

# BALANCE OF POWER VERSUS COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE

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*ABSTRACT: Both the concepts of Balance of Power and Complex Interdependence attempt to describe the post-cold war international system. We select Offensive Realism (re: Mearsheimer) and Neoliberal Institutionalism (re: Keohane and Nye), for theoretically contextualising the aforementioned concepts. Through a critical evaluation in contrast with the realities of the current international system we answer the question of which of these two concepts could be identified as the most relevant. Our conclusions suggest that 'complex interdependence' provides the necessary and at the same time broader framework for analysing the states and their relations after the Cold War, within which recent developments are better explained.*

**KEYWORDS:** Balance of Power, Complex Interdependence, Offensive Realism, Neoliberal Institutionalism

## INTRODUCTION

Among more conventional readings of International Relations (IR), history reveals that balances of power (BoP) – whether the international system struck such a balance or is in the midst of turmoil on the way to, or from, a BoP – characterise relations between the great powers.<sup>1</sup> We assume that the first BoP system emerged after the 30 Years War and the conclusion of the Treaty of Westphalia (1648). While there have been other BoP systems since 1648, the most recent, the Cold War, was most pervasive.<sup>2</sup> Using BoP to divide the history of the state-system is largely accepted among scholars.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a spectrum of IR scholars are fully rooted in BoP. Consider Kaplan's 'models of international systems,' and Rosecrance's political history of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries, as examples.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, there is a seemingly endless supply of critics of BoP, who nevertheless deploy BoP to reveal its shortcomings. For instance, some suggest that the end of the sovereign state, and thus

the state-system, is inevitable and therefore seeking to understand elusive BoP between such declining actors is flawed.<sup>5</sup> Others understand the flow of IR history to be driven, primarily, by hegemonic powers which dominate international interactions and set the boundaries of exchange.<sup>6</sup> While such scholarship is certainly interesting, this work accepts many of the key hypotheses regarding the centrality of the state in the international system.<sup>7</sup>

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Yet, there is a great deal of ambiguity since the end of the Cold War deprived scholars of a fluid testing ground for theories related to BoP since the US and USSR (and their allies) were engaged in such so-called balancing behaviour for roughly a half-century and with the departure of the USSR, the international environment has become more nuanced. So, what type of international system currently exists?<sup>8</sup>

On one side were situated the so-called neorealists, who defend, among other things, the BoP concept,<sup>9</sup> with Waltz's famous book *Theory of International Politics*.<sup>10</sup> On the other side of the debate were the so-called neoliberals, whose bible is Keohane and Nye's work *Power and Interdependence*.<sup>11</sup> This debate endured for much of the Cold War (it continues until the present in some quarters). Indeed, the latest 'Correspondence' in *International Security* between Keohane and Waltz seems like a continuation of Cold War international relations' debates.<sup>12</sup> But they are no longer alone in their hypothesising and the debate may now be understood as belonging to those that cling to more archaic theories of IR and those who consider the debate as being centred on synthesising between the two parts.<sup>13</sup>

With this in mind, it is useful, and possible, to compare two – largely dissimilar – theories which are reflections of the aforementioned mainstream IR theories: BoP (realism) and complex interdependence (neoliberalism). This work sets two main objectives: first, to examine the use of BoP in the context of offensive realism and second, to review the advent and use of complex interdependence (CXI) as a reflection of neoliberal institutionalism. Finally, in the last section, we evaluate the two theories in order to explore which could be identified as most relevant. Hidden within this comparison is the relevance of the two concepts these theories incorporate.

In other words, if we examine both theories and consider the historical events after the Cold War, we may identify which of the two concepts of BoP and CXI best reflects the realities of the current period of international history.

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THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM, BoP AND OFFENSIVE REALISM

The concept of power is very difficult to define<sup>14</sup> though three general issues may be identified: first, it has many dimensions (economic, military, political etc.) and approaches (realist, Foucaulian etc.);<sup>15</sup> second, if we assume the realist view of power, it cannot be measured according to commonly agreed standards,<sup>16</sup> and if we assume others, like the Foucaulian approach, power is something that cannot be measured at all.<sup>17</sup> Third, power in many cases is not manifested until a clash between two powers occurs; we may know for example how many missiles a nation has, but we don't know if they can all be used, if their use will be successful.

Consequently, if we are unable to formulate a common, clear and concrete definition of power, it follows that it may be more difficult to define the balance of power. Zinnes mentions eleven definitions for BoP,<sup>18</sup> and tries to elaborate a series of cases where a BoP could exist, though notes that it 'does not exhaust the possible permutations and combinations that one might generate.'<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, Sheehan refers to Wight's 'nine different ways in which the concept has been used.'<sup>20</sup> Examining Wight, one could argue that the BoP is about the 'even distribution of power' or the 'uneven distribution of power.'<sup>21</sup>

Prior to examining the use of BoP in the context of offensive realism, it is useful to consider how classical realism deploys it. Kegley and Wittkopf mention that 'if all states seek to maximise power, stability will result by maintaining a balance of power, lubricated by shifts in the formation and decay of opposing alliances.'<sup>22</sup> Consequently, one could say that in a given system the BoP will emerge when none of the great powers of the system is able to initiate war because all the others will unite against it. Most important, a system of BoP is characterised by stability, which does not, necessarily, imply that power is evenly distributed among all states or even the great powers.

For structural realism though, if a great power attempts to acquire more power, and more specifically to maximise its power, or pursue hegemony (i.e. disturb the balance), it would be the system that will eventually punish its behaviour.<sup>23</sup> This is exactly the beginning of differentiation between the offensive and the defensive branches of structural realism according to Mearsheimer.<sup>24</sup> For offensive realism, a great power can, and should, try 'to gain as much power as possible and, if the circumstances are right, to pursue hegemony.'<sup>25</sup>

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Mearsheimer begins his analysis by making five assumptions.<sup>26</sup> First, that the anarchical character of the international system leaves a great power, in any emergency, vulnerable. Second, he assumes that the great powers can never be certain about the intentions of their rivals and are forced to live in an environment of significant insecurity. Third, for this reason all great powers develop and maintain offensive capabilities which, in the worst case, could seriously harm their rivals. Fourth, he underlines that the ultimate goal of each great power is survival. Finally, he acknowledges that states (including the great powers) are rational actors. Mearsheimer proceeds by recognising an unlimited appetite of all great powers for more power. They are, accordingly, ready to disturb the BoP whenever they see an opportunity and they should have no restraints in doing so because their own survival is at stake. But, since the acquisition of power is an endless task, Mearsheimer argues that at the 'end of the road' lays hegemony; of course when the circumstances will be ideal for such an enterprise. What a great power requires for hegemony is not *only* military power – the dominant form of power according to Mearsheimer – but also 'latent power,'<sup>27</sup> which is<sup>28</sup> defined as the entire socio-economic structure of the state that has to be solid and robust in order to allow the expansion and enhancement of the military power. Once again, the potential hegemon must carefully calculate the costs and benefits before pursuing hegemony in the particular time selected.

Furthermore, Mearsheimer argues that in the current world there can be no such thing as global hegemony.<sup>29</sup> For his theory, military land power is what counts most<sup>30</sup> and this kind of power cannot be projected through the large oceans dividing the earth.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, due to the proliferation of nuclear weapons, a 'clear-

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cut nuclear superiority' is needed for a state to become a global hegemon; meaning that it should have the power to eliminate his rivals without suffering any retaliation, since even one nuclear missile can cause serious harm.<sup>32</sup> What his theory proposes is that great powers can pursue hegemony in their region, which is a much more feasible enterprise.<sup>33</sup> This distinction among a general balance and sub-balances is not new.<sup>34</sup> Some theoretical argumentations can be found in other theorists' work, but not an extensive theory as illustrated by Mearsheimer.

What Mearsheimer's offensive realism proposes, either explicitly or implicitly, is a description of the post-Cold War international system in terms of BoP, that can be divided into several regional systems. In each of them there is a BoP among the regional powers, which are particularly uncertain about each other's intentions. Consequently, if one of them feels confident about its power, and favoured by the circumstances, may try to disturb the balance and pursue hegemony. But, if a state becomes a hegemon in Region A, it must also sustain a BoP with the other regions by: a) preventing peer competitors in the nearby-accessible by land regions, and b) play the role of offshore balancer in more distant regions.<sup>35</sup> The failure to act in this manner may have an impact to its own hegemonic statute; like in the case that a hegemon emerges in Region B, which will try and undermine the first hegemon's position in Region A.<sup>36</sup>

#### THE CONTRAST: POST-COLD WAR COMPLEX INTERDEPENDENCE

By the early 1970s, Keohane and Nye (among others) had begun to examine the transnational relations that exist among states, concerning various issues of their international political agenda.<sup>37</sup> Keohane and Nye, elaborated Haas' concept of 'economic interdependence',<sup>38</sup> albeit in the concept of world politics. In 1977, they came up with a co-authored book on *Power and Interdependence*<sup>39</sup> where CXI appears for the first time.

CXI is primarily based on the transactions between states, in terms of flows of money, goods, people and messages.<sup>40</sup> Accordingly, interdependence has two characteristics; it is more than a bilateral or multilateral agreement between states and far more than an interconnection. In the first case, an agreement is an intentional

act, confined strictly between two or more states. In terms of interdependence, a state is particularly affected when the oil prices are high, although it may well have not any kind of agreement with petroleum producing states. In the second case, if the price of gold increases the price of jewellery will increase too, but this has no serious effect on a state's economy.<sup>41</sup> Interdependence exists where the effects of a transaction are particularly costly (or beneficial) like in oil prices rate.<sup>42</sup> Based on such interdependence, Keohane and Nye introduced CXI as an enhancement. They claim that CXI constitutes a polar opposite to the assumptions of realism.<sup>43</sup>

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CXI is based on three core characteristics.<sup>44</sup> First, it appears in multiple channels of connection: interstate relations; transgovernmental relations between the sectors of a state's government with those of another (for example, Departments of Environment, the collaboration of national policing forces etc.); and transnational relations between other (non-state) actors in the international system. Through this analysis, it is clear that the authors move beyond realist assumptions about states and involve other, domestic and international actors, like NGOs, multinational corporations, international organisations, bureaucrats and elites (etc). They function not only as potential influencers of a state's policies, but also as 'transaction belts' of the costs and benefits of interaction.

Second, the supposed absence of hierarchy of issues sharply contrasts realist assumptions which stress that issues of security are predominant. In a system of CXI other issues (beyond military) may emerge and different coalitions may be formed. For example, by assuming transgovernmental relations, issues like governments' interdepartmental cooperation on environmental issues, trade regulations and agricultural issues emerge as important, and the international coalitions that will be formed may be extremely different than the already existing military coalitions. Also, non-state actors exercise their own influence on the formation of the agenda in world politics.

Third and consequently, when we broaden the agenda of international issues, military power becomes less useful. Although the military power of a state is particularly important; on issues of CXI, economics, the environment, trade regulations no state will use, or threaten to use, armed force during negotiations. This analysis also

implies that there is a difference in the distribution of power; meaning the distribution of military power and of power resources (for example on trade shipping and oil).<sup>45</sup>

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Keohane and Nye also acknowledge the role of international institutions. They claim that international institutions, among other things, can help setting the agenda, provide a forum for bargaining and coalition formation, help governments focus efforts on specific issues and give developing countries the opportunity to directly communicate with other governments' officials and pursue linkage strategies.<sup>46</sup>

Further elaborating this last argument, Keohane focuses on cooperation and international institutions in *After Hegemony*. His main argument is that the CXI between all these actors on such issues could easily generate conflict, possibly escalating into war.<sup>47</sup> Due to the anarchical character of the system – he does not propose world government or a cosmopolitan system<sup>48</sup> – international institutions are necessary in order to provide some grounds of common understanding and cooperation.<sup>49</sup> Specifically, he identifies several tasks they perform:

1. enhance the likelihood of cooperation,
2. create the conditions for orderly multilateral negotiations,
3. increase the symmetry and improve quality of information,
4. cluster issues together over a long period of time, thus bringing governments into continuing interactions, and
5. create the basis for decentralised enforcement founded on the principle of reciprocity.<sup>50</sup>

Finally, he provides a definition of institutions 'as sets of practices and expectations rather than [...] formal organisations with imposing headquarters buildings.'<sup>51</sup>

Following the Cold War, Keohane began to further refine his theory and argued that great powers need institutions in order to influence events and achieve goals since they reduce the cost of making and enforcing agreements, and reduce uncertainty by promoting transparency.<sup>52</sup> On the other hand, despite the enormous influence of great powers on institutions, the policies followed are different than those that the great powers would follow unilaterally.<sup>53</sup>

Later, Keohane describes the world based on the concepts of

interdependence and international institutions, although he now calls his theory institutionalism, and uses the terms “globalism” and “governance,” in a clear linguistic shift.<sup>54</sup> He argues that states are the main actors in the international system, supplemented though by NGOs, IGOs, and Transnational Corporate Networks, formulating ‘a complex geography.’<sup>55</sup> Numerous ‘networks of interdependence’ exist among them, extending to ‘multicontinental distances.’ These features constitute ‘a state of the world;’ “globalism,”<sup>56</sup> or networks of interdependence, which may be economic, military, environmental, social, and cultural.<sup>57</sup>

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Interdependence, especially in such a high level of complexity as globalism, can lead to conflicts and disputes.<sup>58</sup> Consequently, the modern world needs ‘processes and institutions, both formal and informal, that [will] guide and restrain the collective activities’ of the actors.<sup>59</sup> This is what Keohane defines as “governance”. Keohane makes two significant distinctions. First, between globalism and “universality,” maintaining that we are not inhabiting an era of universality; for example, we may have a worldwide trade system, but not a fully integrated world market.<sup>60</sup> Second, between governance and “global government,” arguing that any attempt at regulation must be ‘consistent with the maintenance of the nation-states as the fundamental form of political organisation.’<sup>61</sup>

## EVALUATION

The theory of institutionalism presents a description of the current international system based on the concept of interdependence, constituting the concept of globalism. This depiction challenges offensive realism’s view of the system; the later uses the concept of BoP. This section addresses some key points of offensive realism’s world-view in contrast to that held by institutionalisms’.

The first characteristic of the international system according to offensive realism is its division into sub-systems of BoP. The difficult part is to actually identify this division. Apart from the US, which has dominated its continent as a hegemon for over a century, there is no clear distinction of sub-systems in other continents and/or regions. Europe, for example, is particularly dependant on Russian energy resources.<sup>62</sup> In Asia, we can identify Russia, China,



India, Japan, and the oil-producing states in Middle East as powerful, though not particularly in the military sector, and definitely not as parts of a BoP sub-system in Asia. Alternatively, we can identify several networks of interdependence, in which all of these states participate and seek to prevail among others at the global level.<sup>63</sup>

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Second, concerning the claimed endless quest for unlimited power (mainly military), one could argue that it may be the case for states like Iran or South Korea, which seek to acquire nuclear weapons. But, in the larger picture there are several states with great influence which do not follow adopt such policies. If we consider, for example, Europe; the UK and France, already have nuclear weapons, and Germany, does not. The offensive realist assumption is baseless. Also in Africa and Asia, apart from the states that already have nuclear weapons, most others are interested in maintaining a strong position in the global economy, which will permit them to enhance their domestic economy and wealth, rather than putting together powerful mass armies to dominate their regions.

Consequently, in the case of states seeking regional hegemony, evidence suggests the opposite of offensive realism. For instance, although Russia tries to create a 'sphere of influence' in the Caucasus,<sup>64</sup> which could be perceived as 'hegemony in its region,' it also attempts to establish a reliable relationship with NATO,<sup>65</sup> enter the WTO to enhance its world trade options,<sup>66</sup> and it finally took a step back in the war in South Ossetia, accepting international mediation by the EU.<sup>67</sup> China and the other BRIC countries also try to strengthen their economy but it doesn't pursue its goals in the expense of other states in the region but with a rather international perspective.<sup>68</sup> These are examples of states in the process of strengthening their domestic structures, not because of their desire to dominate their regions against other competitors, but in order to enhance their position in the global economic network and influence the decision making centres. Of course, in the case of Europe, or Africa, there is no such thing as a hegemony-seeking-state. This part of the theory seems to apply only in the case of the US, though in recent years, some states in South America are attempting to break-out of US hegemony,<sup>69</sup> something that Cuba had already achieved in the late 1950s.

Two more issues are connected to this analysis, offensive real-

ism's claims of insecurity as a kind of motivation for the great powers' previously mentioned policies and the primary role of military power, and the supporting role of latent power.

Although both theories acknowledge the anarchical character of the international system, which generates a certain level of insecurity, this does not necessarily imply that the so-called great powers *must* seek refuge to hegemony. It may be the case that the US and the UK launched the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq due to sentiments of insecurity,<sup>70</sup> but it is also well-argued that international institutions enhance confidence; international organisations promote negotiations and resolution of misunderstandings; and the involvement of all states in various networks of interdependence decrease the potentiality of being deceived by others.<sup>71</sup>

Respectively, it is not easy even for such a powerful state like the US to violate, for example, the WTO, ICAO, WHO, and NATO collective decisions, although it may have a weighted vote, thus creating a certain degree of safety among their allies. We have also witnessed the great powers negotiating through their delegations in various international organisations, even in times of crisis. Furthermore, the violation of financial agreements, the voting of harmful decisions against an ally, and all other actions and practices that could be perceived as deceitful, may impact a state, since other states from around the world will react if their interests are damaged, exactly because of the high level of interdependence; something that the recent financial crisis confirms.

In the case of military power prevailing over latent power in the priorities of a great power, the response of institutionalism is particularly logical. Apart from the fact that offensive realism acknowledges that nuclear weapons are not useful (only as an element of deterrence), one could say that the military power of the states is not first priority. Great powers like Russia, China, the US, the UK, France and Germany, cannot use their power on a whole range of issues, like the environment, poverty, financial issues such as the recent crisis, and others. Moreover, most of them do not face a direct military threat from any rival; even if we consider the terrorist acts as a military threat, there are arguments saying that they have rather sociological, financial, and ideological causes rather than an endless quest for power on behalf of a terrorist group.<sup>72</sup>

Latent power is an important form of power for a state facing to-

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day's world, and it does not simply serve to develop military power. A solid economy, education, health issues, and resources are necessary in order for a state to have a strong position in the international system and be able to influence decisions through the complex networks of interdependence.

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Finally, Offensive Realism draws a connection between the sub-systems of BoP, arguing that a regional hegemon always has to act as an external balancer in other regions in order to maintain the BoP there and prevent the rise of a regional hegemon. In this context, Mearsheimer mentions the obligation of the US to prevent the rise of China in Eastern Asia.<sup>73</sup> Actually the only state that can be identified today as a regional hegemon is the US. However, although the US has several concerns for the rise of China, one could not argue that the former tries to impede its rise as a regional hegemon, or that it tries to preserve the BoP in China's region. Rather, China's empowerment can add another rival for the US in many issues of the international agenda, for example China's excessive needs for energy may lead it to deepen its engagement in the Middle East,<sup>74</sup> and its growing economy will augment its ability to influence decisions on issues like international trade, global finance, and of course in various international organisations where the US currently has a leading voice. Moreover, the US cannot limit the potentials that the networks of interdependence give to China. For example, China may use the weak dollar against the euro to put pressure on the US, it has offered many states in Africa and South America preferential economic treatment<sup>75</sup> and most significantly, large US corporations (re: General Motors) have already invested tremendous monies in the Chinese economy,<sup>76</sup> since China is now the bigger and at the same time less exploited market.

Furthermore, if we examine other parts of the world we can argue that the US has supported the acquisition of nuclear weapons by Israel, making it the strongest military power in Middle East. On the other hand, the US has managed to keep the BoP in Europe; one could agree with offensive realism's view that there is not any state in Europe that has both the latent and the military power to become a regional hegemon, even if it meets the appropriate circumstances. However, after the Cold War, in an era where the EU is fully functional on an economic level, it is very difficult for a European state to seek hegemony mainly due to the high level of interdepen-

dence between the EU members; it will lose more than it gains now by breaking off the EU and seeking to become a single hegemon.

## CONCLUSION

Although this evaluation was limited to the basic lines of argumentation of the theories under examination, throughout the work one could draw the conclusion that the BoP concept seen in offensive realism is unable to accurately describe current international relations. Constrained around military power, it misses a range of issues and the complex network of relations between states, as well as non-state actors.<sup>77</sup> Each state participates in a number of regional, sometimes continental and international governmental organisations that the network created among them is really difficult to define and explore. In this network one can identify numerous overlapping procedures on equally numerous subjects. It may be that very powerful states, like the US, have an important say in most of the organisations they participate in, but they still lack participation in a significant number of others; regional and continental. For these reasons, the complexity of states' relations in the current international environment complicated. It also gets tougher for one to map these relations if he/she decides to consider the power that these organisations possess as entities, as well as non-governmental actors with expertise and influence.

In that sense, the concept of interdependence in the context of institutionalism – seen either as CXI or globalism – provides the necessary, broader framework for analysing states and their relations after the Cold War. By endorsing this concept, one can better understand the level of complexity in modern international relations. We must also take in to account that the understanding of the concept does not simplify the complex network of interdependence, it does not provide a clear view and neither does it make it easier for researchers to map the channels of interdependence or power relations. The advantage for the researcher of understanding this concept is the vast number of data, facts, phenomena and parameters that can help produce a wider view regardless of the subject under scrutiny.

It must be noted that Keohane's approach has limitations as well.<sup>78</sup> When it comes to issues of war, such as the interventions

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in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya, the violation of international law and the decisions of international organisations, the theory of interdependence is unable to provide a convincing analysis. In most cases there was no clear mandate for the intervening states. In others, like Libya, the intervening states decided to adopt a broad interpretation of a UNSC mandate. Not to delve into each intervention, in general it was more the power of intervening states than their interdependence with the states in the region that enabled them to act militarily. Further research is required. Examining the complex networks of interdependence and the behaviour of states and non-state actors in order to enhance the theory and include its exceptions is a noble pursuit. This article constitutes an important theoretical exercise within the framework of the ongoing debate between BoP and CXI. This sought to provide researchers with a comparison that highlights hidden aspects of this debate deploying relevant theories.

Finally, this article brings post-Cold War issues to the more enduring debate between realism(s) and liberalism(s). While it is acknowledged that the current era shares characteristics with previous ones, it is unique in terms of economic and military capabilities, technological innovations and the diffusion and use of information. Contributing in that uniqueness are the high level of complexity and interdependence of states' national interests at the global level, which underpins societal, cultural, political and economic differences and surpasses geographical obstacles.

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