Rethinking Balance: from Power to Threat

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Twenty years passed since the theory of balance of power has been revised and refined by a new paradigm. Much thinking about the international system has been centered on the idea that states oppose any other state that accumulates enough power to be a potential hegemony. That is the central idea of the balance of power theory. Whereas this paradigm revolves around the power buildup that triggers the process of systemic balance, a "new" paradigm, called balance of threat, puts at forefront the assumption that states balance as a reaction against threat and not against power *per se*. The main factor that generates the process of balance, through internal buildup of military power or/and alliances formation, is the threat posed by states. Power accumulation is downgraded from a central feature to one of the variables on which threat is based, alongside with aggressive intentions and geographical proximity.[1]

The balance of threat theory made a major development of one of the realist school's tenets. It proved that the traditional thinking of how the international system functions can be refined. It also illustrated that foremost scholars of the realist tradition of international relations theory, e.g., Hans Morghenthau or Keenth Waltz, made inconsistent assumptions about the impact of security competition among states. This theory made a splendid case of how scientific programs advance based on dynamic scientific research.[2] In this specific case – the traditional balance of power theory replaced by the modern balance of threat theory – it confirmed that neo-realism is a scientific program that can produce new valuable thinking on processes that decode international politics.

However, after its momentum and after twenty years since its outset, the balance of threat theory has not been substantially developed, nor in its theoretical depth neither in its empirical substance. It has been consumed mainly by its core prediction, i.e., a politico-military alliance of states will dissolute as the natural result of the threat disappearance. Whereas the threat that has triggered the external balance process of alliance formation fades away, the expected consequence is that the alliance breaks away too. The recent historical record shows crystal clear that this prediction was fallacious. The post – Cold War epoch makes the case of an alliance – the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – which survives the fading of the threat that initially brought it alive. Instead of further revision of the balance of threat paradigm, the author, Steven Walt, preferred to redesign it with a new name: *the balance of soft power*. Less substantial and with a questionable historical record, in comparison with the former balance of threat paradigm, the theory of soft power struggles to explain how processes of balance still persist, in disguised and altered forms, within a unipolar dominated international system.[3]

This article sustains that the theory of balance of threat can be further improved both in its theoretical and empirical dimensions. Getting off some of the core assumptions of the neo-realist theory on which balance of threat is based is an option, since these assumptions could have been the breaks to deepen investigations on sources of threat balancing processes. Analyzing threat perception formation is better placed in a constructivist framework of thinking, which

centers on the interplay between ideas, collective shared beliefs and identities in order to explain world politics. The findings of other research agendas that are based on the constructivist framework, such as *securitization theory* or *regional security complex*, can be inserted in an expanded and refined theory of balance of threat.

Regarding the empirical research, this study proposes more clarity on choosing the level of analysis (systemic, sub-systemic and unit) and the chronological frame. The selection of a time frame would be very valuable for historical tracking of change in the area of shared strategic beliefs that shape international politics.

I start this article by looking to the roots of balance of threat theory, namely the realist tradition and its traditional balance of power tenet. The second section investigates how the balance of threat theory is set up and it reveals its weaknesses. The third section shows how the balance of threat applies to the current unipolar context of international politics. And the fourth part explores the main features of an extended theory of balance of threat.

The conclusions focus on the relevance of an expanded historical record in which threat balance can be further tested. The conclusions include preliminary findings on the interchange between the study of international history and the theory of international relations.

I. Balance of power and the realist tradition of thinking in international relations theory

The concept of balance of power has a multitude of meanings. At the middle of the last century, Ernst Haas found 8 meanings and definitions of the balance of power concept. It is certain that this line of research comes to an entangled result.[4] It is an unsound track of research since it gets merely to the conclusion that we might not find what really means the balance of power. The central issue is not to attempt finding one general and collectively accepted definition but to see how this concept is embedded in scientific research programs. Although various forms of thinking about the balance of power have been recorded in the history of mankind – the Greek historian of the fifth century BC, Thucydides or the Indian philosopher of the third century BC, Kautilyia – a generous body of thinking about this concept is recorded only in the European world, beginning with the Epoch of the Illuminist philosophy. The concept is found in both, philosophy research and documents of statecraft including international treaties, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.[5] Yet, the balance of power has been articulated in a theoretical construction just since the set up of the realist theories of international relations.

In order to grasp the connection between realism and balance of power theory I draw on the difference between *grand theories* and *middle range theories* of international relations.[6] While the grand theories focus on the general picture and try to answer the question on how the international world functions, the middle range theories explore specific and limited problems regarding the international politics.

Different tenets of the realist school of international relation theory – classical, neo-realist, offensive, defensive, or neo-classical – are research programs that explain the nature of international politics. These theories are identified as grand theories of international relations. As the differences between these research programs are beyond the objectives set by this paper, I confine to a general picture that defines the realist tradition in international relation theories.[7] Realism explains the world politics as an enduring struggle for power between sovereign states that operate in an anarchical environment.

On the other hand, the balance of power theory is, undoubtedly, a middle range theory that focuses on how states oppose each other. It describes the results of power distribution in the international system. The research question of the balance of power theory is how the international system escapes from being

dominated by a single state or how the condition of world hegemony or universal empire is avoided.

It is important to notice that the balance of power as a middle range theory rests on the realist core assumptions about international politics. Realism has been promoted as a school of thought in the theory of international relations, which resulted from a great debate between scholars. The concept of balance of power stood at the very center of this debate. After the end of the First World War, liberalism – as a normative paradigm of thinking in international relations – proposed a new era of statecraft based on the international law of peace, promotion of free market, the prohibition of war as an instrument of international relations, and the guaranty of peace based on a collective security framework. Liberalism completely refuted the balance of power described as an institution of international politics which was blamed to stimulate the resort to war among states.

Many scholars who put the basis of the realist tradition have argued that liberalism is a mere utopia as the international world can not escape the brutal security competition between states. Not any form of international institutions or instruments of collective security can achieve an international system free of war. Power politics are a given. Some forms of international stability can be achieved through the prudent management of power relations based on the principle of balance of power.

There are a number of core assumptions on which realist theories draw on. First, realism puts the emphasis on the anarchical structure of international world, meaning that there is no central authority that can regulate the relations between states. The condition of anarchy defines the international system as a self-help system within which states have to look for their security relying on their own capabilities. The prospects of war are a constant element of international politics. Second, states are locked in a *security dilemma* as they have to permanently evaluate their capabilities in relation with the other states in the system.[8] There is an inexorable sense of insecurity between states as they are pushed to expand their military power in order to be sure that they will not be overtaken by other players in the system. Third, the competition for security among states is the regular feature and it can be surmounted only when the system becomes hierarchal in the form of hegemony, universal empire or world government. And fourth, the most important players in the international system are states viewed as rational units that operate under the logic of national interest, survival, and power maximizing.

Balance of power is a central result of the realist's core assumptions.[9] States, as rational actors constrained by the conditions of the security dilemma will oppose against another state that accumulates enough power to become hegemony. The perspective of system hegemony or world domination by a single center generates the risk for all the other players in the system to lose autonomy of action and sovereignty.

The relative power distribution in the system represents the central frame of analysis. Whereas a state actor or an alignment of states begins to translate aggregate power into military capabilities to an increased level, the other state actors in the system perceive this situation as an *imbalance of power* in the system. Their reaction is twofold: on one hand they increase domestic power buildup efforts (the process of *internal balancing*), on the other hand they form military alliances (the process of *external balancing*). The balance of power that is formed can be tested in a military conflict. Whoever would win the war, the process of shaping the system of balance of power is re-created since all the state actors will continue to be cautious on the distribution of power within the system and will permanently watch out against any attempt of hegemony. The post-war process of balancing can result in the situation in which alliances are formed between former enemies.

There is a certain belief of the realist prominent scholars regarding a pattern of balancing behavior of states that is generated by the general conditions of anarchy in international politics. This tendency is found in both classical and modern (neo-realist)

forms of realism: Morgenthau, one of the leading theoreticians of classical realism, sustains that the international balance of power is a general principle that can be found in any society formed by autonomous units and the balance of power with its adjacent policies are inevitable; Waltz, the initiator of neo-realism, states that "balance of power politics prevail wherever two, and only two requirements are met: that the order is anarchic and that it be populated by units whishing to survive" and "states, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side, for it is the stronger side that threatens them".[10]

The way scholars of realpolitik read the international history, as the empirical basis of their theories, outlines the recurrent formation of balance of power. It generally starts with Europe in the seventeenth century when the supranational power of the Pope was replaced by modern sovereign states. Beginning with the Westphalia Peace in 1648, the international treaties between states invoked the balance of power as desirable in order to prevent the dangerous boost of power of any nation. Successive attempts of winning hegemony in Europe, by Louis XIV of France, Napoleon, Wilhelmine or Nazi Germany have been watered down by balancing coalitions. Nineteenth century is par excellence the epoch of balance of power statecraft. First, England confirmed its successful performance as European *balancer*, forging alliances with other continental powers in order to obstruct any attempt of hegemony on the European continent. And secondly, the Concert of Europe formed after the Napoleonic Wars was meant as an association of great powers that recognized the principle of balance of power as the prerequisite of stability and status quo maintenance.[11]

The theory of balance of power is not free of controversies within the realist tradition of international relation theories. In the realist form of the hegemonic stability theory, the balancer usually overlaps with the hegemon actor, which uses balancing strategies in order to assure the stability of the system. That is also an approach that transcends the limited historical record of the *Westphalian* world of European modern states, expanding the research to the evolution of successive empires in world history.[12]

But the major source of the re-interpretation of balance of power theory rests on middle range theories that test the general propositions advanced by grand theories. The central research questions posed by middle range theories are: whether the balance of power really represents a recurrent result of the anarchical international system; why would states prefer the balancing behavior over other alternatives such as bandwagoning or buck-passing? Or what does the empirical record tell us about the real motives on which balancing strategies are based on?

II. Replacing power with threat.
The genesis of the new theory of balance

Steven Walt, a neo-realist scholar of international relations, starts its research questions on balance of power theory with general remarks on international history.[13] Reflecting on the Two World Wars and the period shortly after the Second World War, he comes to the conclusion that the general assumption on balance behavior triggered by power accumulation does not fit the historical record.

The major findings are that Germany bid for hegemony was overcome by more powerful coalitions. In the World War I the alliance formed against Germany, namely by Great Britain, France, Russia, joined later by the United States, was far superior than the combined power of Germany and its allies, namely Austrian-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire. A similar situation was in the Second World War, where the coalition against Nazi Germany attracted more states, although

Germany was the weaker side in terms of aggregate power. And the third example is the short period after the Second World War that was marked by the preponderance of the United States power (including the monopoly over nuclear capabilities). Yet, a large number of states preferred to form an alliance with the United States and not to balance against its power, as the theory of balance of power would predict.

It should be mentioned here that Walt's findings on the Two World Wars are not convincing. For the First World War the situation can be interpreted as following: Germany, although slightly inferior in terms of demography, economic power, and number of military units had more advantages in terms of army mobilization and performance. In other words, Germany had a big advantage of translating aggregate power into offensive capabilities. Till United States joined the Entente and made clear the outcome of the war, German army knocked down Russia and fought the war in Western Europe on the French territory. In this case, German army performance can be considered a capability in itself and should be counted.

For the case of the Second World War, Walt confuses the way the anti-Nazi alliance has been enlarged. It was not that a number of states rushed in to save Europe from Nazi domination, but rather that Hitler's decisions to declare war on Soviet Russia, and then on the United States overstretched significantly the anti-Nazi alliance.

Yet, the third instance that refers to the period short after the Second War shows very clear that the balance of power theory is inconsistent with the historical record. Roughly all the European Western powers, alongside with Greece and Turkey preferred to adhere to defensive pacts with the United States, in order to deter a potential attack of the Soviet Union. The balance of power theory would predict in this case that most of the other great powers in the international system would swiftly initiate balancing processes directed against the potential hegemon. However, a number of states felt more threatened by Soviet Russia, instead of the United States. This result generates the general hypothesis on which balance of threat theory is based: that states balance against threat and not power *per se*. Internal or external balancing processes are the result of an external threat posed by other states. Power distribution within the international system does not tell us which states will align against others.

Threat formation relies on a number of combined variables: *aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities*, and *perception of aggressive intentions*.

The *aggregate power* means the states' total resources, including industrial and military capability, population and technological dynamism. The states will have more tendencies to balance against a threatening state, the greater the aggregate power this has. A strong indicator regarding the existence of *offensive capabilities* is when a state possesses the capabilities with which it can threaten the territorial integrity of another state at an acceptable cost. States with powerful offensive capabilities are more likely to provoke other states to balance. States that are in close *proximity* pose a greater threat than those that are far. And decoding *intentions* of a state as aggressive will make others to balance. Both internal and external processes of balance come to an end when the external threat disappears.

The case of NATO formation against the Soviet Union after the Second World War fits rightly the balance of threat's scenario. USSR had an impressive *aggregate power* that has been translated into impressive *offensive capabilities* with which it has wiped out the powerful German Wehrmacht. As the Red Army tanks rolled deep into Europe, the USSR began to be in the *near vicinity* of Western European states. The *aggressive intentions* of the USSR have been decoded as it began to aggressively impose puppet regimes in Eastern and Central Europe, while the final settlement regarding Germany was postponed *sine die* by the soviets. The Western countries signed a collective defense treaty in 1948 and one year later they joined a defense treaty with the United States.[14]

It is not that Walt's empirical record is focused on grand historical events such as the World Wars or the begging of the Cold War. These are general hypothesis based on which the author starts a detailed analysis of alliances formation cases. The external balancing process is the central aspect of the research. Walt chooses, for testing the balance of threat's hypotheses, to focus on cases of alliances formation in two regions during the Cold War times: Middle East (Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, and the two superpowers: the United States and USSR) and South-Western Asia (Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, China, and the two superpowers: the United States and USSR).

There are two general propositions that Walt tries to prove. One is that states prefer to form military alliances or alignments in order to balance and not to bandwagon. The other is that states form alliances or alignments in order to balance against the most threatening and not the most powerful state.

Bandwagon refers to the situation in which weak states choose to align with the dominant power in order to appease it or to share the profit of a victory. The alternative of bandwagon is considered in these case studies, because Walt observes that American foreign policy decision makers, during the Reagan administration, believe that other states would prefer to accommodate with the USSR threat rather than balance against it. He proves, based on the above mentioned empirical record, that, actually, when states are faced with an external menace posed by a third state, they will rather prefer to form alliances against it than to align with it.

The new theory of balance represents a major new finding on the processes that explain the results of security competition among states. It replaces power, framed in terms of military capabilities, with threat perceptions. Not the distribution of capabilities in the system, but the distribution of threats is the main determinant of balance.

The limited historical record

Beyond its merits, it is striking that the empirical record of the balance of threat theory remains so narrow. For instance, a very challenging case study would be represented by the European states' competition for security during the time before the World War II. This case does not fit either the balance of threat or the bandwagoning expectations.

While Germany became a major threat for the other European powers, the balancing process did not seem to work. France and Great Britain did balance very late, after a lot of appeasement and Soviet Russia preferred to cut a deal with Germany and adopted a favorable non-belligerent position at the beginning of the conflict. The Soviet action would not be bandwagoning as it was not weaker than Germany.

The whole case seems to be defined by a buck-passing scenario in which states avoid to be part of balancing coalitions preferring the other third states to take on the burden balancing. Buck-passing remains unconsidered although it explains a very important piece of international history, which represents the prologue of the Second World War.[15]

The balance of threat theory simply requires more empirical record for testing. Otherwise it explains only the balancing behavior of states in two sub-systems within the historical framework of the Cold War. In this context, the propositions put forward by this theory can hardly count for general propositions that explain the behavior of states and are valid across time and space.

The anomaly

Findings on balance of power inconsistencies represent the onset of the theory of balance of threats. Even the balance of threats needs

further reformulation since it does not fit recent evidence. In the case of threat decline, the theory would predict a proportional decline

of balancing processes as well, be it domestic or external. As the danger posed by a state disappears, the result is that also the alliance build to counter the threat would fade away.

The idea of ending the balancing process in the conditions of threat disappearance is challenged by the case of NATO. As a military coalition of states, NATO was designed to counter the Soviet threat. After the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the disintegration of Soviet Union, it would have been expected, based on the theory of balance of threat that NATO would become obsolete and the alliance would come to a natural end. However, the outcome has been converse: the more Russia was loosing power in the 1990s, the more the Eastern European states have been more willing to join NATO. Instead of disappearing, NATO enlarged. Although less threatened, the Eastern European countries have been eager to join the alliance. Balance of threats theory is inconsistent with both NATO persistence and the enlargement of the alliance with Eastern European states.

For the second edition of the book *The Origins of Alliances*, in 1990, Stephen Walt indicates in the *Preface* that "[...] the optimistic rhetoric about maintaining the "Atlantic Community" should be viewed with some skepticism [...] Although NATO's elaborate institutional structure will slow the pace of devolution, only a resurgence of the soviet threat is likely to preserve NATO in anything like its present form."[16]

It is true that NATO configuration has been altered in the last two decades as it added a new strategic concept, new state members and even it has performed out-of-area military missions. Yet, the core *rationale* of a collective defensive pact remains intact. The fact that there is no entire harmony at the decision level among its members does not change too much the bigger picture, as it did not change the bigger picture of other uneasy but still successful alliances in international history.[17]

III. Balancing processes in the era of unipolarity

Most of the theories of the realist tradition do not decode comfortably the context set by the current unipolar structure of world politics which unfolded after the Cold War. These theories and the auxiliary forms of balance paradigms have explained to a large extent the results of multipolarity or bipolarity. However, these abstract constructs seem to be unfitted and not designed for making sense of an international self-help system that is dominated by a single power.[18]

Balance of power theory would expect that most of great powers in the system form balancing coalitions against the domination of a single power. The advocates of systemic balance of power theory indicate that although a balancing coalition has not yet emerged, this process can be more durable than expected.[19] There would be a number of signs that signal the slow coming into sight of a future trend of balance formation. The rise of China, the resurgent Russia, or even the development of the European Union Security and Defense

Policy are indicators of a future international structure defined by multipolarity. Yet, this expectation is purely a gamble since the prolongation of unipolarity would keep the theory in the background, just waiting for the balance to come. The more unipolarity persists, the more the theory of balance of power falls slowly into disuse.

On the side of balance of threat theory, the absence of balancing at systemic level in the framework of unipolarity is explainable. The absence of threat intentions posed by the single superpower of the system, namely the US, makes that no balancing coalition will form. Yet, the author's theory struggles to unmask persistent tendencies of balancing at systemic level that can be activated at any time if the US does not restrain its unilateral power projection in third countries. These balancing tendencies are materialized in a *soft power* form. They show the other great powers discomfort *vis-à-vis* the US unilateral military actions and are confirmed in various forms

short of military components. The balance of soft power finds out that balancing processes are persistent and they can be activated in military known forms when the level of threat posed by the single superpower of the system would transcend certain limits.

It should be mentioned that the balance of soft power rests on a very unsteady empirical record. What would go in and what would go out from a list of states' balance of soft power behavior?[20] The theory is quite unclear on this issue. The theory represents also an effort of criticizing the neo-conservative tenet of foreign policy embraced by the Bush administration in the context of the US intervention in Iraq.

Another fallback of the balance of threat theory and of the new form of balance of soft

power theory is that they try hard to validate the realist tradition core assumptions regarding the recurrent security competition among states as the sufficient result of the anarchical international structure. From this point of view, Walt comes too easily at the conclusion that European powers, e.g., France or Germany, would slide into a security competition with the US. The current developments show that the transatlantic relations stay on firm grounds. The path from amity to enmity is visualized by Walt as too easy and straightforward. It is almost as if lord Palmerston's views on alliances from XIXth century England would be still very lively and applicable in the current context of the US – Europe relations.[21]

IV. An extended theory of balance of threat

The general conclusion is that, with the exception of NATO anomaly, the balance of threat theory's validity persists as long as the levels of analysis are correctly distinguished and visualized. During the Cold War times, the clear cut between *systemic* and *sub-systemic* levels was blurred by the insertion of rivalry between the two superpower – the US and Soviet Union – within merely all sub-systemic structures. Only after the demise of bipolarity, the regional structures and their specific security relations become conspicuous. The interplay between geographic proximity and perception of threat makes balance of threat theory relevant for making sense of the security relations among regional actors.[22]

The employment of balance of threat theory for sub-systemic analyses overlaps with the findings of a more sophisticated paradigm called the *regional security complex*. The latter paradigm focuses on processes of securitization and de-securitizaiton within clusters of states. The regional security complex is defined by the intensity of these processes which are so intertwined that the states' security concerns cannot be considered or resolved apart from one another.[23]

It is noticeable that the regional security complex introduces also the notion of

de-securitization, meaning that threat intentions within a cluster of states decline to such a degree that states cede to be locked into a security competition. The relations would be in this case replaced by patterns of amity in forms of a high degree of cooperation or at the maximum of a security community.[24]

The element of de-securitization complements the balance of threat theory, being a sort of a missing link. It is a very important addition since the balance of threat theory is rather quiet on the forms in which balancing processes fade away and on the possible scenarios following from it.

But how do the processes of securitization and de-securitization really take form? This is also another issue on which balance of threat theory does not say much, because of two causes. First is that the theory in its present form takes for granted only two possible scenarios: alliances or opposition between states. And the second is that it would sacrifice the required parsimony of paradigms and the reluctance of neo-realist systemic research that does not leave too much space of an interconnection between unit level (the foreign policy) and systemic level processes (the distribution of power among units).[25]

The clear cut between foreign policy and systemic approaches is exaggerated. Moreover, it does not make sense of states' variations in decoding threats. The current balance of threat theory does not consider the analysis of threat perceptions' fluctuation at unit level. If domestic analyses of the way in which security concerns form are introduced into theory, then the theory would become more clarifying, e.g., the way Iran changed its security concerns after the coming to power of the Ayatollah regime in 1979.

Including variables that refer to processes of securitization would also reveal how states that form a military alliance will prefer the continuation of this arrangement. For instance, the analysis of the development of NATO member states' security concerns shows two general trends. One is that they prefer keeping the collective defense arrangement for a future possible resurgence of military threats coming from a third state. The second is that their main concerns focus on security risks that result from failed states, international networks of terrorism, or the spread of weapons of mass destruction.[26]

In order to disentangle all the elements that can complicate the disclosure of domestic processes of threat formation, the insertion here refers to the findings of the *securitization theory*. The main idea promoted by this paradigm is that norms formation and adoption is based on discourse analysis.[27] The discourse analysis in political science is the method of understanding how political issues come into sight as an intersubjective process. The discursive approach is employed to see how national security or international organizations security agenda is set up. According to the securitization theory, the security policy is not objective, but intersubjective.[28] An issue becomes a matter of security as a result of a speech act. What is relevant is not the existence of an external threat but more of how that threat is designated by the securitizing actor as a security issue, an issue that is more important than others and should take absolute priority.

The general flaw found at the theory of threat is the absence of an in-depth focus on threat formation. This general issue comes relevant as the theory of balance of threat can not explain how NATO persists in the context of the external threat disappearance.

Both the regional security complex and the securitization theories' findings are complementary to the balance of threat theory. Based on the new assumptions of the securitization, it becomes explainable how states can change their perception on the external threat and how the exit from a balance scenario can be.

While the variables of *geographic proximity*, *aggregate power* and *offensive capabilities* remain valid, the perception of aggressive intentions should be enlarged with the *securitization/de-securitization* variables. The materialization of balancing processes, in terms of domestic military enhancement and initiation of alliances, depends on the success of a domestic *securitization* speech. The way out from a balance of threat situation results from a successful domestic *de-securitization* speech.

The exit from a balance of threat is conceived in various scenarios, ranging from recreating another competition for security, in which states will form new balances of threat, to the circumstances in which the relations are constructed in terms of co-operation, and to the situation in which the states will form a pluralistic security community.

The balance of threat exit in the form of a successful de-securitization discourse does not imply the automatically dissolution of security commitments between states, as new forms of security concerns can be inserted on a common security agenda.

It is worth mentioning here that an expanded theory of balance of threat would become, to certain degree, contradictory with its realist tradition umbrella. Integrating the variable of de-securitization and its possible results - especially the co-operation or security community relations - contradicts the central assumption of realism on anarchy, which generates a self-help system and an inexorable security competition among states. A general

defection of the realist research programs is the inflexibility on explaining the change in international politics. The central cause of this flaw, which has influenced also the balance of threat theory, is the predetermined systemic processes that are expected to be generated by the anarchical structure of international politics.[29]

The securitization and the regional security complex theories have been both influenced by the conventional constructivist approach in international relations theory. Constructivism is defined as "the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world"[30]. Constructivism is a framework of thinking about the nature of social life that can be used in empirical research on international relations issues. It puts emphases on the shared intesubjective beliefs and the role of identities that shape the social structure of international politics. The context visualized through the lenses of conventional constructivism is not predetermined but constituted jointly by agents and structures.

The balance of threat theory can be framed in a constructivist approach that offers more

flexibility on revealing the changing patterns of security relations between states in the international system. It would transcend some of the rigid realist expectations on balancing recurrence in the anarchical international system and on interpreting the threat formation solely through the lenses of sovereignty/territorial defense.

As the expanded theory of balance of threat can have a closer look on threat formation, various data can show that the threat formation roots are not limited at defending national territory or sovereignty. The securitization process can imply, beyond the elements of political and military security, the recourse to issues of identity and economy in the forms of concerns lifted up to existential/security concerns.[31]

A sectorial approach on threat formation that includes military, political, social and economic elements does not hamper the military components on which balance of threat is based. At this point, a differentiation should be made between process and result. The employment of military instruments by states, through military power enhancement and defensive pacts initiation with other states that have similar security concerns, remains the result of the balancing process.

Conclusions: the history and theory of balance of threat

This article is a broad critique of Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory. A general finding is that beyond its merits as a better theory on balance, this paradigm has encountered important challenges. The view of this article is that the balance of threat theory represents a major contribution to creating better instruments of analysis that make sense of the international politics. However, the theory needs some refinement that includes more in-depth evaluation of the threat formation variable. It also needs more empirical record in order to reveal systemic and various sub-systemic trends.

In the beginning, this article makes an introduction into the traditional balance of power theory and its realist tradition

theoretical framework in order to reveal the relevance of the re-formulation done by the theory of balance of threat. The main flaw of the theory is this: the "big" expectation of NATO's dissolution as a natural consequence of external threat's disappearance has not been met. Instead of fading away as we would expect based on the balance of threat theory, NATO enlarged. The alliance has become even stronger as the current return of France into the integrated military command, ending a fourth decade rift, shows.

The answer to this inconsistency is that the balance of threat theory can be further revised. Adding the securitization and de-securitization elements that stand at the core of threat formation would make more sense of states'

security options in various regional/sub-systemic frameworks.

Another major finding of this article is that balance of threat theory can be improved outside its realist tradition aegis. A more flexible theoretical framework, such as the moderate constructivism, can offer more space for the interpretation of threat formation at unit or systemic level. The change of states' security preferences and the outcome of exiting the balance of threat relations on the lines amity relations can be captured by the balance of threat paradigm only with better equipped instruments of analysis. Discourse security analysis is one of these instruments.

The second major weakness found at the balance of threat theory is represented by its narrow empirical basis. A general explanation of this gap is to a certain degree stemming from the realist paradigms' tendencies characterized by *presentism*.[32] Although realist research programs as grand theories of international relations studies develop general proposition on international politics that transcend time and space, their empirical ground is contained into the *European Westphalian order*. Even within this time frame, the historical record barely refers to other epochs than the XIXth and XXth century.

Walt's balance of threat theory is obviously marked by *presentism*. The first studies starts with evolutions on statements of the Reagan administration foreign policy decision-makers.[33] The second, more recent study on *balance of soft power* debates the performance of the Bush administration foreign policy and the impact of the US intervention in Iraq.[34] A history of the balance of threat is thus missing, living a question mark over whether the balance of threat is a recurrent feature of the international system or not.

Choosing an empirical record that would count for the history of balance of threat is a complex enterprise. Scaling a historical frame is, in particular, the most intricate issue. One option is to visualize balancing processes on the broad scale of the historical international systems that have been recorded by historians. Comparative analysis would be then the most challenging quest. As a general result of comparison between different international systems in a study addressed by 9 scholars, the outcome is that balance is not recurrent and not the most prominent feature of the described systems. In most of the cases balancing fails and rising to hegemony represents the recurrent aspect. For accounting the decline of the hegemonic power, again, the balancing processes do not stand as prominent variables.[35]

The second option is to choose a narrower historical frame, which would be characterized by turning points or environment shifting in order to count for regular or varied security preferences of the actors within an international system. I find in particular that the period between World War II and the recent times at the beginning of the 21st century offers important features that would make it for a good case of empirical research.

First, the selected historical frame reveals important turning points that would possibly generate shifts in collective beliefs, which shape strategic preferences of states. A general hypothesis is that the balance of threat might have been the general norm of the international system in the first three centuries of the European *Westphlian* world. Yet, the finalization of a long epoch of European great powers, locked in the security environment of multipolarity, marks the beginning of parallel security speeches, which generate collective beliefs at more than one sub-system. The threat formation process at systemic level, during the Cold War, can include the variable of identity, in forms of political ideological confrontation. The research question is what are the processes of securitization telling us about the grounds on which threat formation is based?

Second, for the shifts produced after the collapse of the Cold War order, the empirical research looks at whether the balance of threat becomes challenged by other strategic preferences or whether a systemic strategic preference for balance of threat is just complementary with other preferences that can be counted at systemic level.

Third, the selected time frame has a special importance for the actual international system. After the World War II, the international system gets completely integrated, on a world scale. It transcends the outlook of a European dominated world to the point of multiple states that share the same system. As the system is rooted in the model of the European sovereign states, the line of research looks to whether the regional settings recreate the model of balancing behavior. The emulation of balance processes is an interesting line of empirical research in the context in which the region from where the system originates, namely Western Europe, makes the case of an exit from the balancing logic towards the emergence of a pluralistic security community.[36] Another research question related to regional contexts focuses on revealing variations of threat formation processes, added to the traditional military or political ones. The distribution of identities among regional actors is considered, as it covers many forms, e.g., national, religion or ideology.

And fourth, the proposed research area departs from the current literature on balance theories. The reference time frame for the theory of balance of power is 19th and the first half of the 20th century. For the balance of threat, the empirical data are rather modest, as it has been already pointed out. Contextualizing a long perspective of an international structure of world politics is feasible as the middle range theories should not necessarily be bound to generate general propositions that are valid in any time or space. It should not be expected that the theory of balance of threat produces propositions that are equally valid for Ancient Greek World and 20th century Europe. Threat perception and its

securitization processes differ from a historical context to another depending on the strategic culture that the historical actors produce in their specific historical milieu.

Regarding the international history, this article proposes a new approach of empirical investigation. International history can surpass the view of being solely the study of diplomatic and military events. Describing and analyzing collective mentalities and their impact on economic and social structures within a long historical perspective have been considered by the modern historiography under the aegis of the so called French *Annales* School.[37] Yet, this historiography trend has a major gap in terms of international relations history, as the prominent preoccupation has been the economic and social history.[38]

A synthesis of the international history research and of the theory of international relations has much more to contribute for the advancement of knowledge within the study of international politics than two separated and delineated approaches. Analyzing discourses of security in systemic and sub-systemic environments and their impact represents the central link for both the history and the theory of international politics. The essential conditions for forging such a study is that, on one hand, the selected theory of international relations must be a middle range paradigm centered on a problem-solving frame; and on the other hand, the historical examination that does not focus on the succession and construction of specific events, but on describing certain features of a selected long term-based structure. These views on empirical research and paradigm employment are proposed for a comprehensive study on the history and theory of balance of threat.

NOTES

[1] Balance of threat theory is based on two studies by the same author: Walt, Stephen (1987) *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, London and (1988) "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation. The Case of Southwest Asia" *International Organization*, vol. 4(2): 275-316.

[2] On progressive/degenerative research programs see Lakatos, Imre (1974), "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (eds) *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. See also references regarding the research programs in IR

studies in Keohane, Robert (1986) "Theory of World Politics: Structural Realism and Beyond," in Robert Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press.

[3] Walt, Stephen (2005) "Taming American Power" *Foreign Affairs* 84(5): 105-124 and (2002) "Keeping the World "Off Balance": Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy" in John G. Ikenberry (ed.) *America Unrivalled. The Future of Balance of Power*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press. On balance of soft power see also Paul, T.V. (2005) "Soft Balancing in the Age if US Primacy" *International Security*, 30(1): 46-71. For the critical assessment of the theory of soft balance see Lieber, Kier A. and Gerard Alexander (2005) "Waiting for Balancing. Why the World Is Not Pushing Back" *International Security* 30(1): 125-138.

[4] Haas, Ernst (1953) "The Balance of Power: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda," *World Politics* vol. 5 (4): 370-98.

[5] A history of balance of power is developed by Kissinger, Henry (2002) *Diplomația*, București: BicAll, pp. 58-88: see also Sheehan, Michael (1996) *The Balance of Power. History and Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, pp. 24-52 and pp. 97-144. See also the definition of balance of power in Findling, John (1980) *Dictionary of American Diplomatic History*, Wesrport: Greenwood Press, p. 33.

[6] Gilpin, R, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1981, pp. 3-4. Gilpin develops on the initial idea of K.J. Holsti (1971) "Retreat from Utopia: International Relations Theory, 1945-70", *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 4: 165-77.

[7] I employ the term *realism* and *realpolitik* meaning the realist tradition of IR theory. On realism in IR theory, the literature is immense. I refer here at two studies on this topic: Walt, Stephen (2005) "The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition" in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds) *Political science: the state of the discipline*, New York, Washington: Norton, American Political Science Association; and Mearsheimer, John J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 17-23.

[8] On the security dilemma see Hertz, John (1950) "Idealist Internationalism and the Security Dilemma," *World Politics*, vol. 2: 157-180.

[9] On the theory of balance of power see Walt, (1987) (1988) *op. cit.* Sheehan, *op. cit.*, Kissinger, *op. cit.* Gulick, Edward V. (1955) *Europe's classical Balance of Power*, New York: Norton, Kaplan, Morton A. (1957) *System and Processes in International Politics*, New York: Wiley; Morgenthau, Hans J. (2007) *Politica între națiuni*, București: Polirom, pp. 203-243. Waltz, Kenneth (2006) *Teoria politicii internaționale*, București: Polirom, pp. 147-81. Paul, T.V., J. J. Wirtz și M. Fortmann (eds.) (2004), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press; Nye, Jr. J.S. (1997) *Understanding International Conflict*, New York: Longman, pp. 12-68; Kegley, C.W. and E.R. Wittkopf (2004) *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, Belmont CA: Thomson Wadsworth, pp. 531-64.

[10] Morgenthau, *op. cit*, p.203; Waltz, *op. cit.*, 177.

[11] Kissinger, *op. cit.*,48-87; Findling, *op. cit.*

[12] Ikenberry, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-16; the leading theoretician on neo-realism hegemonic stability is Gilpin, *op. cit.*

[13] Walt (1987) (1988), *op. cit.*

[14] I simplified much the road of alliances formation at the beginning of the Cold War. For the extensive and detailed history on the Cold War see Gaddis, John (1997) *We Know Now. Rethinking Cold War History*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. See also Baylis, John (1984) "Britain, the Brussels Pact and the Continental Commitment" *International Affairs*, 60(4).

[15] On balance vs. buck-passing in power politics see Mearsheimer, *op. cit*, 267-333.

[16] *op. cit.* p. *VII*

[17] For example, the Entente during the World War I, the Anti-nazi alliance and even NATO during the Cold War have all encountered misunderstandings between their member states. Yet all these alliances have been successful, completing their objectives. Here should be made a clear cut between loose and dysfunctional alliances on one hand and current diplomatic frictions that have no relevant impact.

[18] With the exception of the realist strand of hegemonic stability, the absence of balancing against the US predominance after the Cold War generates a lot of question marks in realist approaches. About the debate regarding the balance of power in the post-Cold War times see Ikenberry, *op. cit.* and Paul, *op. cit.*

[19] Waltz, Kenneth (1993) "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, vol. 18 (2): 44-88.

[20] Lieber, *op. cit* pp. 125-138

[21] Palmerston was PM of Great Britain during the Victorian epoch. He famously stated that "England has no permanent friends; she has only permanent interests."

[22] The post-Cold War times show that balancing behavior is recurrent in various sub-systems such as Middle East, South Asia, and South-Eastern Asia. Yet other sub-systems such as North America or the European Union do not encounter any balancing behavior.

[23] Buzan, Barry and Ole Waever (2003) *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 44.

[24] Alexander Wendt points out three possible security systems: the "competitive system" in which states identify negatively with each other's security (that can be called the "Hobbesian system"); the "individualistic" system in which states are still self-regarding to their security but the collective gains generated by cooperation are their primary target; and the "cooperative" security system in which each other's security is perceived as the collective responsibility. See Wendt, Alexander (1992) "Anarchy is what states Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," International Organization, 46(2): 391-425. Security community is a region in which war and security rivalry has become very unlikely or even unthinkable. The term has been coined by Karl Deutsch in 1950s, but it has been adapted by constructivist scholars in the 1990s: see Adler, Emanuel and. Michael Barnet (eds) (1998) *Security Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[25] Waltz, Kenneth (1986) "Reflections on Theory of International Politics: Response to My Critics" in Robert Keohane (ed.) *Neorealism and Its Critics*, New York: Columbia University Press.

[26] Regarding the new security concerns of the NATO member states see the two strategic concepts that have been agreed on after the Cold War: *The Alliance's Strategic Concept agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council, Rome, 8 November 1991*, http://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/b911108a.htm. and *The Alliance's Strategic Concept agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C. on 23rd and 24th April 1999*, available HTTP: http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/1999/p99-065e.htm. On the changing patterns of threat formation in Europe from the classical defense to the multi-sectorial threats see also The EU Security Strategy (2003) *A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy*, available HTTP: < www.consilium.eu.int.>.

[27] Waever, Ole (2005) "Discursive Approaches," in Antje Wiener and Thomas Diez (eds) *European Integration Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press and (2005) "European Integration and Security: Analysing French and German Discourses on State, Nation, and Europe," in David Howarth and Jacob Torfing (eds) *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

[28] Buzan, Barry, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde (1998) *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynnne Riener.

[29] Buzan, Barry and Richard Little (2000) *International Systems in World History. Remaking the Study of International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 18-22.

[30] Adler, Emanuel (1997) "Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics," *International Journal of International Relations*, 3(3): 319-363. On constructivism in IR theory see also Hopf, Ted (1998) "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security*, 23(1): 171-200.

[31] The idea that security can be defined on distinct sectors has been promoted by Buzan in (1991) "New Patterns of Global Security in the Twenty-First Century," *International Affairs*, 67(3): 431-451 and developed in further studies. Walt disagrees with the extension of the security concept beyond its military dimension; see Walt, Stephen (1991) "The renaissance of Security Studies" *International Studies Quarterly*, 35: 211-239.

[32] Buzan and Little, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-22.

[33] Walt (1987), *op. cit.*

[34] Walt (2005), *op. cit.*

[35] Wohlforth, William C., Richard Little, Stuard J. Kaufman, David Kang, Charles A Jones, Victoria Tin-Bor Hui, Arthur Eckstein, Daniel Deudney and William L. Brenner "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History" *European Journal of International Relations*, 13 (2): 155-185.

[36] This process has been masked by the Cold War's context in which the majority of the European Community member states were also NATO members. Yet, the consolidation of the European Union after the Cold War shows that the process of integration and security community building among European states has been contiguous with the security competition between Western World and Soviet Empire.

[37] Burke, Peter (1990) *The French Historical Revolution: the Annales School 1929-89*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[38] States, power and important events have been underconsidered by the historians of the *Annales School* as the preferred area of the traditional event-based history.