

# Conceptualizing Soft Balancing Beyond Cold War

## What's Changed, What Remains the Same?

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This article is a systematic inquiry into the nature and role of soft balancing in the contemporary theory and practice of international relations. By wading into the contentious debate concerning the place and legitimacy of soft balancing, the article explores the theoretical prominence of the concept and adds methodological content to the study. Thus, the research produces a quantitative corpus-based and thematic analysis of the existing soft balancing literature to demarcate the boundary of the concept. This approach enables the author to enhance conventional theorization and not only identify the main gaps within the existing studies but go beyond the popular post-Cold War era discussion. Additionally, this article addresses the question of how soft balancing is distinguished from other concepts in the balance of power theory. Ultimately, the study reveals that despite its theoretical and empirical potential, the soft balancing research agenda remains underdeveloped, largely due to the limitation in the empirical content. Precisely, the empirical studies are limited to balance of power rhetoric akin to hard vs. soft and its implications for the United States' hegemonic power.

*Keywords: IR theory, soft balancing, hard balancing, hedging, balance of power*

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### 1. The concept of soft balancing

This theoretical article seeks to initiate conceptual sophistication of soft balancing to contribute to the existing and yet underdeveloped understanding of the phenomenon. Despite the solid soft balancing study generated during the last decades, it however remains fraught with conceptual ambiguities, competing theoretical and empirical claims and vocabulary. Thus, the research produces a quantitative corpus-based and thematic analysis of the existing soft balancing studies to demarcate the boundary of soft balancing. This approach enables the author to enhance conventional theorization and not only identify the main gaps within the academic literature but go beyond the popular post-Cold War era discussion. Regarding the initiated research agenda, the following questions can be posed:

1. Where are the boundaries of the soft balancing concept? What is the nature of the conceptual boundary?
2. What have been the conceptual alternatives to soft balancing?

The balance of power is one of the most influential theories in international relations, which has been further clarified and advanced by soft balancing. While soft balancing is not a new phenomenon in international relations, it has become popular, and hotly debated, under the unipolar distribution of power. The soft-balancing concept was primarily designed by Walt<sup>1</sup> and Joffe<sup>2</sup> to differentiate between traditional hard and soft forms of balancing. Revised in 2000s with the works of Pape and Paul, it soon, however faced widespread criticism. In recent years, the research community has engaged in a lively debate concerning the place and the actual legitimacy of soft balancing in International Relations (IR) scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

Currently, there are two foundational quotations that underpin the rest of the soft balancing argument. The first is from T. V. Paul:

[Soft balancing] occurs when states generally develop ententes or limited security understandings with one another to balance a potentially threatening state or a rising power. Soft balancing is often based on a limited arms build-up, ad hoc cooperative exercises, or collaboration in regional or international institutions; these policies may be converted to open, hard-balancing strategies if and when security competition becomes intense and the powerful state becomes threatening.<sup>4</sup>

The second is by Robert Pape, who describes four main nonmilitary mechanisms that enable the strategy of soft balancing: refusal to use territory that is vital to the operations of the superior state's ground, air, or naval forces; entangling diplomacy, by which states undermine the plans and policies of the superior state, especially using international institutions; economic statecraft by strengthening the regional economic blocs and diverting trade from non-members; and finally, coordination of mutual commitment to resist the policies of the superior or threatening state.<sup>5</sup>

As was stated above, both foundational quotations raise a lot of questions and criticism. Precisely, critics suggest that broad definition leads to conceptual widening and lack of consensus on the actual term.

The recent contribution to the understanding of soft balancing in its empirical discussion has been made by T. V. Paul in his book *Restraining Great Powers: Soft Balancing from Empires to the Global Era*. Historical retrospect from the post-Napoleonic era to today's situation enabled the author to explain the conditions under which soft balancing has occurred and when it works. Despite his notable contribution, further research is required to identify a mechanism that will allow scholars to spot potential cases of soft balancing and demarcate its boundaries. To achieve this, corpus analysis is employed in the research.

## 2. The algorithm of data analysis

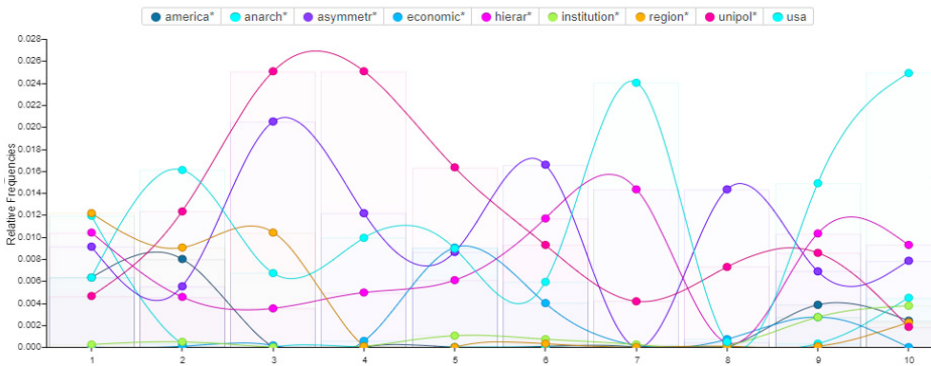
The author sees a compatibility between quantitative and qualitative methods; however, the dominant research paradigm adopted in the article is the former.<sup>6</sup> Thus, computer-based text analysis is used to provide quantitative confirmation of patterns noticed in the literature review and illustrate the data in great detail. The quantitative corpus-based method<sup>7</sup> is applied to recognize the more commonly occurring words and phrases in corpora. A corpus was created by downloading the full texts of 107 academic articles on soft balancing published from 2001 to 2018. Following the standard procedure implemented by many researchers, notices, personal profiles, titles, legends, references, acknowledgements, and tables and figures were removed from the corpus. Hence, the remaining textual data represents full sentences only. The corpus was analyzed using several software programs, including WordSmith Tools and Voyant. These tools were used to calculate the number of occurrences of each unique word. The so-called function words that are used for sentence construction were not considered. The most prev-

alent content ('meaningful' words or the root words) for the research in the corpus were the following: Hard (hard balancing, hard power); Hierar\* (hierarchy, hierarchical), Asymmetr\* (asymmetry, asymmetrical, weaker, weak, dominant, great (powers)), Anarc\* (anarchy, anarchical), Region\* (region, regional), Economic\* (economical, economically), Institu\* (institution, institutional, organization(s), NGO, SCO, ASEAN, EU, European Union, multilateral), USA, America\* (American, Bush, US), Unipol\* (unipolarity, unipole, unipolar), Hedg\*(hedging, hedge).

All these meaningful words are keywords as their percentage prevalence is significantly high in the corpus. It is important to note that the main prevalent meaningful word of the corpus is 'hard' because soft balancing is contrasted with hard balancing in the majority of the articles. In the current research, the process of corpus analysis is divided into two agendas: first, to explain the conceptual definition and demarcate the boundary of soft balancing, and second, to elaborate a distinction among three related and alternative concepts, hard balancing, hedging, and bandwagoning.

Consequently, the dominant content of the corpus excluding the above-mentioned related concepts can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Document segments of soft balancing literature review



Source: Created by the author through the computer-based text analysis.

In order to spot the main themes of the concept, the frequently occurred words were divided to clusters (Table 1). Further, based on the clusters and content analysis, thematic literature review is grouped according to terms, arguments and parameters. Thereby, thematic grouping demonstrates the types of topics important for the research and organized in inclusive order. Based on frequencies of themes (topics) the author generalizes the conceptual contours of soft balancing (Table 2).

Table 1

Operationalization Themes	Meta Theme
Hierarchy and Power Asymmetry	Soft Balancing Theorization
Anarchy and Power Asymmetry	
Regional Security	
Economic Competition	
Limited Institutional Cooperation	
International Trade	
Economic competition (diplomacy and security) /	
Economic coordination	
Soft Power	

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Table 2. Concept Map for Soft Balancing

Theme	Source citation
Hierarchy, Anarchy, Unipolarity	80%
Power Asymmetry, Unipolarity	75%
Regional Security, Institutions	60%
International Trade, Limited Institutional Cooperation, Economic competition, Institutions	68%
Soft Power <sup>8</sup>	30%

The concept map created by the author depicts relationships between the operationalization themes. Thus, 80% articles in the corpora refer to Hierarchy, Anarchy and Unipolarity as central themes, while for 75% of the existing studies Power Asymmetry and Unipolarity remain dominant in soft balancing discussion. In the same manner, International trade/Institutional and Economic cooperation/completion represent 68% of the reference. Regional security and institutions share 60% of the academic discussion and the smallest portion as of 30% is dedicated to the soft power.

### 3. Soft Balancing Conceptualization

In the context of the thematic analysis of contemporary literature, five topics are relevant to the soft balancing concept, viz., (1) hierarchy, (2) power asymmetry, (3) regional security, (4) international trade/economic interdependence/interconnectedness of politics and economics, and (5) soft power.

### 3.1 Hierarchy

The most popular theme in soft balancing literature is the US hegemonic power and American dominance, unipolarity and hierarchy. During the last decades, the global dominance of the United States has forced academics to analyze how other states respond to US hegemonic power.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in the age of US unipolarity, Pape's definition gives a name to the strategies implemented by states to restrain the hegemonic power.<sup>10</sup> Precisely, he argues that in order to constrain the hegemon, weaker states utilize 'nonmilitary tools, such as international institutions, economic statecraft, and strict interpretations of neutrality'.<sup>11</sup>

Numerous academics have used soft balancing to describe the policies of second-ranked powers trying to delay and thwart US war efforts. For example, Paul has claimed that 'in the post-Cold War era, soft balancing has become an attractive strategy through which second-tier major powers are able to challenge the legitimacy of the interventionist policies of the United States and its allies'.<sup>13</sup> Thereby, traditional hard balancing is replaced by soft balancing and the latter becomes 'the primary reaction of major powers to the United States' hegemonic power'.<sup>14</sup> The strongest case highlighted by academics to validate the importance of soft balancing is the reaction of major powers to the Bush administration during the preventive war in Iraq. Specifically, as Josef Joffe rightly points out regarding the policies of France, Germany, and Russia on Iraq: 'What was their purpose? To save Saddam Hussein? No, of course not. It was to contain and constrain American power, now liberated from the ropes of bipolarity'.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, providing valuable insight into the understanding of the post-Cold War era and the prominence of soft balancing, academics have stretched the balance of power theory, with soft balancing proponents giving it a sophisticated theoretical treatment. However, post-Cold War era findings fed into widely published commentaries and critiques, as they were limited to a system displaying unipolarity and the United States' hegemonic power.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the corpus-based research shows that empirical ground of soft balancing studies is mostly second-tier states and major, emerging powers versus unipolarity and the US hegemonic power. Although this trend is natural as the US - with its hegemonic sphere of influence - has the ability to project its power anywhere in the globe, one of the remaining problems of such tendency is the relevance and scope of the concept. This should not be read, however, as a critique of soft balancing empirical findings per se,

## Hierarchy

First Order Theme Cluster	Operationalization Theme <sup>12</sup>
dominance of the United States to curtail US power weaker states confronting a unipolar power weaker actors may seek to constrain the unipole second-tier major powers challenge the legitimacy of the interventionist policies of the United States principal reaction of major powers to the Bush administration's preventive war doctrine security threats from the hegemon post-Cold War era is the only modern unipolar system Unipole soft balancing behavior vis-a`-vis the United States. threat posed by the superpower. global unipolarity systematic attempts to constrain and balance the United States a coalition of secondary powers secondary states begin to see the unipole as a direct or indirect threat to their national interests delegitimize unipolar unilateralism excluding the unipole from multilateral political and economic organizations the current era of US dominance	Hierarchy

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but rather as a valid point to define the contemporary significance of the phenomena and an opportunity to go beyond this 'tradition' and develop the concept further.

### 3.2 Power Asymmetry

By the mid-2000s, a new strand of soft balancing theorization came to disciplinary prominence. Reflecting the criticism, the general theoretical contour of soft balancing was changed to remedy the above-mentioned shortcomings and demonstrate that the concept is relevant to systems displaying unipolarity, bipolarity, and multipolarity. As Paul puts it, 'soft balancing has been employed irrespective of the

distribution of power in the international system—whether multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar’.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Pape argues that soft balancing is ‘mostly brought about within the unipolar system yet there are numerous examples of soft balancing which predate the post-Cold War era’.<sup>18</sup> As an example, he discusses the retrospective period after the Franco- Prussian war in 1870, in which the unified Germany soft balanced against France by forming ‘soft alliances’ with Austria, Britain and Russia.<sup>19</sup>

While many proponents of the soft balancing argument restrict the notion to joint efforts among emerging and great powers and to actions responding to security threats from the hegemon, others offer a wide range of actions taken by a weaker state to gain influence with a stronger state.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, the second major thematic grouping generated during the research is Power Asymmetry.

The analysis of this thematic group suggests that the possibility of applying a soft balancing strategy ‘has more to do with the potential Power Asymmetry

First Order Theme Cluster	Operationalization Theme
various international systems overcoming coordination problems under anarchy degree of power asymmetry 60% To pursue alliances to obtain outcomes against the will of a dominating power undermine the relative power the behavior of weaker states toward more powerful states  to constrain an emerging power’s freedom of action mutual binding an emerging power to constrain an emerging power’s freedom of action overcome power asymmetries toward the predominant power non offensive coalition building to neutralize a potentially threatening power compensating for power asymmetries the relative power of the threatening state changes and asymmetries in the distribution of capabilities political integration practice	Power Asymmetry



leverage and vulnerabilities of the involved actors rather than with the system's polarity per se.<sup>21</sup> In this respect, power asymmetry cluster provides an extensive justification to add empirical depth to the concept of soft balancing. Thus, based on the theme of power asymmetry, advocates of the concept offer a wide range of definitions. Some have described soft balancing as a policy that pursues alliances to obtain outcomes against the will of a dominating power.<sup>22</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, for example, claim that 'soft balancing refers to the efforts to undermine the relative power of the threatening state through diplomatic coordination and institutional constraints'.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, by providing a detailed, systematic account of power asymmetry, analysis of soft balancing has played a critical role in understanding the behavior of weaker states toward more powerful states. Additionally, soft balancing is considered as a strategy essentially designed to limit the actions of emerging powers while avoiding hard balancing or bandwagoning.<sup>24</sup> For example, Saltzman states that 'soft balancing is considered only relevant to systems in which there is vast disparity between the emerging and the responding powers leaving no margin for all other strategies'.<sup>25</sup> Thereby, this cluster is very important for further research even though the empirical studies still often contain US hegemonic power. To put it simply, the theoretical contribution of this cluster to the understanding of the concept of soft balancing still does not fully reflect the empirical research.

### *3.3 Regional Security*

The next theme in soft balancing literature has strong correlation with power asymmetry. Being prominent in relation to the security dimension,<sup>26</sup> soft balancing becomes a means of regional security to counter a rising power's influence. Although the term soft balancing has been limited to situations of global unipolarity, many academics have demonstrated that it should be considered in respect to regional unipolarity.

Over the past few years, analysis of soft balancing has played an important role pertaining to regional security. Applying the soft balancing concept to regional systems, academics have examined the conditions under which it occurs.<sup>27</sup> Thus, soft balancing spots states' perceptions of the threat posed by the regional unipole or rising power. For example, McDougall believes that soft balancing can take various forms, and can be pursued with varying degrees of intensity.<sup>28</sup> However, as rightly

Regional Security	
First Order Theme Cluster	Organizing Theme
regional unipolar systems	Regional Security
perceptions of the threat posed by the regional uni- pole	
variation among regional powers	
collaboration in regional institutions	
responses within the region	
reduce the dependency	
keeping the stronger state under control	
to counterbalance the power of a strong neighbor	

pointed out by Friedman and Long: ‘soft balancing is not an inevitable reaction to the growth of another state’s power [per se].’<sup>29</sup> Overall, it could be stated that soft balancing allows for different degrees of ‘op-  
position’ to the most powerful country in terms of regional security.

Focusing on the responses within the region, some academics can see differences between the major powers on the one hand, and the middle and smaller powers on the other hand. Thus, the impact of rising power has been varied. Some academics stress that soft balancing might be the best strategy for the major powers in the region, however the extent to which soft balancing has been followed is varied. The middle and smaller powers are less able to pursue soft balancing, and they will most probably opt for some combination of accommodation. In contrast, other academics state that a soft balancing strategy is being pursued by both major and smaller powers. Major powers want to avoid a situation where rising powers will play a dominant role, while weaker powers implement it to reduce their dependency on and constrain the influence of stronger states.<sup>30</sup>

The regional security cluster has a strong connection to the next cluster described below—many studies have been conducted with a focus on deepening economic cooperation within coalitions and institutional settings.

#### *3.4 International Trade/Economic interdependence / Interconnectedness of politics and economics*

Drawing on this thematic grouping, recent studies have further contributed to the development of soft balancing by examining the interplays within diplomatic coalitions, political integration practices, international institutions, and informal ententes.

International Trade/Economic interdependence/Interconnectedness of politics and economics

First Order Theme Cluster	Organizing Theme
<p>economic dependency and tools or mechanisms of soft balancing</p> <p>International institutions</p> <p>the option to reduce economic dependencies and still benefit from the cooperation with the counterpart</p> <p>aid to rivals</p> <p>excluding the unipole from multilateral political and economic organizations</p> <p>utilization of institutions</p> <p>To pursue alliances to obtain outcomes against the will of dominant power</p> <p>weaken the persuasive power</p> <p>Limit the ability of the unipole</p> <p>joint response system</p> <p>deepening economic cooperation within alliance</p> <p>trading blocs or by using existing institutions to frustrate threatening power</p> <p>external balancing</p> <p>counter the predominance of the United States (US)</p> <p>Challenge US preponderance</p> <p>use international institutions, economic statecraft, and diplomatic arrangements to delay, frustrate, and undermine US policies.</p> <p>Institutional binding or exclusion</p> <p>diplomatic entangling and political integration practiced</p> <p>restraining the emerging power and discouraging it from carrying out its over-reaching hegemonic aspirations</p> <p>diplomatic coordination and entanglement</p> <p>strategic non-cooperation</p> <p>Institutional binding or bargaining and economic statecraft</p> <p>Economic means</p> <p>Economic warfare</p> <p>economic means by which damage is imposed</p> <p>political alignments</p> <p>multilateralism</p> <p>sanctions</p>	<p><i>Mila Larionova</i></p> <p>International Trade, interdependence, Institutions</p>

The analysis shows that this thematic group has several organized themes, meaning that if an author was discussing international trade, he also mentioned economic interdependence and institutions, and vice versa.

Thus, in turning to international organizations and law, bilateral diplomacy, coalition-building, and international institutions, countries seek to constrain the ability of their counterparts to exercise power.

Academic literature in this group is mostly concentrated on the economic dependency and tools or mechanisms of soft balancing. Thus, soft balancing is seen as an option to reduce economic and/or geopolitical dependencies and still benefit from cooperation with the counterpart.

Academics offer a wide range of strategies of soft balancing. However, in this thematic group, many scholars still use soft balancing exclusively in the context of responses by second-tier or major states toward unipolarity and US power. Thus, second-tier major powers abandoned traditional hard balancing 'because they do not fear losing their sovereignty and existential security to the reigning hegemon'.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, scholars define soft balancing as a 'state activity which involves the formation of limited diplomatic coalitions or ententes with the implicit threat of upgrading their alliances, if the United States goes beyond its stated goals'.<sup>32</sup> Pape expounds on this definition arguing that soft balancing 'does not directly challenge US military preponderance but uses nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies'.<sup>33</sup> According to Pape and Paul, these 'nonmilitary tools' include international institutions, economic statecraft, diplomatic arrangements and strict interpretations of neutrality. Moreover, from geopolitical perspective, strategic partnerships or alignment seeking soft balancing enable weaker states gain leverage against a hegemonic power by joining forces in international institutions or / and through regional complexes. To put the matter bluntly, by soft balancing through the strategic partnership at the geopolitical level, actors can increase their influence greatly.

Others strongly believe that soft balancing is used on the regional level to balance power asymmetry. Consequently, scholars described soft balancing as a policy that pursues alliances to obtain outcomes against the will of dominant power. In this manner, states adopted soft balancing seek to limit the ability of the unipole to 'impose its preferences on others through coordinated action, attempts to augment

power, and countervailing coalitions'.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, on the regional level 'states are able to constrain emerging powers and influence their policies by using institutional mechanisms, rules, norms, and procedures of mutual regulation'.<sup>35</sup> Such arrangements ensure the voice of other states is heard,<sup>36</sup> which enables them to protect their security and interests even in conditions of significant power asymmetry.<sup>37</sup>

In this thematic grouping soft balancing is defined as a 'calculated, focused and nonmilitary strategy that may involve economic statecraft, institutional binding or exclusion, diplomatic coordination and entangling and political integration practiced in order to constrain and restrict an emerging power from pursuing its threatening policies'.<sup>38</sup>

Further, cluster analysis shows that economic statecraft<sup>39</sup> is one of the most important and common instruments of soft balancing. Being a tool of soft balancing strategy, economic statecraft 'is believed to provide decision makers with an effective and relatively cheaper alternative compared with armed conflict that they can implement in order to dissuade an emerging power from pursuing its detrimental policies'.<sup>40</sup>

Another focal organizing theme in the cluster is international institutions. A lot of scholars argue that soft balancing is predominantly undertaken via international institutions, as these structures enable actors to overcome the prisoner's dilemma associated with engaging in balancing.<sup>41</sup> As Pitcairn rightly points out that a weaker state will seek to balance the hegemon and at the same time to decrease its cost of doing so through the institutional platform.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, 'international institutions can facilitate cooperation among states because they reduce uncertainty by providing information, monitoring state behavior, codifying state behavior, and conferring legitimacy'.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in his recent book, TV Paul stresses the importance of international institutions in specific and these thematic group in general and argues that they are the most viable instruments of soft balancing.<sup>44</sup> Accordingly, his contention is that 'states have increasingly relied on international institutions, limited ententes, and economic instruments to balance power and restrain threatening behavior'.<sup>45</sup> Even though the military capabilities still central in power politics, 'they are not the only feasible instruments of balancing in the contemporary world'.<sup>46</sup> To sum up, this cluster shows the clear distinction between soft balancing and hard balancing, no matter the type of international system, power asymmetry conditions, or hierarchy. Additionally, the review of literature

in this cluster reveals that soft balancing is a strategy mainly used between regional organizations or institutions and states.

### 3.5 Soft Power

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Even though soft power is outside the neorealists' conceptual borders of soft balancing, some academics have accommodated both neoliberalism and constructivism to explain soft balancing. In this respect, soft balancing is reconceptualized as an attempt to restrain a rival by soft power through the utilization of norms, persuasion and cooption, etc.

The increasing importance of soft power in a globalized, interdependent world<sup>47</sup> and the cost of hard balancing to challenge the counterpart both constrain states' strategies and prescribe the implementation of soft balancing to prevent and control competitors. As Keohane and Nye so aptly state, 'power can be thought of as the ability of an actor to get others to do something they otherwise would not do. Power can also be conceived in terms of control over outcomes.'<sup>48</sup> Nye defines soft power as "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments."<sup>49</sup> Soft power behavior is displayed through agenda setting, attraction, culture and political ideals, and co-optation.<sup>50</sup> In this sense, soft power is a key to soft balancing, as it expresses the means through which an actor can seek to advance its significant normative interests in the presence of a prevailing or ri-Soft Power

First Order Theme Cluster	Organizing Theme
attraction rather than coercion or payments	Soft Power
Beyond the military realm	
attraction through culture and political ideals, and co-optation	
utilization of norms	
persuasion and cooptation	
preferences of actors	
growing primacy of soft power in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century	
Attractive power	
non-military power	
sources of soft power	
increasing importance of soft power	
does not pursue an aggressive foreign policy	
cooperation	
increasing global interdependence	

val normative (and cultural) configuration.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the notion of soft balancing differs from Nye's liberal soft power concept, which is based on attraction. Indeed, soft balancing contains what the author calls soft power and attraction but goes beyond that and includes the power to destroy a competitor through economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical means. In other words, soft power and soft balancing are united by the absence of hard instruments or mechanisms. But at the same time, soft power is a tool used to soft balance the counterpart.

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The corpus-based and thematic analysis of academic literature was used to understand the state of the art of the publications on soft balancing. Computer-based text analysis identified the most commonly occurring words and phrases in corpora and enabled the author to demarcate the boundaries of the soft balancing studies. The most prevalent content ('meaningful' words) in the corpus allowed the author to indicate the main clusters of the phenomenon and spot the main themes. In the context of the thematic analysis of contemporary literature, five topics are relevant to the soft balancing concept, viz., (1) hierarchy, (2) power asymmetry, (3) regional security, (4) international trade/economic interdependence/interconnectedness of politics and economics, and (5) soft power. Even though all the themes discussed above remain important, they do not fully demarcate the boundary of soft balancing and explain its nature in the contemporary world. Based on the analysis of each cluster as described above, the empirical studies are limited to balance of power rhetoric akin to hard vs. soft and its implications for the United States' hegemonic power. Since the theoretical ground does not reflect the empirical potential of the concept of soft balancing, further development is vital. Additionally, to avoid the further litigation of soft balancing as a concept, it is necessary to sufficiently distinguish soft balancing from other concepts in IR.

#### **4 Alternative IR concepts to soft balancing**

In an attempt to rebuff the criticisms raised against soft balancing, which are still quite valid in terms of the fragility of the empirical findings developed so far, this section poses the question of how soft balancing is distinguished from other concepts in the balance of power theory. As Brooks and Wohlforth state, 'soft-balancing proponents have not supplied the conceptual tools to distinguish behavior that is an outgrowth of the systemic balancing imperative from what we might call unipolar politics as usual.'<sup>52</sup> Similarly, Liber and Alexander

argue that due to the lack of empirical support, ‘any discussion about soft balancing is a discussion about nothing’.<sup>53</sup> This criticism is valid but should not be treated as a criticism of the conceptual understanding of soft balancing, but rather as a criticism of the empirical studies initiated so far.

For the past four centuries, the balance of power has been the bedrock of international politics and (neo)realist international relations theory. Indeed, structural realism explains international outcomes and general modes of great power behavior (balancing/bandwagoning). Thus (neo)realism sees the existence of an anarchic international system with no central authority to exercise hierarchical order, where states must secure their mere survival.<sup>54</sup> Specifically, Waltz and Walt proposed two strategies that states can choose for better security, namely, hard balancing and bandwagoning. Hard balancing means that states can either arm themselves (internal balancing) or form alliances with other powers to balance against great powers (external balancing).<sup>55</sup> Bandwagoning assumes that states can ally with the great power to seek security assurances.<sup>56</sup>

As was mentioned above, even though, the post-Cold War era left hard balancing behind, its heritage —the US focused approach— keeps restraining the concept of soft balancing and leads to the wrong judgments and conclusions.

Another key point is that the neorealists’ understanding described above is rather linear. In such circumstances, soft balancing can be differentiated from the traditional instruments for restraining powers. However, there are still many questions left: When does soft balancing end and hard balancing begin? Is strategic partnership a ‘light version’ of alliance or a more ‘popular version’ of bandwagoning? Additionally, based on the initiated corpus analysis above, it emerges that most soft balancing studies have implicitly focused on the structure and hegemonic power. In this matter, the United States’ focused approach, conceptually inherited from ‘hard balancing’, restrains the concept and leads to the wrong judgments and conclusions. For example, most academics tend toward the view that China and Russia are building a durable strategic partnership to soft balance the United States’ preponderance in the post-Cold War geopolitical order.<sup>57</sup> At first glance, the designation of Sino-Russian soft balancing against the United States appears to be reasonable, as it is rooted in the common security threat from the West. But the impact on the global balance of power does



not completely explain the relationship between the countries. The Sino-Russian relationship is contradictory and occasionally demonstrates limits and the two states' rivalry for power. Despite the grand ambitions for cooperation declared by the two countries, substantive results often elude them.<sup>58</sup>

The next alternative to soft balancing is hedging. The concept of hedging comes from the business statement 'hedge your bets' and means that the future is uncertain, so 'by waiting and watching while making use of present opportunities, one's options are widened'.<sup>59</sup> Since the development of futures market, hedging theory has become an influential theory in finance. With respect to IR, hedging has emerged as a response to the critique and shortcomings of 'balance of power'. Despite of the fact that IR scholars and policy makers are increasingly pledge to the concept of hedging, it has never been clearly defined and understood in international politics. Many scholars believe that the concept of hedging should be understood in the context of the 'balancing-bandwagoning' range within the 'balance of power' theory, in which hedging is located in between as the state's third strategic choice.<sup>60</sup> Evelyn Goh offers the traditional definition of this term as 'a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Medeiros states that hedging is a beneficial strategy for small states that wish to uphold a balanced relationship with two superpowers.<sup>62</sup> In the same manner, Tessman and Wolfe perceive strategic hedging as 'a type of behavior that helps states cope with certain kinds of uncertainty that are likely to exist in unipolar systems'.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, the former author made an effort to reflect on hedging through unipolarity, based on the idea that 'strategic hedging behavior helps second-tier states cope with the threats and constraints they are likely to encounter under conditions of unipolarity, (especially) in a deconcentrating unipolar system such as the one that has characterized the early twenty-first century'.<sup>64</sup> In contrast, Korolev attempts to enhance the understanding of hedging by relating it to the levels of analysis in IR theory, thus, 'instead of placing hedging somewhere between balancing and bandwagoning or attaching it to either end of the balancing-bandwagoning continuum, [his research] argues that hedging is most useful if removed from the system level and tied more closely to regional (interactional) or unit-level independent variables'.<sup>65</sup> And finally, the rest of

the scholars believe that hedging can at best be considered an 'umbrella concept' of multiple dimensions, open to multiple understandings and interpretations.<sup>66</sup>

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Following from the above, and based on the empirical research initiated so far, several differences between hedging and soft balancing could be indicated as follows. First, the lack of military force lead to the assumption that hedging and soft balancing could be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, the nature of the poster of these two concepts is completely different. Accordingly, the real empirical ground of soft balancing studies — based on the corpus analysis — is global level and great powers or regional level and regional powers. On the contrary, hedging is typically secondary states and regional powers and/or great powers. The reason behind this fact is that the engagement in balancing is very costly for small- and medium-size states. A strategy of hedging is well-matched with an anarchic system and enables small powers to hedge risks and advance their positions while avoiding the costs of major confrontation.<sup>67</sup> By these means, hedging is mainly the combination of balancing and/or bandwagoning, and this counteraction scratches out the risks of each action, thereby 'either gaining the benefit of buying time to determine whether the state should balance or bandwagon until the strategic landscape's future direction is clarified, or attaining a strategic benefit to maintain the state's neutral position in a manner that maximizes autonomy'.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, based on the empirical ground of hedging research agenda the number of states involved in hedging should be at least three, on the other hand, for soft balancing it's enough to have two states. This empirical distinction is especially important to avoid the confusion in theoretical explanation of state actions and strategies. Second, regardless of the similarities in relation to the maneuvers and technics both concepts have, hedging is a narrower phenomenon. Hedging is a tool of foreign policy that could be employed for soft balancing, hard balancing or bandwagoning. Soft balancing is a concept that enhances and expands the traditional understanding of balance of power theory. Third, hedging is the strategy to be implemented only in the uncertain environment. Once the uncertainty has disappeared there is no need to 'hedge your bets' and the actors can continue with the primary strategy, whereas soft balancing is usually a long-term approach. At the same time, both hedging and soft balancing have a potential to provide an alternative perspective for general modes of great power behavior that is not directly a product

of US hegemonic power. However, hedging does not show the nature of the relationship between the states and their ambitions. Hedging is a prudent insurance strategy states adopt when facing uncertainties.<sup>69</sup> Such a strategy is aimed at reducing or minimizing the risks only, whereas soft balancing is not about minimizing the risk but about maximizing the conditions and the position.

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## **Conclusion**

The presented article sought to conceptually grasp and demarcate the boundary of soft balancing through analysis and decomposition of the existing academic literature. Computer-based corpus analysis was used to provide quantitative confirmation of clusters (the most commonly occurring words and phrases) in corpora and group them in an inclusive order. The most prevalent content ('meaningful' words) in the corpus allowed the author to indicate the main clusters of the phenomenon and spot the main themes. In the context of the analysis, the most popular clusters in the soft balancing literature is hierarchy, unipolarity, and more specifically, the United States' hegemonic power. This cluster defines the empirical significance of soft balancing, even though the concept is facing difficult times due to its critiques. To increase the legitimacy of soft balancing in contemporary IR scholarship, a new strand of soft balancing theorization has come to disciplinary prominence. The second-ranked cluster—power asymmetry—has changed the contour of soft balancing to remedy the shortcomings and to rebuff the criticism of the concept. This thematic group further advances the concept through its theoretical and empirical focus on numerous quantitative and qualitative examples of strategies against regional emerging powers. Even though this cluster shows that soft balancing is formulated as a strategy employed irrespective of the type of international system—whether multipolar, bipolar, or unipolar—it has not overcome the superiority of the hierarchy theme and has not moved beyond the analysis of unipolarity in its empirical research and case studies. Indeed, the corpus-based research shows that the empirical ground of soft balancing studies is mostly second-tier states and major/great emerging powers versus unipolarity and the United States' hegemonic power. Yet, some studies demonstrate that soft balancing has appeared in various international systems throughout history, though this research agenda is rare compared to the United States' hegemonic power.

The next prevalent cluster is regional security. Applying soft balancing to regional systems, the concept has become a means of regional security to counter a rising power's influence. Although the term 'soft balancing' has been limited to situations of global unipolarity, many academics have demonstrated that it can be applied to instances of regional unipolarity. The regional security theme has a strong connection to the next predominant cluster, which is international trade/economic interdependence/interconnectedness of politics and economics. Thus, many studies have been conducted with a focus on deepening economic cooperation within coalitions, institutional settings, bilateral diplomacy, etc. Academic literature in this group mostly concentrates on the ability of economic instruments, international institutions, and limited ententes to soft balance and restrain the counterpart's threatening behavior. This cluster shows the clear distinction between soft balancing and hard balancing, no matter the type of international system, hierarchy, or power asymmetry conditions.

After the analysis of the revealed clusters, it should be evident that the soft balancing strategy exists more or less exclusively in the following scenarios: interstate relations (for example, the United States' soft balancing towards China and vice versa); triangular relations (China and Russia's soft balancing toward the United States)—the most popular scenario in international relations' empirical studies; and relations between regional organizations and states (BRICS' soft balancing towards the United States).

The last prevalent cluster in the corpora is soft power. Although soft power is outside of neorealists' conceptual borders of soft balancing, some academics have accommodated both neoliberalism and constructivism to describe the concept. In this cluster, soft power and soft balancing are united by the absence of hard instruments or mechanisms. But at the same time, soft power should be treated as a tool used to accommodate soft balancing.

Despite the proliferation of soft balancing research, the discussion, as conducted in the 2001–18 period, is the unfinished endeavor of international relations scholars. Thus, there are certain problems and analytical weaknesses associated with studies of soft balancing. For example, soft balancing scholars often quote and/or modify the Pape definition, thereby limiting the application of soft balancing to the unique behavior against the United States under the unipolarity. In recent years, the global dominance of the United States has led

scholars to ask how other states respond to US hegemony, but this is not enough for the conceptualization of soft balancing. It becomes apparent that a clear or uniform understanding of what is meant by soft balancing still requires elaboration as the US-focused approach downplays the existing understanding of the phenomenon and leads to the wrong judgments and conclusions. For example, most academics tend toward the view that China and Russia are building a durable strategic partnership to soft balance the US preponderance and thus constitutes the post-Cold War geopolitical order.<sup>70</sup> At first glance, the designation of Sino – Russian soft balancing against the US appears to be reasonable as it is rooted in the common security threat from the West. But concentrating primarily on the behavior patterns against the hegemonic power does not completely explain the relationship between these states. The Sino-Russian relationship is contradictory and occasionally demonstrates limits and the two states' rivalry for power. Despite the grand ambitions for cooperation declared by the two countries, their relations are characterized by the territorial disputes, unwellness to foster a more integrated cooperation and distrust. Besides the historical and cultural heritage, perhaps, more convincing evidence supporting the rivalry between them are the growing power gap and, as a result, increasing threat perception. There are numerous examples of how China and Russia soft balance each other, including the multilateral platform of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the development of trade agreements and coercive diplomacy. The adopted soft balancing strategies of the competitors have derived from their sophisticated efforts to control the neighboring countries and expand their own power in Central Asia. Ironically, 'Sino-Russian strategic partnership rhetoric' is fueled by bounded empirical research restricted to 'China and Russia vs. US Hegemonic Power'. Thus, the empirical base of soft balancing should be expanded to gain acceptance in the scientific community.

Additionally, the concept was established to address the puzzle of the absence of hard balancing against the United States after the Cold War, however, the military and non-military dichotomy in the corpora fails to capture the essential distinction of soft balancing from other concepts in IR, for example hedging. Undoubtedly, the empirical ground of soft balancing as a concept downplays its theoretical potential and doesn't allow academics to clearly validate the distinction.

Thus, despite its theoretical and empirical potential, the soft balancing research agenda remains underdeveloped, largely due to the limitation in the empirical ground and overlaps between it and other related concepts. Consequently, theorization of soft balancing is in progress, albeit significant theoretical criticism has been swirling around theoretical grounds from the very start. Thus, in an attempt to add richness into the understanding of the phenomenon, the discussion was facilitated by addressing the second research question — What have been the conceptual alternatives to soft balancing? The article required a reflection on the conventional wisdom of traditional balance of power theory to distinguish soft balancing from hard balancing, bandwagoning and hedging. For the first two, the difference is rather linear: use of military tools and/or the nature of alliance. However, there are still many questions left: When does soft balancing end and hard balancing begin? Is strategic partnership a ‘light version’ of military alliance or a more ‘popular version’ of bandwagoning? The last alternative discussed in the article was hedging. The analysis shows that the lack of military force lead to the assumption that hedging and soft balancing could be used interchangeably. Nevertheless, hedging is a narrower phenomenon that could be employed to soft balance, hard balance or bandwagon. Thus, hedging doesn’t show the nature of the relationship between the states and their ambitious. And finally, hedging is a short-term strategy implemented only in the uncertain environment. Once the uncertainty has disappeared there is no need to hedge and the actors can continue with the primary strategy, whereas soft balancing is usually a long-term approach. In particular, hedging is aimed to minimize risk, while soft balancing is aimed to maximize capabilities of a state.

Since the theoretical ground does not reflect the empirical potential of the concept the author suggests an alternative way of expanding the understanding of soft balancing through the creation of the composite index. Thus, the goal for further research is to compose the soft balancing index and validate it empirically.



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