

Critical Dialogue

Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era. By T.V. Paul. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018. 256p. \$30.00 cloth.
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When, why, and how do states confront threats in international politics? With the possible exception of the causes of war, few issues have received greater scholarly attention. Contemporary international relations (IR) research takes one of two broad tracks. On the one hand, realist scholarship of many stripes proposes that states balance by pooling resources with other actors via alliances, by building up their own armaments, or by doing both. Neoliberal and constructivist accounts, on the other hand, focus on the possibility of building institutions, norms, and conflict resolution mechanisms to inhibit or limit threats from manifesting. Each approach has its proponents, although it is rare for analysts in one camp to fully engage arguments on the other side.

Enter T.V. Paul in his fine *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*. Paul inaugurated a critical debate in the mid-2000s by proposing that the apparent absence of balancing against the United States was really due to the novel forms that balancing took in the contemporary world (see Paul's argument in *International Security*, 2005; with responses by Robert Pape [2005], Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth [2005], and Robert Art [2005–6]). As originally construed, international norms against military aggrandizement, robust international institutions, and the preponderant power of the United States meant states were instead primed to “soft balance” the United States: throwing up roadblocks to US foreign policy objectives via ad hoc coalitions and within international institutions.

With the new volume, Paul updates his argument while addressing critics of his original approach. In its revised form, soft balancing expands from an approach to contain a hegemonic power such as the United States in the modern world to a far more common tool of statecraft. As Paul writes, soft balancing means “restraining the power or aggressive policies of a state through international institutions, concerted diplomacy...and

economic sanctions in order to make its aggressive actions less legitimate...and hence its strategic goals more difficult to obtain” (p. 20). By this logic, states use soft balancing to variously (1) “impede the target’s ability to profit from bad behavior”; (2) to “increase the marginal cost” for a target in implementing its policies; (3) to “delegitimize” a target state’s efforts; and (4) to signal that more traditional forms of balancing—what Paul calls “hard balancing”—may emerge (p. 23).

Logically, this approach should be more attractive at some times than at others, and Paul identifies “facilitating conditions [that] should exist” (p. 29) for soft balancing to emerge. Most important is that the threat being balanced “should not be existential or even severe”: soft balancing is a tool first and foremost for low-threat environments. Still, it also helps if states (1) put stock in international institutions, legitimacy, and economic interdependence and (2) if hard balancing appears unattractive either because of the absence of great power tensions or power imbalances (pp. 29–33; also p. 168). Collectively, these are fairly restrictive conditions, and one might expect soft balancing to rarely occur. Surveying the history of great power relations since the Napoleonic Wars, however, Paul finds substantial evidence that states—especially the great powers—regularly used sanctions, delegitimation, institutional roadblocks, and the like, to address challengers.

This is an important contribution to IR theory. Most directly, Paul’s work convincingly shows that there is a broader set of tools that states may use to confront opponents than scholars have traditionally looked to and analyzed. Of course, other scholars—including several realists—have flagged such tools (see, e.g., Barry Posen, “European Union Security and Defense Policy: Response to Unipolarity?” *Security Studies* 15 [2], 2006; Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Coming End of the United States’ Unipolar Moment,” *International Security* 31 [2], 2006; Kai He, “Undermining Adversaries: Unipolarity, Threat Perception, and Negative Balancing Strategies after the Cold War,” *Security Studies* 21 [2], 2012). Paul’s work, however, goes a long way toward systematizing the importance of institutions, economics, and legitimation strategies as mechanisms through which balancing occurs. In the process, it also meaningfully adds to a burgeoning literature that blends

realist arguments on the competitive nature of great power politics with neoliberal and constructivist arguments about the changing form and structure of world politics (Stacie Goddard and Daniel Nexon, “The Dynamics of Global Power Politics: A Framework for Analysis,” *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 1 [1], 2016; Stacie Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order*, 2018). Especially for researchers interested in understanding the course and conduct of foreign policy, it is a major and meaningful theoretical intervention. That Paul also successfully surveys such a wide swatch of history and forthrightly acknowledges where his argument succeeds or fails is a leading example of honesty in qualitative social science that others would do well to emulate.

Still, no book is perfect, and Paul’s work has some theoretical and empirical limitations. One issue concerns the underlying logic of soft balancing. As noted, Paul identifies an array of mechanisms by which soft balancing operates and aptly lays them out (pp. 24–30). Still, it remains somewhat nebulous how these steps contribute to “restraining the power or aggressive policies” (i.e., the threat) of another actor; it is unclear how they affect a target’s capabilities or aggressive intentions. Sanctions, for example, might harm the broader economy of a targeted state but do nothing to diminish the threat at hand. Likewise, delegitimation might undercut the political appeal of a target state’s foreign policy but may have little bearing on a target state’s ability to go after other actors. Missing, in short, are clear links between the mechanisms at the heart of soft balancing and the resolution of the security threat posed by the targeted state.

A related problem concerns the project’s framing. From the outset, Paul emphasizes that his work is intended to challenge scholars—primarily realists—who treat balance of power dynamics as synonymous with alliance formation and military arming (p. vii). This is a key insight. Still, the approach introduces an underlying tension. Arming and allying are primarily expected when states confront threats to their vital interests and survival (John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001; Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979). Soft balancing, however, is expressly a strategy designed to handle limited threats—a circumstance where existing research would *not* expect traditional balance of power choices to apply; indeed, Paul even acknowledges that traditional balancing remains likely when vital interests are on the line (e.g., chaps. 2 and 8). In presenting soft balancing as a challenge to existing balance of power treatments, Paul thus puts his project in opposition to research that the work actually complements. Far from showing that traditional balancing no longer applies, the work instead highlights that balancing is far more commonplace than previously recognized: there is balancing at all levels, at all times, and in a variety of forms. This does not take away the significance of Paul’s findings—far from

it!—but partially obscures what the contribution entails: despite setting out to challenge core tenets of balance of power theory, Paul’s logic points to balance of power theory’s broader salience.

One final issue concerns the empirics. To be clear, Paul’s historical research is impressive, containing insightful syntheses of major historiographic developments and forthrightly acknowledging both where soft balancing does and does not apply: all of this is to the project’s credit. On balance, however, the evidence for soft balancing in the contemporary world—a major motivation and proving ground for the project—may be less clear-cut than allowed.

This issue is clearest in the US-China relationship. Paul writes that from roughly 1991–2010 “the United States ...faced a surprising absence of balancing efforts against it” (p. viii, also p. 133); likewise, “China has not been the subject of serious balancing activity” before 2010 (p. 1, also pp. 141–43). Although Paul contends that this seeming puzzle is explained by soft balancing, there is growing evidence that hard balancing was in fact alive and well even before 2010. We now know, for example, that the United States had begun building up militarily and politically against China in the late Clinton years and likely would have done so even more under George W. Bush had the events of September 11 not occurred; likewise, Chinese military policy (i.e., internal arming) seems to have been focused on offsetting US strengths from the 1990s onward (e.g., Nina Silove, “The Pivot before the Pivot: US Strategy to Preserve the Power Balance in Asia,” *International Security* 40 [4], 2016; M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China’s Military Strategy since 1949*, 2019). For sure, it is possible that soft balancing occurred alongside more traditional forms of arming and allying in the US-China relationship. Nevertheless, such evidence of hard balancing seems to undercut the salience of soft balancing to international politics under conditions where the argument should readily apply.

Still, these are relatively minor issues. Ultimately, *Restraining Great Powers* is an important book that needs to be read and engaged by IR scholars. The theory is ambitious, the writing is clear, and the empirical work impressive; in many ways, it is a model for how social science can engage contemporary debates while mobilizing history in support of a broader argument. In extending balancing dynamics to economic affairs and institutions, Paul makes a keystone contribution to a growing wave of research looking to bridge paradigmatic divides in international security studies. Even scholars and policy makers who discount the relevance of soft balancing will find their arguments strengthened and their thinking challenged by Paul’s theory and empirical work. The book is a worthy successor to his *International Security* article, a significant addition to the IR landscape, and one that analysts of world politics will discuss for a long time to come.

Response to Joshua Shiffrin's Review of *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*

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— T.V. Paul 

Joshua Shiffrin, in his review of *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*, offers a succinct summary of the book's key arguments and their merits and drawbacks. He presents a number of contributions the book makes and raises some questions surrounding my arguments. One issue is the need for more clarity regarding the causal mechanisms. To be clear, the causal mechanism of the argument is built largely around reputational considerations. First, a potential aggressor may be restrained by knowing that its reputation will suffer and that it will not get the needed support from others, including traditional allies sometimes. Second, the notion of collective legitimation is introduced, suggesting that the support or non-opposition of international institutions like the UN is needed for effective intervention or its later success. Third, soft balancing and associated reputational considerations can affect the aggressor's domestic politics. The US electorate's voting Barack Obama into office in 2008, thereby repudiating the Bush administration's Iraqi intervention, is a case in point. During his campaign, Obama had successfully used the argument that the United States had lost its global legitimacy and the support of its allies and that he wanted to restore both. The electorate agreed. Finally, states often resort to soft balancing as a signaling mechanism to show displeasure, especially if they have limited military capabilities or intentions to engage in a deeply confrontational response.

Although I agree that soft balancing can be a complement to the balance of power theory, I have also shown that balancing against threats is more important than against aggregate power. I argue that, as the threat level increases, soft balancing can develop into limited and full-fledged hard balancing, and this progression is not captured in the traditional balance of power theory. In fact, traditional balance of power theory is about power and not threats, and it was Steven Walt (*The Origins of Alliances*, 1987) who showed that states tend to balance more against threats than against power. Hardcore realists tend to reject all the secondary mechanisms I discuss in the book as insignificant. For instance, John Mearsheimer and Susan Strange both have rejected institutions as epiphenomena of power and therefore of limited significance to world politics. There is an exclusive focus on the hard mechanisms of alliances and arms buildups in realist theory. The emerging literature that Shiffrin cites is in the right direction but has yet to become mainstream. Showing that different levels of threat elicit different balancing responses brings the theory closer to reality and places it beyond the

domain of stringent conditions for balancing that only recur occasionally, despite claims by structural realists.

The case studies in the book offer discussions of different circumstances when soft balancing was attempted but may not have succeeded. Success is not the same as the attempt. We know that hard balancing or economic sanctions do not always succeed. Yet states attempt these strategies for various reasons, including domestic pressures. The book discusses the Concert of Europe and the League of Nations, as well as Cold War and post-Cold War era cases. Other works exist on soft balancing in different regions such as Latin America, Central Asia, and Africa, showing the global relevance of this theory.

I disagree with Shiffrin's contention that hard balancing is the dominant mode of US balancing toward China today. Yes, some amount of military buildup is taking place, with the aim of retaining US hegemony—and not purely for balancing or creating an equilibrium with China. No new hard balancing coalition has been formed yet (only the existing ones such as US–Japan and US–Korea, which are much weakened under Trump). China is pursuing its expansion in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean, as well as the Belt Road Initiative, connecting trade routes to Europe via Central Asia and Africa. The new US QUAD partnership with Australia, India, and Japan is of a soft balancing variety.

In fact, the United States has responded tepidly to Chinese expansion, presenting a strong challenge to the balance of power theory. The “pivot to Asia” strategy was a limited hard balancing measure. This was very different from the manner in which previous rising powers were treated by established powers or in which the United States contested the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The US military buildup in the Indo-Pacific is not sufficiently balancing or deterring China's expansionist behavior, because Beijing is playing an asymmetric, economic, infrastructure-based strategy to expand, and resorting to strategies such as wedging smaller powers to confront the United States' traditional approaches. And Washington does not have strong answers yet.

Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts. By Joshua R. Shiffrin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018. 263p. \$45.00 cloth.

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The phenomenon of the rise and decline of great powers has been a major preoccupation of IR scholarship for a long time. It has now become a more intense pursuit with the rise of China and the potential of US hegemony losing steam in the foreseeable future. The debate in realist IR

theory has focused on the causes and consequences of changes in the material capabilities of major powers and the efforts at power grabbing by states in a highly competitive international environment. From this viewpoint, the changing distribution of power generates systemic pressures that often pit one power against the other. Major wars are the most consequential result of this conflictual strategic interaction among the great powers. More concretely, the power transition dynamic is the result of dramatic changes in the aggregate military and economic capability differentials among the leading actors of an era and in the willingness of powers to exploit or balance or contain the increasing power of others. To some power cycle theorists (e.g., Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* 2017) it is declining power that initiates conflict. Even then, the grand strategies of the rising and declining great powers are critical to understanding the level and extent of conflict among the leading actors of an era.

Joshua Shiffrin's well-written book, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*, is one of the rare theoretical treatments of the grand strategies of rising powers toward declining powers. The general impression in the extant literature on power transition is that rising powers have an interest in seeing declining powers weaken even further to reinforce their power position. Theorists from A. F. K. Organski (*World Politics*, 1958) to John Mearsheimer (2001) largely see a one-way process taking place, with rising powers attempting to unseat their rivals as soon as they achieve material dominance. There is little room for peaceful accommodation of a declining power in this deadly competition for dominance and hegemony. However, as Shiffrin shows, this is not always the case. Some declining powers are valuable to the rising powers, and historically, the behavioral patterns of rising powers showed variations in their treatment of their near peers. This is largely because, in some cases, keeping the latter alive as powerful actors has helped further the capability gradient of the rising powers themselves.

In his book, Shiffrin develops an explanation for this variation in behavior based on what he calls "predation theory," which states that "rising states engage in the most intensive and brutal kinds of predation only if a rising state concludes that a declining state simultaneously (1) can give the riser little or no help in opposing other great power threats, and (2) lacks military options to keep the riser in check" (p. 3). In the opposite situations, a rising power can "adopt supportive strategies the more they can use the declining state to counter other threats" (p. 3), especially those coming from other great powers. He tests his theory with the aid of two substantive case studies: the US and Soviet responses to Britain's decline immediately after the end of World War II and the US strategy toward the Soviet Union after the demise of the Cold War. Other historical

cases are brought in as illustrations in the concluding chapter. The book contains a list of all declining great powers from 1816 to 1913. In addition, Shiffrin lists several government officials he interviewed, which is part of the comparative case study method he adopted, one based on the extensive use of primary and secondary data through archival research and interviews. The concluding chapter summarizes the theoretical and empirical conclusions and extrapolates some of the findings for China-US relations.

This book is an important addition to the research on the rising power phenomenon and it shows that grand strategies of leading actors matter significantly to the creation of a stable or unstable international order. The largely system-driven calculations behind these strategies are central to understanding the differing policies of rising and declining powers. The book offers a parsimonious discussion of the micro-foundations of the power transition phenomenon that have not received adequate attention in IR theory. Why and how particular strategies are developed by rising powers toward their peer competitors are central to understanding the power transition dynamic more accurately. Further, the book unravels the myth that rising powers are uniformly interested in the destruction of declining powers and that war is also inevitable in that process. The strategic choices are more nuanced and often do not follow a straight line of incessant pressures on the decliner to concede.

The book is rooted in realist IR and is to a great extent a nuanced articulation of the offensive realist logic, inherent in the works of John Mearsheimer (*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 2001; *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities*, 2018). However, one challenge that all realist theories (especially that of the offensive variety) face is their tendency to extrapolate general patterns largely from European great power and Cold War superpower behavior and then attribute those as the behavioral patterns of all states at all times. The contextual changes in the current and emerging international orders are not taken sufficiently into consideration in these accounts. For instance, European great powers did not have deepened economic globalization or economic interdependence when they engaged in violent rivalries, as we experience today. The Anglo-German case (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) may be an exception. The Cold War rivals, the United States and the USSR, had hardly any economic relationship of significance as both engaged in forceful containment strategies. Moreover, for European great powers, control of territory was deemed to be essential for their dominance and economic prosperity. Even though spheres of influence matter, the contemporary great powers have shown less proclivity to conquer land, as a territorial integrity norm seems to have taken hold in the international arena, despite some exceptions like Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea.

In this context, a puzzle that needs an explanation is the behavior of China and the United States toward each other. Their fate seems intertwined, and it is evident that the reluctance to do too much predation may be the result of the economic interdependence they have built over two decades. Although one can see some elements of predation in China's foreign policy, China is also contributing to global public goods and US economic well-being because of the interdependence it has built and the supply chains that keep the global economy floating. In many respects, the rising power in this equation—China—has adopted an indirect strategy, avoiding direct or frontal confrontation with the United States. It is also difficult to see who is acting as a rising and a declining power in this dynamic relationship. The eagerness with which both sides attempted to solve the trade disputes in 2020, despite the bravado of higher tariffs and trade restrictions by the Trump administration, shows how difficult it is to pursue predation when you are mutually interdependent. Despite periodic tensions, especially during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic crisis, a total break in relations is unlikely to happen. Thus, one might ask Shiffrinson: Is this twenty-first-century power transition fundamentally different from those that preceded it, or will history repeat itself in this case?


Critically important for answering this and similar questions, it would seem, is to examine the grand strategies of the declining powers and the action–reaction process, as well as the security dilemma that these challenges can pose to the rising power itself. A declining great power can compensate for some of its capability deficiency by focusing on its core strengths to stop the predatory policies of the powerful challenger. Today Russia has declined in a relative sense, but Moscow under Vladimir Putin has managed to keep its great power status through (1) its possession of a large arsenal of nuclear and conventional weapons and (2) Moscow's active diplomacy and coercive strategy in its immediate region, as well as in spheres of influence such as the Middle East. It has prevented the United States and the West in general from the further expansion of NATO to the former republics beyond a few cases, for instance. This dimension of the declining power's grand strategy needs greater articulation if we wish to get a fuller understanding of the two-way process involved in this phenomenon. Shiffrinson pays only limited attention to the declining power's strategy and gives almost full credit to the rising power in the power competition. Granted, this can be justified as a way to focus on the most critical dimension of the two-way puzzle for practical research reasons. However, it takes two to tango, and a joint exploration of the policies of the two sides would have been preferred so as to gain a fuller perspective on the strategic choices of states undergoing power transitions.

Judging from historical experience, one thing is clear: the manner in which power transitions occur matters for

international peace and security. This book provokes one to think about the different dimensions of this phenomenon, which is a testament to what it offers us as a menu for further research. Overall, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants* is a great read and a must for anyone interested in the rising power phenomenon, as well as the grand strategies of the rising and declining powers going through the power transition process in the modern intranational system. The emerging international order will be determined by the particular grand strategies that the rising and declining powers adopt, and this book offers clues concerning what motivates them to devise a given strategy.

Response to T.V. Paul's Review of *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts*

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— Joshua R. Shiffrinson 

T.V. Paul offers a thoughtful read of my *Rising Titans, Falling Giants (RTFG)*. In this response, I address Paul's critiques while offering some thoughts on where research on power shifts may go in the future.

Paul's points can be briefly summarized. First, he observes that *RTFG* may understate the role of economics and, more broadly, contemporary forms of international exchange in shaping rising state incentives to prey on or support declining powers. Relatedly, he questions whether the power shift underway between the United States and China will parallel earlier rising state–declining state interactions. Finally, Paul asks how a declining power's decisions factor into a rising state's strategy.

All three points are well taken. In *RTFG*, I developed a theory based on core realist propositions and tested it against competing arguments—including claims regarding economic interdependence—using the record of rising-state strategy since 1945. Ultimately, I found that economic interdependence explained less variation in rising-state strategy than factors relating to military power and national security discussed in the book. This finding does not mean, however, that economics and the other contextual changes in contemporary world politics that Paul notes are irrelevant. Instead, the logic developed in *RTFG* suggests that interdependence, norms against conquest, institutions, and so on may act as a drag on incentives for predation and reinforce incentives for support—with the incentives themselves stemming from concerns over hard power and national security. Put differently, Paul is right that additional variables matter to rising states, but they are primarily conditional rather than causal; on their own, interdependence and the like cannot create reasons for cooperation or stop competition when power and security concerns dictate otherwise.

The preceding also helps address trends in US–Chinese relations. Paul suggests that the absence of overt Chinese

balancing against the United States (elaborated further in his book) is puzzling, begging the question of whether rising-state strategy today parallels that of earlier periods. Viewed in light of *RTFG*, however, China's behavior is less puzzling than might first appear. Weaker than the United States and vulnerable to US punishment, China has understandably embraced a limited predation strategy—what I call “weakening” in the book—to gradually shift the distribution of power against the United States without running large short-term risks. Hence, as Paul notes, it has largely settled conflicts of interest with the United States in the face of US pressure, while still working to adumbrate US advantages. This behavior is not only consistent with past rising states, but makes sense given, as I describe in the volume, China's incentive to undermine US military dominance in what may appear to be a bipolar system.

What of the declining state's strategy? Paul is right that this issue is largely omitted from the volume. Still, *RTFG* provides a foundation on which others may

build. In particular, in detailing how a declining state's military posture affects rising-state strategy, the theoretical core of the book suggests conditions under which more or less coercive declining-state strategies may interact with rising-state behavior and, in turn, prime the international system for rivalry or a peaceful hand-off of power. Especially noteworthy is the possibility that, unless a declining state retrenches in situations when rising states have incentives to support or stands firm in conditions when rising states have incentives to prey, changing power dynamics may put rising and declining states on a collision course for rivalry or worse.

Ultimately, as Paul observes, research on rising-state strategy has been oddly neglected by the field, and I certainly never intended to have the final word. His points are generous and insightful, and I hope they point the way toward greater engagement on the course and conduct of rising-state strategy.