of some European states against the United States in 2002/3, around the time of the Iraq War.²⁰ Contessi suggests that multilateralism has been used as a soft balancing tool by China to expand its power and influence in Africa and the Arab world in the post-9/11 era;²¹ and Ferguson argues that China and Russia have adopted ‘soft’ or ‘normative’ power assets as a balancing means to deal with pressures from the United States.²² These soft or normative power assets refer to alternative norms, such as the concept of ‘sovereign democracy’, which treats foreign support for domestic democratic movements as a form of external meddling in their internal affairs.²³ Levick and Schultz argue that Latin American states have relied on institutional binding strategies to restrain US behaviour in the Americas, especially when the threat level was low, but have employed soft balancing when the threats were perceived to be high.²⁴

Responding to four challenges of soft balancing

Despite the advancement of the soft balancing research programme in the field, there are still four major challenges for soft balancing scholarship around the questions of ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘so what?’. First, what is soft balancing? What is not soft balancing? It is still an unsettled debate even among soft balancing scholars. In the 2005 *International Security* debate, Lieber and Alexander criticize soft balancing theory by suggesting that much of what is termed ‘soft balancing’ is typical diplomatic friction among states, which is normal in world politics and happened occasionally even before US unipolarity.²⁵ Similarly, Brooks and Wohlforth argue that the soft balancing argument lacks conceptual clarity, empirical uniqueness and theoretical innovation.²⁶ These criticisms are problematic as soft balancing is not the same as day-to-day diplomatic friction, but concerted efforts by states, through international institutions and/or via economic statecraft, to blunt and delegitimize the target powers’ threatening policies. Still, the lack of clarity on what counts as soft balancing and what does not calls for further

²⁰ Judith Kelley, ‘Strategic non-cooperation as soft balancing: why Iraq was not just about Iraq’, *International Politics* 42: 2, 2005, pp. 153–73, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ip.8800105>.

²¹ Nicola P. Contessi, ‘Experiments in soft balancing: China-led multilateralism in Africa and the Arab world’, *Caucasian Review of International Affairs* 3: 4, 2009, pp. 404–34.

²² Chaka Ferguson, ‘The strategic use of soft balancing: the normative dimensions of the Chinese-Russian “strategic partnership”’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35: 2, 2012, pp. 197–222, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2011.583153>.

²³ Ferguson, ‘The strategic use of soft balancing’, p. 213.

²⁴ Laura Levick and Carsten-Andreas Schulz, ‘Soft balancing, binding or bandwagoning? Understanding institutional responses to power disparities in the Americas’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 53: 3, 2020, pp. 521–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423920000220>.

²⁵ Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, ‘Waiting for balancing: why the world is not pushing back’, *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 109–39 at p. 109, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894580>.

²⁶ Steven G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, ‘Hard times for soft balancing’, *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 72–108, <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162288054894634>.

conceptual development. Consequently, the contributions to this special section seek to clarify what soft balancing is as well as what it does to global and regional politics.

Although some soft balancing scholars have tried to clarify the concept of soft balancing, many take it for granted, without offering a proper definition or measurement in their research. Critics can still raise queries about the conceptual difference between soft balancing strategies and traditional research programmes on institutions, economic sanctions and even strategic alignments. Before the invention of the concept of soft balancing, states relied on these instruments to constrain others' behaviours, but with the soft balancing literature a codified umbrella approach has emerged. Theoretically, how to consolidate the soft balancing scholarship and these existing studies is an unresolved problem. Therefore, scholars who intend to enhance the soft balancing scholarship will have two tasks to accomplish. On the one hand, they will need to carefully define what soft balancing is, and—even more importantly—what behaviour does *not* constitute soft balancing. One major problem from the first generation of soft balancing scholars is that they conceptualized soft balancing too loosely. Efforts by later scholars to conceptualize it have made some progress. In his 2018 work, for example, Paul defines soft balancing as:

restraining the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy via limited, informal ententes, and economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate in the eyes of the world and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain.²⁷

Three critical mechanisms are also presented: institutional restraints, diplomacy and economic sanctions as key indicators and strategies of soft-balancing behaviour. While these mechanisms are utilized for different purposes in interstate relations, if they are deliberately and consistently employed to constrain and delegitimize the aggressive behaviour of a threatening power for a period of time, they can be considered to constitute soft balancing, as the aim is to blunt the power and threatening behaviour of a state. For instance, stronger powers can use economic sanctions to punish weaker actors, but not necessarily for the purposes of soft balancing. Instead, it could be done for retribitional purposes or for signalling their disapproval of particular policies of target states. Blindly accepting critics' easy positions on soft balancing—like calling it 'day-to-day diplomatic friction'—has caused others to repeat these misunderstandings, ignoring efforts to systematize soft balancing in more recent research.

Second, why do states choose soft balancing over other strategies? Under what conditions, or when, are states more likely to conduct soft balancing? Paul suggests four major reasons for states to conduct soft balancing, especially in the post-Cold War era: the deepening economic interdependence in the era of globalization, the development of defensive and deterrent technologies (especially nuclear weapons), the widely accepted norms of territorial integrity among states,

²⁷ Paul, *Restraining great powers*, p. 20.

and the absence of expansionist ideology.²⁸ However, although Paul does not explicitly explore which variable or variables are the most important ones in encouraging states to prefer soft balancing at the expense of hard balancing, in the case-studies and concluding chapter he does examine the causal relationship between these variables and soft-balancing behaviour, or the absence of it. Often it is practised in situations where it is difficult to engage in hard balancing, owing to a lack of internal balancing capabilities or of external allies willing to form formal military alliances. Thus, the periods 1815–53 (the Concert of Europe) and 1991–2010 favoured a greater application and some successes of soft balancing strategies, while the years between 1853 and 1890 and the period since 2010 show mixed strategies of hard, soft and partial balancing outcomes. However, the periods 1890–1914, 1919–1939 and 1945–1991 were eras of intense hard balancing.

The advantage of a soft balancing strategy is that it can be practised against allies, as was attempted by Germany and France in the case of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. It is also practised in contexts where the target is a critical player in collective action problem-solving, as in the case of China today. The strategies of the EU and ASEAN towards China rely on soft balancing over hard balancing because of China's role in the above and because it is also a major source of trade and investment.²⁹ It is, however, worth exploring how interactions among these four variables can shape states' policy choices between soft balancing and hard balancing. It may very well be that all four variables are present in the post-Cold War era, producing an additive effect. The common thread is the threat level in the international or regional systems in a given era. Intense threats of the existential variety often produce hard balancing, but non-existential threats are confronted by soft balancing mechanisms so that states can avoid becoming embroiled in serious conflict and provoking military retribution. In some circumstances, soft balancing can be a complement to hard balancing, as in the western approach towards Russia following the 2014 annexation of Crimea until the invasion of Ukraine in 2022—although in the aftermath of the invasion hard balancing has been the dominant approach. There is also an underlying assumption in critics' positions that only successful policies constitute a strategy, which neglects the fact that hard balancing can produce failures and negative outcomes. Similarly, despite the limitations of soft balancing, states resort to measures such as economic sanctions, hoping to blunt opposing powers. Sanctions are also often used as signalling devices to show displeasure at given policies. Soft balancing strategies have similar aims for states, large and small.

Differing from Paul's efforts at hypothesizing in a general sense why states choose soft balancing over other strategies, some scholars develop country-specific explanations to explain a state's soft balancing strategy. For example, Dursun-Özkanca identifies three main reasons behind Turkey's soft balancing by creating an impasse in NATO–EU coordination: 1) Turkish resentment for its exclusion

²⁸ Paul, *Restraining great powers*.

²⁹ Eva Pejsova, 'The EU's Indo-Pacific strategy in 10 points', *The Diplomat*, 20 April 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/the-eus-indo-pacific-strategy-in-10-points>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 22 November 2024.)

from European security developments; 2) the uncertainties revolving around Turkey's EU membership prospects and the subsequent lack of trust towards the EU; and 3) the unresolved issue of Cyprus.³⁰ The advantage of this type of localizing soft balancing approach is to provide more accurate and nuanced arguments in explaining a specific country's foreign policy. The weakness, however, lies in the generalizability of the soft balancing argument to other cases beyond Turkey. The common thread here is the use of soft balancing in the absence of hard balancing against a perceived threat by a state. Further, allies can also be targeted for soft balancing if there is a perceived threat to national interests. Secondary states' soft balancing strategies can preclude direct responses by established powers. More work on the conditions under which states are more likely to adopt soft balancing strategies in a variety of contexts will be necessary to develop the research agenda even further.

Third, how do states conduct soft balancing against their rivals? What kind of soft balancing tools do states choose? How many instruments does soft balancing have? What are the processes and mechanisms of soft balancing strategies? As a leading pioneering scholar of soft balancing, Paul has proposed a repertoire of soft balancing mechanisms and identified four instruments to execute soft balancing against rivals: institutions, limited alignments, economic sanctions and legitimacy denial. As previously mentioned, other scholars have also specified the role of institutions, diplomacy and norms in constituting states' soft balancing strategies.³¹ However, how states exercise these different soft balancing instruments is still worth further scrutiny. For example, no-one denies that states can use institutions to countervail pressures from and restrain behaviours of others. One interesting, although less studied, question is *why* states use institutions to accomplish their foreign policy goals, whether for power, security or status. In other words, what processes and mechanisms inside institutions can help states execute soft balancing strategies to constrain their rivals' behaviours? Wivel and Paul argue that states use institutions for soft balancing, because they are important sources of international legitimacy; they are cost-effective; and they typically offer opportunities for responding with flexibility.³² However, more research is needed on the rule-making process and agenda-setting procedures within institutions to understand exactly how this is done. In addition, scholars might want to explore the question of the conditions under which states are more likely to prefer one type of soft balancing, such as institutions, to others, such as economic sanctions or limited alignments.

Finally, and importantly, the following questions should be considered: why are some soft balancing strategies more effective than others? What are the implications of soft-balancing behaviour for the regional system, as well as for the international system? In particular, if soft balancing becomes a popular state strategy in

³⁰ Dursun-Özkanca, 'Turkish soft balancing against the EU?'

³¹ Paul, *Restraining great powers*.

³² Anders Wivel and T.V. Paul, 'Maximizing security through international institutions: soft balancing strategies reconsidered', in Anders Wivel and T.V. Paul, eds, *International institutions and power politics: bridging the divide* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), pp. 89–100 at pp. 91–3.

the system, will the order transition be more peaceful? For instance, Paul suggests seven ideal conditions in which soft balancing is more likely to succeed and be effective. These seven conditions include a low-threat environment, the importance of international legitimacy, the immediate aftermath of a major conflict, the flourishing of institutions, the defensive advantage in military affairs, high economic interdependence and domestic support. As Paul points out: 'These conditions are ideals, and not all of them need to be present for soft balancing to succeed.'³³ Although Paul does not examine all these conditions thoroughly in case-studies, given the scope of his book, he has indicated a direction for other scholars to follow in exploring the conditions for pursuing effective soft balancing in world politics. The articles in our special section examine the presence or absence of these conditions for states adopting soft balancing strategies.

Another 'so what' question is related to the nature of the soft-balancing research programme in the IR scholarship. By nature, soft balancing is a unique state behaviour or foreign policy instrument in the studies of foreign policy. However, if soft balancing becomes a prevailing strategy for great powers, the outcome of their competition might be different from the hard-balancing or military-oriented interactions in the international system. It is an important but less studied question in the soft balancing literature. There is, however, recognition that soft balancing can produce intense conflict, as in the cases of Japan, Germany and Italy during the 1930s. This may very well be a function of the level of rivalry that exists among states and the ambitious nature of the threatening state. Therefore, scholars should pay more attention to the implications of soft balancing for both regional and international orders, examine how soft balancing can influence and shape the outcome of state interactions, and transcend the academic divide between a theory of foreign policy and a theory of international politics.³⁴

These four challenges around the 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'so what' questions pave the way for scholars to further elevate the soft balancing scholarship in the IR field. This special section advances the soft-balancing research programme by focusing on these four key challenges, but from a regional perspective. Contributors apply their soft balancing arguments to explain regional dynamics during the international order transition and use their observations of these dynamics to specify and develop the concept of soft balancing. The enduring crisis in the liberal international order is increasing the importance of regional dynamics as well as balancing dynamics across the international system, but the links between the regional and global levels and the roles and functions of regional institutions in power politics continue to be poorly understood.

³³ Paul, *Restraining great powers*, p. 33.

³⁴ Colin Elman, 'Horses for courses: why not neorealist theories of foreign policy?', *Security Studies* 6: 1, 1996, pp. 7–53, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419608429297>; Kenneth N. Waltz, 'International politics is not foreign policy', *Security Studies* 6: 1, 1996, pp. 54–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419608429298>; Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro and Steven E. Lobell, *Neoclassical realist theory of international politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Taking soft balancing back to regions

The contributors to this special section use the analytical lens of soft balancing to explore these links. The articles analyse and discuss developments in the EU, the Indo-Pacific, central Asia and BRICS/BRICS+ to address four sets of questions: 1) What are the main characteristics of soft balancing in the regions? How is soft balancing conceptualized in a particular region? What does soft balancing strategy in the region entail? 2) Why do states choose soft balancing over other strategies in their respective regions? Under what conditions do states choose soft balancing? 3) How do regional actors apply different types of soft balancing strategies? What are the processes and mechanisms of soft balancing in the region under discussion? And 4) When and under what conditions will soft balancing strategies be effective? What is the impact of soft balancing on regional and global orders (especially during order transitions)?

By answering these questions, we make three contributions to current debates on international relations. Our first contribution is on international order. Debates on international order are typically ‘clash of the titans’ debates focused on systemic great powers and the consequences of their actions for international society. The logic tends to be one-directional, with implications for international relations flowing from the (inter)actions of the great powers. Analysing soft balancing in the regions allows us to identify the regional consequences of global power politics as well as how regional politics feeds back to the global level. Our second contribution is on understanding state strategy. Soft balancing has been used extensively to understand developments at the great power level, but we show how a focus on diplomatic and institutional strategies holds considerable potential for explaining how rising powers, middle powers and smaller states seek to navigate the emerging international order. Regional soft balancing strategies are particularly important to these states, since they lack the relative material capabilities to pursue hard balancing strategies on their own or to shape global agendas. Consequently, they tend to focus on the use of institutional and diplomatic foreign policy instruments at the regional level. Our focus on the Indo-Pacific, BRICS, central Asia and Europe allows us to explore how and why soft balancing strategies differ between regional settings and to overcome the Eurocentric bias in most of the literature on middle powers and small states.

Our third contribution is to conceptualize soft balancing with regional characteristics. For two decades, IR scholars and foreign policy analysts have debated the value of soft balancing as a foreign policy instrument and as an analytical lens for understanding state strategy and how great power dynamics may be tamed. We contribute to this debate by identifying the characteristics of soft balancing in the regions and its impact on global and regional orders. The soft balancing literature argues that the fabric of the international system today is different from that before the Second World War. Economic and security interdependence, the institutionalization of international affairs, and norms on self-determination and peaceful conflict resolution have altered the logic of consequences and appropriate

behaviour in favour of diplomatic and institutional foreign policy tools. However, these changes are not evenly distributed across regions. Consequently, analysing the concept in the regions allows us to develop a more fine-grained understanding of soft balancing by identifying regional characteristics (including the impact of global power politics on the region in question) and exploring their linkage to soft-balancing behaviour and impact.

Organization of the special section

This special section features four articles that, to varying extents, address the challenges of soft balancing by exploring the ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’ and ‘so what’ questions from regional perspectives. In a departure from the conventional view of soft balancing as either a precursor to hard balancing or a less confrontational form of balancing against great powers, Anders Wivel redefines soft balancing as a ‘governance model’ inspired by the EU’s experience.³⁵ He conceptualizes the EU’s soft-balancing approach as ‘embedded and inclusive institutional soft balancing’, in which member states leverage institutional mechanisms to bind each other through shared norms, rules and procedures within the organization. This highly institutionalized environment shapes member states’ perceptions of power and interests, embedding them within the expectations created by both formal rules and informal practices.

Wivel examines the evolution of the EU governance model, detailing its defining characteristics and considering its future trajectory. He suggests that treaty revisions and prolonged crises involving member states often lead to renegotiations, serving as crucial mechanisms for soft balancing within the bloc. For states outside the EU, the primary mechanisms of inclusive institutional soft balancing are the processes for membership application, accession and trade agreements. Together with exclusive institutional soft balancing, these approaches regulate access to membership and trade agreements, thus playing a gatekeeping role. However, the EU soft balancing governance model faces a dual challenge amid the current crisis of the liberal international order and Russia’s war in Ukraine. The intensifying US–China rivalry and Russian aggression have fuelled calls for greater European military capabilities. While these developments could enhance the EU’s capacity for soft balancing against both China and the United States, they also introduce a geopolitical logic that may ultimately undermine the EU’s soft balancing governance model.

In the Indo-Pacific region, Kai He and Huiyun Feng analyse how the US and China have leveraged multilateral and minilateral security institutions—such as various trilateral dialogue mechanisms, the Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—

³⁵ Anders Wivel, ‘The EU’s soft balancing governance model: origins, characteristics and prospects for the future’, *International Affairs* 101: 1, 2025, pp. 17–34, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae265>.

as tools of institutional balancing to compete strategically.³⁶ Their analysis focuses on a specific form of soft balancing that highlights the diplomatic value of institutions. Crucially, beyond examining ‘how’ the US and China utilize soft balancing strategies in the Indo-Pacific, they address the ‘so what’ question by assessing the outcomes and implications of institutional balancing for regional stability and peace. He and Feng propose that institutional balancing between the US and China has generated three positive externalities for the region: sustained institutional dynamism, new motivations for regional cooperation, and the provision of public goods, which collectively contribute to regional peace and long-term prosperity. Using US–China security competition in the Indo-Pacific as a case-study, they illustrate these three positive effects. While emphasizing these beneficial outcomes, He and Feng also acknowledge the ‘negative externalities’ inherent in US–China relations. These include the risk of escalating competition, which, if mismanaged, could lead to intense diplomatic tensions, heightened strategic rivalries and potentially even military conflict. They argue that the positive externalities of institutional balancing depend on two critical conditions: the continued logic of mutually assured destruction and the effective management of ideological competition between the US and China. He and Feng conclude that, if both powers can moderate their strategic rivalry through international institutions, the current international order transition could be more peaceful than past transitions, even with the risk of regional military crises.

Oya Dursun-Özkanca presents a two-dimensional soft-balancing framework to explore how states in central Asia use soft-balancing strategies at both the great power and regional power levels.³⁷ In central Asia, soft balancing among great powers involves Russia, China and the United States, while regional balancing includes the five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Dursun-Özkanca argues that at the great power level, soft balancing occurs through various regional institutional mechanisms, whereas at the regional power level it involves a range of strategies including active diplomacy, ‘cheap-talk’ diplomacy, limited alignments, informal ententes, exclusive institutional balancing, strategic non-cooperation, costly signalling and legitimacy denial. Importantly, Dursun-Özkanca notes that while regional powers primarily use soft balancing defensively to counter perceived threats, great powers employ it more proactively to establish or maintain regional spheres of influence. Among great powers, soft balancing enables Russia and China to both compete for regional influence and jointly resist US involvement without direct military confrontation. For regional powers, soft balancing supports their autonomy and security, strengthens their bargaining position with the great powers, and helps prevent any single power from dominating the region. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has significantly affected the balancing strategies of both great and regional powers in central Asia. The future of the regional order will depend

³⁶ Kai He and Huiyun Feng, ‘The positive externalities of US–China institutional balancing in the Indo-Pacific’, *International Affairs* 101: 1, 2025, pp. 35–52, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae272>.

³⁷ Oya Dursun-Özkanca, ‘Two-dimensional soft balancing in central Asia and the emerging regional order’, *International Affairs* 101: 1, 2025, pp. 53–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae279>.

on multiple factors, including the outcome of the Ukraine conflict, the trajectory of the Russia–China partnership, the China–West relationship and the policy decisions of regional powers.

Mihaela Papa and Zheng Han apply the concept of soft balancing to examine how BRICS has evolved from a loose coalition of diverse powers into a dynamic and complex institution.³⁸ Drawing on the theory of compensatory layering from institution-building studies, they show that BRICS' structure emerged through a series of iterative negotiations, where successive agreements created institutional layers that expanded the coalition's scope and enhanced its soft-balancing potential. The demand for compensation from less powerful members influenced the institution's development and limited the ability of major powers to dictate its direction unilaterally. Papa and Han explore how soft-balancing actors navigate complex negotiations and initiate both informal (within-group) and formal efforts, such as the establishment of the BRICS New Development Bank (NDB), to advance their objectives. Their analysis illustrates how various institutional layers—India's promotion of the NDB, China's advocacy for BRICS expansion and Russia's push for de-dollarization—broaden BRICS' scope and have significant geopolitical implications. Although compensatory layering empowers weaker actors within BRICS, successive agreements have also solidified its role as a forum for informal, club-like cooperation rather than expanding it directly into broader multilateral frameworks. Their study highlights how a blend of balancing and non-balancing initiatives is strengthening BRICS as a focal point for soft balancing.

By revisiting the concept and theorization of soft balancing in a regional context, this special section deepens our understanding of the theory's conceptualization, rationale, processes and implications in foreign policy and international relations. It aims to encourage more scholars to investigate the logic and applications of soft balancing theory and to extend its relevance to other regions in today's dynamically multipolar world, amid various transitions in the international order.

³⁸ Mihaela Papa and Zheng Han, 'The evolution of soft balancing in informal institutions: the case of BRICS', *International Affairs* 101: 1, 2025, pp. 73–95, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iaae278>.