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The Rise of Balance-of-Power as an Ordering Institution

Abstract

The balance of power is a key institution of order in the society of states. When did it emerge? David Hume argues authoritatively that the balance of power is an ancient political practice. Later authors disagree and date its emergence to the 15th and 16th centuries. Who is right? Hedley Bull may suggest that both have a point: he notes that for a balance to be effective, it must exist both subjectively and objectively. Hume's claim may be seen as a case for a subjective reality of the balance of power. However, it cannot be considered an institution in Bull's sense of the term before it attains an objective reality.

Some authors argue that the balance-of-power politics was an objective reality in the late 15th century. They demonstrate its practice in the Italian city-state system and identify its description in texts of Machiavelli and Guicciardini. It is doubtful, however, whether these demonstrations can count as an ordering institution in Bull's sense of the term; for Renaissance balancing was largely individual rulers' practice of counterpoise rather than the modern notion of system maintenance to which Bull refers.

This paper discusses several 16th and 17th century authors – including Emeric Vatell, on whom Bull relies for his basic definition. It concludes that the first writer who squarely falls within the ambit of Bull's definition is William Robertson (1721-1793). For good measure, it is to him we owe the claim that the balance-of-power practice originated in Renaissance Italy.

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Introduction

“Balance of Power” is central concept in the study of international affairs. Indeed, some authors argue that it is the nearest thing the scholarly study of IR has to a unifying concept. “Power” may be said to play the same important role for the scholarly study of International Relations as “mass” does in Physics and “wealth” in Economics.

The notion of “balance of power” is an indispensable concept in scholarly IR. It conveys an idea that was familiar to the ancient Greeks. Thucydides suggests the basic logic of the concept in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The reason why this great war broke out, explains Thucydides, “I consider to be the one which was formally kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta, made war inevitable” (book I.23). For David Hume (1985[1741]), this suggests that balance-of-power politics undoubtedly existed the ancient West. “In all the politics of Greece, the anxiety, with regard to the balance of power, is apparent, and is expressly pointed out to us, even by the ancient historians”, he writes – with an explicit reference to Thucydides.

However, it was not until the Renaissance that the balance of power was recognized as one of the principal formulas of macro-political life. Italian humanists were among the first modern authors to use the balance-of-power term. Thucydides’ *History* was translated from Greek to Latin in 1485, and was eagerly embraced by Renaissance humanists. They recognized the similarities between Thucydides’ world of ancient city states and their own political environment of several distinct and independent centres of power – Florence, Milan, Naples, Venice and the Vatican.

The uniqueness of their situation must have made the similarities all the more evident: The Italian city-states of the 14th and 15th centuries were geographically delineated and constituted an identifiable region of Europe – surrounded by sea on three sides, and protected by mountains on a fourth. This city-states world – especially its northern half – provided a lively arena for military and diplomatic interaction. Hans Baron (1952) referred to this world as “the Italian city-states system”. And although the term is a modern imposition, the old humanists discussed politics in ways which clearly suggest a systemic understanding. Among the earliest authors are famous names like Niccolò Machiavelli (1469-1527) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540).

The balance-of-power concept is pretty old, then. How old is it? This question will be briefly discussed below. It is, however, not easy to answer, for the term is unclear and the answer depends on how the term is defined. The definition employed here is taken from Hedley Bull's discussion of the same question and it is discussed in a Bullian way – e.g. when did balance of power emerge as an ordering institution?

This of course raises a question: If Bull has already discussed this question, why is it necessary to raise it again, and even address it with Bull's own terms? The short answer is, that Bull did not do a good job. His book is a classic in the academic field of international Relations – and deservedly so, as e.g. Stanley Hoffmann (1995) explain. Bull's discussion of "The Balance of Power and International Order", however, is its weakest chapter. The purpose of this paper is not to write a better chapter for Bull's book; it is, more modestly, to try to pinpoint more accurately than Bull the origins of the concept of balance of power.

Pioneers: Thucydides, Machiavelli and Guicciardini.

Hedley Bull (1995:97ff) distinguished between a simple and a complex balance of power. If we re-examine the brief sketch of the above history of the balance-of-power concept, we only find the simple balance. In the writings of Thucydides – the widely regarded *locus classicus* of the term – the concept reflects a bipolar balance (Fliess 1966). It revolves around the rivalry of the ancient city-states of Athens and Sparta in the 5th century BC. It is also worth noting that Thucydides does not actually apply terms like "balance" or "equilibrium".

Machiavelli used the term *bilanza* or balance. But only on one single occasion. A closer investigation of Machiavelli's texts suggests that Machiavelli hardly used the concept more dexterously than Thucydides – who probably was his main source. He who reads Machiavelli closely, may sense the presence of the concept. Machiavelli is close, but he does not apply the term "balance" more than once – in the *Prince*. And when he uses it, he seems to entertain the same bi-polar notion as Thucydides. Both of Machiavelli and Thucydides, in other words, used the concept in a way that conjured up the image of a pair of weighing scales or balance scales.

It was Francesco Guicciardini – Machiavelli's younger contemporary – who first used the balance-of-power term in its modern sense. In his *History of Italy* (1337), Guicciardini writes about Lorenzo (the Magnificent) de Medici of the 1480s:

Realizing that it would be most perilous to the Florentine Republic and to himself if any of the major powers should extend their area of domination, he carefully saw to it that the Italian

situation should be maintained in a state of balance, not leaning more toward one side than the other (Guicciardini 1969 [1561]:4f).

Guicciardini seems to transcend the simple image of the simple scales and move towards a more complex balance-of-power notion. Guicciardini's text was published in 1561, and indicates that a more complex balance-of-power concept had arrived in scholarly circles at that time, and that humanist scholars like Guicciardini employed it as a theoretical device to explain statesmen's actions.

In view of Bull's discussion, however, this raises a question: Had the new understanding also arrived in decisionmaking circles? Did Guicciardini, who made decisions during the 1480s, employ a complex balance-of-power concept?

Bull distinguishes "a balance of power which exists subjectively from one that exists objectively" (1995:99). Guicciardini saw Italian inter-city politics in the 1560s in the light of a complex balance-of-power concept, it clearly existed subjectively (for Guicciardini). But did it also exist (subjectively) for Lorenzo some 80 years earlier? Did Guicciardini faithfully describe Lorenzo's notions of balance-of-power as political practice?

The short answer is, that we do not know. We have, however, reasons to doubt it. The more prudent course of action is to argue that Guicciardini imposed his own, subjective balance-of-power views on the policies that Lorenzo conducted some 80 years earlier. We might, however, stretch the argument and argue that Lorenzo did in fact practice balance-of-power politics, but that he did so intuitively. Lorenzo conducted his foreign policies on an *ad hoc* basis, with no concern about a more general principle; the outcome, however, was one of balancing. Here we can summon support from David Hume, who argued that to a practicing statesman "the maxim of preserving the balance of power is founded so much on common sense and obvious reasoning" (Hume 1985:338). It would, however, be quite a stretch to infer from this the claim that balance of power existed objectively. To be an ordering institution, however, balance of power would have to be something more than a commonsensical practice; it would have to be self-consciously conducted by statesmen who were all aware of its existence. It would, in other words, have to have a reality as an intersubjective phenomenon.

Two more questions can be added. First, did Guicciardini offer a more developed understanding of the balance-of-power principle than Thucydides and Machiavelli – both of whom entertained a simple bi-polar notion of balance as a pair of weighing scales. Did Guicciardini have a notion of balance of power as the property of an interstate system? It is tempting to answer both questions in the negative. He seems to entertain the same basic image

of balance of power; i.e. the image of a balancing scale. In fact, no Renaissance author seems to have broken loose from this basic image and conceived of balance of power as the self-regulating property of a multi-state system.

The Concept Matures

Bull (1995:97f) distinguishes between a simple and a complex balance of power. He has the complex balance in mind when he defined the balance of power as an institution of international order. The balance of power may have existed as a simple fledgling in Renaissance Italy. However, it did not emerge as a complex, mature institution until some 150 years later. And then not in Italy, but further north-west along the North-Atlantic rim.

The balance-of-power as an intersubjective notion and a complex institution is present in Europe in 1713. It is referred to in the Treaty of Utrecht that ended the wars of Louis XIV. The statesmen who wrote that treaty saw the balance of power as essential for the peace of Europe. During the peace conference of Utrecht, then, the balance-of-power argument exist as an intersubjective representation. Here we may begin to look for the more mature balance-of-power concept. For at the time of the peace conference, the notion of a balance of power was invested with more than a bi-polar sense; it was clearly conceived of as a multi-polar, phenomenon. Also, it is conceived of as such by several diplomats – i.e. they self-consciously perceived the balance of power as a calibrated, orderly system of states. Which is what Bull meant by the term “institution”.

If we search for a complex, objective balance-of-power notion in France, we find little. The notions of ‘balance’ and ‘equality of power’ among states seemed to carry little meaning and less appeal to absolutist rulers like France’s Louis XIV. Also, more surprisingly, England’s Dutch monarch, William III (1689-1702) used the term, but he did not seem to embrace any clear, complex balance-of-power notion either.¹

King William’s English subjects, on the other hand, entertained more modern notions and sounded different notes. Thus, when the House of Commons thanked king William for having restored to England ‘the honour ... of the holding the Balance of Europe’ (Cobbett, cited in Lossky 1971, p. 157), they invoked a different, systemic and more typically

¹ True, William III used the term ‘balance’, but he did this more from an old-fashioned notion of counterpoise and containment than from a modern idea of a self-consciously calibrated, orderly system of states. It looks like William III was mainly concerned with how the overwhelming ambitions of France threatened the ‘liberty of Europe’. But it also looks like his primary aim was to preserve the independence of individual European states and their institutions rather than to maintain the equilibrium of the system as such. Admittedly, this is unclear. William is known to have used the term ‘balance’; however, the question is *how* he used it. Thus, Lossky (1971, p. 157) argues that William did not use it in ways which invoked a general balance of a European states system.

eighteenth-century notion of interstate relations. Also, the Scottish MP Andrew Fletcher in 1701 expressed a more systemic idea when he warned Parliament that the death of the last Habsburg king, Charles II, could trigger a Spanish succession crisis which would break the balance of Europe (Fletcher 1997 [1701]). Likewise, the ministers of Queen Anne (1702-1714) claimed to be guided by an effort ‘to preserve the equilibrium in Europe’ (Lamberty, cited *idem*).

What we find around the time that leads up to Utrecht, is that the term was used, but that its use was not very common. And when it *was* used, it was usually applied to a limited area – to Italy, to Franco-Spanish affairs or to Anglo-Spanish relations.

Hume, Robertson and The Mature Systems View

Around the time of the Treaty of Utrecht, the balance-of power was rarely used; however, it was used by some, notably in England, and it was understood as regionally restricted phenomenon. It was seen as a “local balance of power” but not as a “general balance”, in Bull’s (1995:98) terms.² The balance-of-power logic, however, is present in the text of the Treaty of Utrecht. In the eyes of the Utrecht diplomats, the explicit purpose of the Treaty settlement was “to confirm the peace and tranquillity of the Christian world through a just equilibrium of power (which is the best and most secure foundation of mutual friendship and lasting agreement in every quarter)” (Dumont 1731, p. 394).

It is tempting to argue that the complex balance-of-power notion was put in the treaty by Lord Bolingbroke, for England dominated the conference, and no single diplomat had more influence on the proceedings than him.³ However, if we search through Bolingbroke’s memoirs for a deeper understanding of the concept, we will find little but adumbrations. Bolingbroke has no “theory” – he refers to no mechanism through which the stabilizing workings of the balance could be understood.

² Bull (1995:98f) distinguished between a local and a general balance of power.

³ St. John had been Secretary of War under Queen Anne and chief architect of the Peace of Utrecht (1713). So when he collected his observations in *Letters on the Study and Use of History* and in *The Idea of a Patriot King* (both in 1738) he drew on much personal experience. In these writings he laid out the basic principle of British foreign policy in unmistakable balance-of-power terms. Yet he never penetrated the core workings of the balance-of-power mechanism. He seems to be aware of this shortcomings. As when he, in 1738, advised the king to carefully maintain the military capabilities of Great Britain (especially its ‘maritime strength’) but to use them sparingly and only when ‘immediate interests and her honour’ is at stake. If the king does this, Great Britain may control the ‘general system of power in Europe; she may be the arbitrator of differences, the guardian of liberty, and the preserver of that balance, which has been so much talked of, and is so little understood’ (Armitage 1997, p. 278).

In the wake of Utrecht, the balance-of-power concept was more widely embraced. Popular writers began to use the term. Also, diplomatic discourse was filled with variations on the balance-of-power theme. By mid-century, “the balance of Europe” had become a phrase that was routinely invoked to explain foreign-policy moves and justify diplomatic arrangements. “The phrase quickly acquired the character of an incantation with which to conjure up consent, or at least weaken the mental resistance of opponents”, comments Lossky (1971, p. 156).

It was during this fashionable upswing of the term that David Hume wrote his famous essay on the subject – i.e. in 1752. However, Hume did not, strictly, have a theory either. He argued that international politics is regulated by some balancing mechanism. Although he seems to have some Newtonian image in mind, he did not really explain how that balancing mechanism operates. Although in an aside in his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* of 1748, does he approach a theory: Adjacent states resemble individuals; they regulate their interactions by rules of just conduct and formalize these rules into diplomatic codes and laws of nations, he notes.⁴

It was not David Hume, but William Robertson who fleshed out the argument and provided it with substance and furnish the concept with its modern mechanisms. William Robertson (1721-1793) had a far better grasp than both Bolingbroke and Hume on both the origins and the nature of balance-of-power politics.

Robertson presented the balance of power as a peculiarly European invention. More precisely, he argued, it originated in Italy during the Italian Wars (1494-1516), and was a product of Renaissance 'political science'. The Italians, he wrote,

... had discovered the method of preventing any monarch from rising to such a degree of power as was inconsistent with the general liberty, and had manifested the importance of attending to that great secret in modern policy, the preservation of a proper distribution of power among all the members of the system into which the states of Europe are formed (Robertson 1896, p. 120).

After the Italian Wars, this practice had grown “to be fashionable and universal”, Robertson continued. It “linked the powers of Europe ... closely together” (*idem.* p. 121).

⁴ Hume provided several expositions as to how the balance-of-power principle operates. But his most extensive arguments seem to concern domestic politics rather than international relations (Hume 1985, pp. 42-6, 47-53 and 67-73). His formidable *History of England* of 1754–62 includes scattered speculations on international relations that are couched in terms of maintaining equilibrium.

Robertson's book was published in 1769. It was immediately popular, widely read and admired. Its view on the origins and nature of Europe's the balance-of-power system was quite influential. Both Gibbon and Voltaire claim to have been affected by it. In the age of Newton and mechanistic physics, Robertson's explanation of the European balance of power had a seductive naturalness about it.

Criticisms

Robertson's book provided a popular underpinning for the British understanding of Europe as a system of states that had evolved through modern history into a workable alternative to empire. Yet, some observers were dissatisfied with the balance-of-power argument. And as the argument matured through the century, so did the counter-arguments. By the end of the century, the most consequential criticisms evolved from a new kind of writers, the 'publicists'. Tomas Paine (1737-1809) and William Godwin (1756–1836).

Paine and Godwin both rejected the balance-of-power principle as an ordering institution of international affairs. Paine (1908a) referred to balancing as "royal maneuverings" and argued that they achieved little else than to extend "the spirit of duelling" to an international scale. Godwin very much doubted that there was any substance at all behind the notion of an interstate balance: "The pretence of the balance of power has, in a multitude of instances, served as a veil to the intrigue of courts", he claimed (Godwin 1985, p. 516). Both of them saw international politics largely as an activity of kings, and the kings as the key cause of international conflict and war. Monarchs play games of deception and power among themselves, and in the process they produce injustices, conflicts and wars for the whole world.

The balance of power is no ordering institution. Paine and Godwin agreed, that balancing was a wasteful game played by European kings who "are like individuals in the state of nature" (1908b, p. 236; Keane 1996, p. 230). If humanity should have any hope of changing this sad predicament and establish orderly relations among states, then the corrupt royal courts must be removed from the states of Europe and replaced with democratic systems of government (Paine 1969, p. 183). Democracy, not balance, was a better institution for order and peace.

"War will be foreign to the character of any people in proportion as their democracy becomes simple and unalloyed", argued Godwin (1985, p. 507). However, when he observed the international scene more carefully, he noted with some disappointment that democracies did not really seem to express a less belligerent behaviour than non-democracies. Having

pondered this observation carefully, he fashioned a powerful argument which Paine had already foreshadowed (Paine 1908b, p. 219; 1969, p. 174): In practice it will be difficult to observe directly the peaceful nature of democracies, because democracies will regularly fight with non-democracies, argued Godwin. However, the peaceful nature of democracies would become apparent in cases where democratic states shared common boundaries. From this simple observation, Godwin derived two important implications. First, that the peaceful nature of democracies can only be observed in democracies' behaviour towards one another. Second, that several adjacent democracies in the world would constitute a zone of peace in the international community.

Conclusion

Hedley Bull argues that the BoP has fulfilled three positive functions in the modern state system:

1. It has prevented the system from being transformed by conquest into a universal empire
2. Local balances of power have served to protect the independence of states in particular areas from absorption by a preponderant power
3. It has provided the conditions in which other institutions on which the international order depends might develop – e.g., diplomacy, war, international law, great-power management.

Bull's analysis is perceptive, but three things should be noted: The first point is Robertson's. He argues that empire and balance have existed side by side in European history; and although Europe was never transformed into a universal empire, parts of Europe were.⁵ Thus, European imperialism took place during the same period that balance of power was the dominant power management technique.

Doubts can be raised about the general veracity of the second point, for when Great Powers conduct policies of balancing, smaller states may suffer. It should be sufficient to not two examples of states that have lost their independence as a result of balance-of-power policies, viz., Poland (which was divided in the 18th century) and Czechoslovakia (which was divided between Germany and Russia in 1939).

⁵ An argument that made a big impression on e.g. Edward Gibbon.

With regard to the third function, although it has provided the conditions for mitigating general anarchy, war is a central feature of balance-of-power policies. The function of war is either to restore the balance or to rearrange it. Thus action-reaction, challenge-response, revisionist/status quo, dissatisfied/satisfied, are key ideas associated with the operation of balancing institution.

Finally, there are instances in which a balance-of-power system is anything but a stabilizing institution. E.g. when a sudden change in technology occurs and dramatically increases the power of one of the participating states. Traditional realists argue that a simple balance involving two states (a bipolar system) is more unstable than a complex balance (a multipolar system), because leaps in weapons technologies may upset an established equilibrium. These realists can easily illustrate their claim with examples from the Cold War – e.g. the success of the Soviet Sputnik in 1957 which sparked anxiety and a fast arms buildup in the USA. Neorealists may argue that multipolar systems is more stable, because the possibility of shifting combinations and alliance patterns can more readily cope with such occurrences.

Indeed, flexibility of alignment and diplomatic mobility are important characteristics; under a balance-of-power regime; states must be able to change sides regardless of ideological affinity. The corollary is also true: states must be willing to abandon an erstwhile ally when conditions change. Both these points fly in the face of one of William Robertson's basic points: That the maintenance of balance of power presupposes some shared beliefs among the participants, especially concerning the nature, role and legitimacy of the state.

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