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Randall L. Schweller: Unanswered Threats

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INTRODUCTION

Balance of Power and the Puzzle of Underbalancing Behavior

BETWEEN 1638 AND 1640, Charles I concentrated his energies on the construction of a new royal palace at Whitehall. Designed in the Classical style by John Webb, the new Whitehall was to be the fulfillment of the king's lifelong dream to replace the sprawling and obsolete palace that he had inherited from the Tudors with one that would match the splendor and majesty of the Louvre or the Escorial. Charles I desired nothing else than that his surroundings should reflect the magnificence of his rule: "Here, at last, would be a seat of government appropriate to the system of 'Personal Rule' Charles I had established since dispensing with Parliament in 1629. At least until 1639, it was from here that Charles could expect to govern his realms, resplendent amid Webb's Baroque courtyards and colonnades, during the next decade and beyond."¹

In making such ambitious plans, Charles I displayed supreme confidence that his regime would not only survive but thrive well into the future. Unfortunately for Charles, the controversies and disputes that dogged him throughout his unsuccessful reign erupted in civil war between Crown and Parliament (the Cavaliers and the Roundheads) on August 22, 1642, and "this war without an enemy," as Sir William Waller called it, resulted in a parliamentary victory for Oliver Cromwell. On January 30, 1649, Charles I was beheaded on a scaffold outside the Banqueting House in Whitehall, London. His last words were: "I am the martyr of the people."² If the conventional historical wisdom that "the collapse of Charles I's regime during the 1630s, appeared 'inevitable' " is correct, then Charles obviously suffered from self-delusion—an unreality all too characteristic of remote and isolated rulers.³

International politics, too, has seen many instances of this type of folly, where threatened countries have failed to recognize a clear and present danger or, more typically, have simply not reacted to it or, more typically still, have responded in paltry and imprudent ways. This behavior, which I shall call underbalancing, runs directly contrary to the core prediction of structural realist theory, namely, that threatened states will balance against dangerous accumulations of power by forming alliances and/or building arms. Indeed, even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing. Consider, for instance, that none

of the great powers except Britain consistently balanced against Napoleonic France, and none emulated its nation-in-arms innovation. Later in the century, Britain watched passively in splendid isolation as the North defeated the South in the American Civil War and as Prussia defeated Austria in 1866, and then France in 1871, establishing German hegemony over Europe. Bismarck then defied balance-of-power logic by cleverly creating an extensive “hub-and-spoke” alliance system that effectively isolated France and avoided a counterbalancing coalition against Germany. The Franco-Russian alliance of 1893 emerged only after Bismarck’s successor, Leo von Caprivi, refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty with Russia for domestic political reasons and despite the Tsar’s pleadings to do otherwise. Thus, more than twenty years after the creation of the new German state, a balancing coalition had finally been forged by the dubious decision of the new German Chancellor combined with the Kaiser’s soaring ambitions and truculent diplomacy. Moreover, it was not the common threat of Germany that brought Russia and France together but rather their shared desire to change the status quo, as Kenneth Waltz’s own discussion of the Franco-Russian pact makes clear:

Russia would have preferred to plan and prepare for the occasion of war against Austria-Hungary. She could hope to defeat her, but not Germany, and Austria-Hungary stood in the way of Russia’s gaining control of the Straits linking the Mediterranean and the Black Seas. France, however, could regain Alsace-Lorraine only by defeating Germany. Perception of a common threat brought Russia and France together.⁴

Waltz says “common threat,” but the motivations he cites are for gains, not security.

Likewise, during the 1930s, none of the great powers (i.e., Britain, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Japan) balanced with any sense of urgency against Nazi Germany. Instead, they variously bandwagoned, buck-passed, appeased, or adopted ineffective half measures in response to the German threat. A similar reluctance to check unbalanced power characterizes most interstate relations since 1945. With the exception of the U.S.-Soviet bipolar rivalry, a survey of state behavior during the Cold War yields few instances of balancing behavior. As K. J. Holsti asserts: “Alliances, such a common feature of the European diplomatic landscape since the seventeenth century, are notable by their absence in most areas of the Third World. So are balances of power.”⁵ Continuing this pattern, no peer competitor has yet emerged more than a decade after bipolarity to balance against the United States. Contrary to realist predictions, unipolarity has not provoked global alarm to restore a balance of power.⁶

Despite its historical frequency, little has been written on the subject. Indeed, Geoffrey Blainey's memorable observation that for "every thousand pages published on the causes of wars there is less than one page directly on the causes of peace" could have been made with equal veracity about overreactions to threats as opposed to underreactions to them.⁷ Library shelves are filled with books on the causes and dangers of exaggerating threats, ranging from studies of domestic politics to bureaucratic politics to political psychology to organization theory. By comparison, there have been few studies at any level of analysis or from any theoretical perspective that directly explain why states have with some, if not equal, regularity underestimated dangers to their survival.

There may be some cognitive or normative bias at work here. Consider, for instance, that there is a commonly used word, *paranoia*, for the unwarranted fear that people are, in some way, "out to get you" or are planning to do one harm. I suspect that just as many people are afflicted with the opposite psychosis: the delusion that everyone loves you when, in fact, they do not even like you. Yet we do not have a familiar word for this phenomenon. Indeed, I am unaware of any word that describes this pathology (hubris and overconfidence come close, but they plainly define something other than what I have described).

That noted, international relations theory does have a frequently used phrase for this pathology, the so-called Munich analogy.⁸ The term is used, however, in a disparaging way by theorists to ridicule those who employ it. The central claim is that the naiveté associated with Munich and the outbreak of World War II has become an overused and inappropriate analogy, because few leaders are as evil and unappeasable as Adolf Hitler. Thus, the analogy either mistakenly causes leaders to adopt hawkish and overly competitive policies or is deliberately used by leaders to justify such policies and mislead the public.

I suspect, however, that a more compelling explanation for the paucity of studies on underreactions to threats is the tendency of theories to reflect contemporary issues as well as the desire of theorists and journals to provide society with policy-relevant theories that may help resolve or manage urgent security problems. Thus, born in the atomic age with its new balance of terror and an ongoing Cold War, the field of security studies has naturally produced theories of and prescriptions for national security that have had little to say about—and are, in fact, heavily biased against warnings of—the dangers of underreacting to or underestimating threats. After all, the nuclear revolution was not about overkill but, as Thomas Schelling pointed out, speed of kill and mutual kill.⁹ Given the apocalyptic consequences of miscalculation, accidents, or inadvertent nuclear war, small wonder that theorists were more concerned about overreacting to threats than underresponding to them. At a time when all of humankind could

be wiped out in less than twenty-five minutes, theorists may be excused for stressing the benefits of caution under conditions of uncertainty and erring on the side of inferring from ambiguous actions overly benign assessments of the opponent's intentions. The overwhelming fear was that a crisis "might unleash forces of an essentially military nature that overwhelm the political process and bring on a war that nobody wants. Many important conclusions about the risk of nuclear war, and thus about the political meaning of nuclear forces, rest on this fundamental idea."¹⁰

Now that the Cold War is over, we can begin to redress these biases in the literature. In that spirit, this book focuses on the question of underbalancing and presents a domestic-politics explanation. There are surprisingly few, if any, studies on the role of domestic politics in balance-of-power theory. The reason for this theoretical lacunae is that balance of power has been traditionally treated as a law of nature, wherein the whole universe is pictured "as a gigantic mechanism, a machine or a clockwork, created and kept in motion by the divine watchmaker."¹¹ The origins of balance-of-power theory are important in explaining why structure and natural laws, rather than domestic politics, have dominated its discourse for centuries—a subject to which I now turn.

BALANCE OF POWER AS A LAW OF NATURE

The idea of a balance of power in international politics arose during the Renaissance as a metaphorical concept borrowed from other fields, such as ethics, the arts, philosophy, law, medicine, economics, and the sciences, where balancing and its relation to equipoise and counterweight had already gained broad popular acceptance. Wherever it was applied, balancing was conceived as a law of nature underlying concepts viewed as generally appealing, desirable, and socially beneficial (e.g., order, peace, justice, fairness, moderation, symmetry, harmony, and beauty).¹² As Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed about the states of Europe: "The balance existing between the power of these diverse members of the European society is more the work of nature than of art. It maintains itself without effort, in such a manner that if it sinks on one side, it reestablishes itself very soon on the other."¹³

This Renaissance view of balancing behavior as a response driven by a law of nature still infuses most discussions of how the theory operates. Thus, Hans Morgenthau wrote: "The aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it."¹⁴ More recently, Kenneth Waltz has declared: "As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors

unbalanced power.”¹⁵ Likewise, Christopher Layne averred: “Great powers balance against each other because structural constraints impel them to do so.”¹⁶ Realists invoke the same “law of nature” metaphor to explain opportunistic expansion. In this vein, Arnold Wolfers says of structural incentives for gains: “Since nations, like nature, are said to abhor a vacuum, one could predict that the powerful nation would feel compelled to fill the vacuum with its own power.”¹⁷ Using similar logic, John Mearsheimer claims that “status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs.”¹⁸

From the policymaker’s perspective, however, balancing superior power and filling power vacuums hardly appear as laws of nature. Instead, these behaviors, which carry considerable potential political costs and uncertain policy risks, emerge through the medium of the political process; as such, they are the product of competition and consensus building among elites with differing ideas about the political-military world and divergent views on the nation’s goals and challenges and the means that will best serve those purposes.¹⁹ As Nicholas Spykman observed many years ago, “Political equilibrium is neither a gift of the gods nor an inherently stable condition. It results from the active intervention of man, from the operation of political forces. States cannot afford to wait passively for the happy time when a miraculously achieved balance of power will bring peace and security. If they wish to survive, they must be willing to go to war to preserve a balance against the growing hegemonic power of the period.”²⁰

In an era of mass politics, the decision to check unbalanced power by means of arms and allies—and to go to war if these deterrent measures fail—is very much a political act made by political actors. War mobilization and fighting are distinctly collective undertakings. As such, political elites carefully weigh the likely domestic costs of balancing behavior against the alternative means available to them (e.g., bilateral or multilateral negotiations, appeasement, buck-passing, bandwagoning, etc.) and the expected external benefits of a restored balance of power. Structural imperatives rarely, if ever, compel leaders to adopt one policy over another; decisionmakers are not sleepwalkers buffeted about by inexorable forces beyond their control. This is not to say, however, that they are oblivious to structural incentives. Rather, states respond (or not) to threats and opportunities in ways determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites, who must reach consensus within an often decentralized and competitive political process.

Before proceeding, I must make a very important point. The discussion so far has focused on the concept of underbalancing behavior. Underbalancing, however, is merely one symptom of the larger puzzle that this

book addresses, namely: Why can some states mobilize their nation's material resources effectively and, thereby, realize their latent national power, while others cannot do so? Prudent balancing behavior is only one potential use of mobilized power. Other uses of mobilized national resources include profitable and prudent expansion as well as self-destructive, reckless aggression, namely, expansion that leads to the formation of overwhelmingly powerful countercoalitions. The general question this book addresses is less about whether states can balance prudently against threats (though this is discussed in detail) than it is about the larger issue of which states can and cannot adroitly mobilize their material resources. Simply put, the book is about who mobilizes, not whether the goals of mobilization are prudent ones. It, therefore, concerns not just unanswered threats but also missed opportunities and ill-considered and disastrous aggression (illustrated by the case of Paraguay in chapter 4).

This chapter unfolds as follows. First, I situate a domestic politics explanation of underbalancing within the extant literature and, more particularly, within the realist paradigm. Second, I offer a precise definition of balancing and underbalancing and how the two concepts should be viewed within the larger context of balance-of-power theory. Next, I examine the relationship between national power and the domestic politics of mobilization capability. Then I present an epistemological discussion of what is meant by explanation and understanding in this study. Finally, I provide an overview of the book.

THE ROLE OF DOMESTIC POLITICS IN REALIST THEORY

The theme of this book fits squarely within the new wave of neoclassical realist research, which emerged in the early 1990s and posits that systemic pressures are filtered through intervening domestic variables to produce foreign policy behaviors. Works by Thomas Christensen, Aaron Friedberg, Randall Schweller, Jack Snyder, William Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria all show that states assess and adapt to changes in their external environment partly as a result of their peculiar domestic structures and political situations. More specifically, complex domestic political processes act as transmission belts that channel, mediate, and (re)direct policy outputs in response to external forces (primarily, changes in relative power). Hence, states often react differently to similar systemic pressures and opportunities, and their responses may be less motivated by systemic-level factors than domestic ones.²¹

Curiously, neoclassical realists have yet to examine the subject of underbalancing in response to external threat(s). Instead, they have offered explanations for normal expansion (Zakaria), reckless overexpansion (Sny-

der), adaptation to relative decline (Friedberg), why leaders inflate external threats to sell costly internal mobilization campaigns (Christensen), how perceptions of the balance of power affect state behavior (Wohlforth), and alignment decisions based on state motivations (Schweller).²²

There have been several challenges to the conventional realist wisdom that balancing is more prevalent than bandwagoning, a form of underbalancing behavior. Paul Schroeder's broad historical survey of international politics shows that states have bandwagoned with or hidden from threats far more often than they have balanced against them. Similarly, I have claimed that bandwagoning behavior is prevalent among revisionist states, whose behavior modern realists have ignored because their alliance choices are driven more by the search for profit than security.²³ More recently, Robert Powell treats states as rational unitary actors within a simple strategic setting composed of commitment issues, informational problems, and the technology of coercion and finds that "balancing is relatively rare in the model. Balances of power sometimes form, but there is no general tendency toward this outcome. Nor do states generally balance against threats. . . . States frequently wait, bandwagon, or, much less often, balance."²⁴ Yet Powell notes that a rational-unitary-actor assumption "does not mean that domestic politics is unimportant."²⁵ None of these studies has offered a domestic politics explanation for bandwagoning or a theory of the broader phenomenon of underbalancing behavior, which includes buck-passing, distancing, hiding, waiting, appeasement, bandwagoning, muddling through, and ineffective half measures.

Another strand of realist literature focuses on buck-passing, a form of underreaction to threats by which states attempt to ride free on the balancing efforts of others. The strategy of buck-passing exhibits several distinctive characteristics. Threatened status quo states: (1) form very loose alliances with vague commitments or avoid alliances altogether, (2) convene few, if any, joint meetings of their General Staffs to coordinate war plans and to establish a coherent Allied grand strategy, (3) spend a disproportionately low percentage of their gross national product on defense in relation to that of the aggressor state(s), and (4) adopt purely defensive strategies with little or no capability to project military power.

There are two widely accepted structural-systemic explanations for buck-passing. First, Thomas Christensen and Jack Snyder claim that great powers under multipolarity will pass the balancing buck when they perceive a military advantage for the defense over the offense.²⁶ The logic is straightforward: defensive advantage leads to the expectation of a long and costly war of attrition. Under these conditions, defensive states will be tempted to shirk their balancing duties by sitting passively on the sidelines and letting other states absorb the aggressor's initial attack. In so

doing, buck-passers can safely watch the enemy's strength being depleted in a long and bloody war.

The theory is an elegant one and its logic is, on its face, quite intuitive and persuasive. Yet, Christensen and Snyder's buck-passing explanation skirts the issue of how to define and measure the offense-defense balance (ODB). According to their theory, the ODB is simply whatever leaders rightly or wrongly perceive it to be. And because they offer a structural-systemic theory of alliance patterns, they must adopt a conceptualization of the "subjective" ODB as a systemwide attribute. But why should we expect all leaders to perceive or misperceive the ODB in the same way? Why is not the ODB a regional attribute? or something that can be said to exist only between pairs of states (conflict dyads)? Further, does not it make more sense to measure the ODB separately at the tactical, operational, and/or strategic levels of military operations than to use one aggregate, systemwide measure of the concept?²⁷

In Christensen and Snyder's two cases (alliance patterns prior to World Wars I and II), leaders got it wrong both times: they perceived offensive advantage in 1914 and defensive advantage before 1939. Aside from revealing the murkiness of measuring the offense-defense balance, this misperception on the part of elites begs the prior and arguably more important question: Why did they get it wrong when they had every incentive to get it right? And why, when the status quo states were perceiving defensive advantage in 1939, were the aggressor states correctly perceiving offensive advantage? This important variation among leaders' perceptions of the ODB and among states' strategic behaviors suggests that the likely causes of buck-passing behavior reside not at the structural-systemic level of analysis but rather at the unit level.

Second, John Mearsheimer argues that buck-passing occurs primarily in balanced multipolar systems, especially among great powers that are geographically insulated from the aggressor.²⁸ The reason is that in a balanced multipolar system, no aggressor will be strong enough to defeat and dominate all the rest of the great powers combined; which means that some great powers will not be directly threatened by the aggressor. These less-threatened great powers will, according to Mearsheimer, attempt to remain unscathed by passing the balancing buck to other, more directly threatened states. Further, in balanced multipolar systems, there will be at least one potential buck-catcher in the system who can be depended on to defend the balance of power. Hence, the logic of buck-passing behavior is rooted in system structure.

For this structural explanation to be correct, the multipolar system prior to World War I must have been unbalanced, whereas the one prior to World War II must have been balanced. This appears to be backward, however. As I have argued elsewhere, the late interwar system was tripolar

with Nazi Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union as the poles. Britain and France had fallen from the ranks of the polar powers to join Italy and Japan as second-ranking great powers.²⁹ This is precisely the kind of system that Mearsheimer calls an unbalanced multipolar system, for which he predicts little or no buck-passing behavior among the great powers. Yet, buck-passing prevailed over balancing behavior among the status quo great powers.

I argue that whether states choose to balance against threats or to buck-pass (among other nonbalancing strategies) is not primarily determined by structural-systemic factors but rather, like all decisions that concern national defense, by the domestic political process.³⁰ Before proceeding to the specifics of the argument, however, I must define the term “balancing” and place the term “underbalancing” within the more general scheme of balance of power.

WHAT IS MEANT BY BALANCING AND UNDERBALANCING?

Though it is arguably the most frequently used term in the field of international relations, balancing remains an ambiguous concept. In its traditional usage, balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or the political and military domination of the state by a foreign power or coalition. Balancing exists only when the stakes concern some form of political subjugation or, more directly, the seizure of territory, either one’s homeland or vital interests abroad (e.g., sea lanes, allies, colonies, etc.). Thus, balancing requires that states target their military hardware at each other in preparation for a potential war. If two states are merely building arms for the purpose of independent action against third parties, they are not balancing. Indeed, state A may be building up its military power and even targeting another state B and still not be balancing against B, that is, trying to match B’s overall capabilities to prevent B from invading A or its vital interests. Instead, the purpose of A’s actions may be coercive diplomacy: to gain bargaining leverage with B. Finally, the timing of a state’s response to threat determines whether it is balancing or not. Balancing does not mean simply fighting back rather than surrendering after an attack. As I have written elsewhere, balancing involves a situation in which “a state is not directly menaced by a predatory state but decides to balance against it anyway to protect its long-term security interests”; or, as Jack Levy puts it, “it would not be balancing if war is forced on the potential balancer by a direct military attack by the aggressor.”³¹

Balancing and underbalancing can be broken down into four distinct categories. The first is simply appropriate balancing, which occurs when the target is a truly dangerous aggressor that cannot or should not be appeased and the state's military capabilities are indispensable to counterbalance the rising state's power. The second is overbalancing (or hyperbalancing), which occurs when the target is misperceived as an aggressor but is, instead, a defensively minded state seeking only to enhance its security. Overbalancing unnecessarily triggers a costly and dangerous arms spiral.³² The third category is nonbalancing, which may take the form of inaction, normal diplomacy, buck-passing, bandwagoning, appeasement, engagement, distancing, or hiding. These policies (which may also be underbalancing behaviors when adopted under the circumstances specified below) are prudent and rational when the state is thereby able to avoid the costs of war either by satisfying the legitimate grievances of the revisionist state or allowing others to do so or by letting others defeat the aggressor while safely remaining on the sidelines. In addition, if the state also seeks revision, then it may wisely choose to bandwagon with the potential aggressor in the hope of profiting from its success in overturning the established order.³³ In still other situations, one state is so overwhelmingly powerful that a harmony of interests can exist between the hegemon (or unipole) and the rest of the great powers—those that could either one day become peer competitors or join together to balance against the predominant power.³⁴ The other states do not balance against the hegemon because they are too weak (individually and collectively) and, more important, because they perceive their well-being as inextricably tied up with the well-being of the hegemon. Here, potential “balancers” bandwagon with the hegemon not because they seek to overthrow the established order (the motive for revisionist bandwagoning) but because they perceive themselves to be benefiting from the status quo order and, therefore, seek to preserve it.³⁵

The fourth category is underbalancing, which occurs when the state does not balance or does so inefficiently in response to a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor, and the state's efforts are essential to deter or defeat it. In this case, the underbalancing state brings about a war that could have been avoided or makes the war more costly than it otherwise would have been. This book concerns underbalancing. What I offer, therefore, is a “theory of mistakes,” so to speak, provided that one were to consider the policy choice solely in terms of the international strategic setting. In other words, underbalancing is the opposite mistake of overbalancing. When a state underbalances it either misperceives the intentions of the rising power as more benign than they in fact are or, if it correctly perceives the threat, does not adopt prudent policies to protect itself for reasons of domestic politics.

THE ARGUMENT: THE DOMESTIC CONSTRAINTS
ON BALANCING BEHAVIOR

If most states inside and outside of the Eurocentric domain from which balance-of-power theory was derived and largely tested can resist its logic of balancing, then the theory is not akin to a law of nature; at the very least, it is underspecified. The question then becomes: What are the necessary conditions for the proper operation of the balance of power? What factors confound the logic and predictions of the theory?

The main reason why states have so infrequently balanced efficiently and in a timely fashion against dangerous threats—and, therefore, why balance-of-power theory as an explanation of state behavior (as opposed to a normative-prescriptive theory) gets it wrong in most instances—is that states rarely conform to realism’s assumption of units as coherent actors. The closer the policymaking process and actual state-society relations approximate a unitary actor, the more accurate realism’s predictions. Conversely, when states are divided at the elite and societal levels, they are less likely to behave in accordance with balance-of-power predictions. The core of the argument turns on the domestic political and policy risks associated with mobilizing behavior. Specifically, leaders of incoherent states are less willing and able to undertake high political and policy risks to mobilize national resources for balancing purposes than are leaders of coherent states.³⁶ Given its focus on elite risk-taking propensity, the logic of my argument does not apply when balancing is perceived as relatively costless for elites and society.

More specifically, I argue that four factors at the domestic-political level of analysis thwart balancing behavior, especially internal balancing in the form of costly military mobilization drives. The first is elite consensus (disagreement) about the nature and extent of the threat, the political and policy costs and risks, and the policy remedy that will be most effective and appropriate to deal with a threat. In other words, do elites agree or disagree about the external environment and the type of strategic adjustment (e.g., competitive or cooperative, standing firm or accommodation) that is required to meet the threat and protect the state’s strategic interests?

The second variable is elite cohesion (fragmentation). Elite cohesion refers to the degree to which a central government’s political leadership is fragmented by persistent internal divisions. Elite polarization may arise over ideological, cultural, or religious divisions, bureaucratic interests, party factions, regional and sectoral interests, or ethnic group and class loyalties. In terms of balancing behavior, several key concerns emerge when elites are fragmented. Opportunistic elites within the threatened state may be willing to collaborate with the enemy to advance their own personal power or to gain office. When there are multiple threats, frag-

mented elites typically disagree on their rankings of external threats from most to least dangerous to the state's survival and vital interests. Further, fragmented elites may, for parochial political, cultural, or ideological reasons, disagree about with whom the state should align. In addition, they may be divided over the issue of whether to devote scarce resources to defend interests in the periphery or the core.

The third variable is social cohesion (fragmentation). I derive the hypotheses regarding social cohesion and balancing behavior from the familiar logic of Lewis Coser's theory about the role of external conflict in promoting in-group cohesion.³⁷ Coser claims that the relationship between out-group conflict and in-group cohesion holds *only* when there is some minimal consensus that the group is a "going concern"—one whose preservation as an entity is generally seen by group members as worthwhile—and when the outside threat is seen as a danger to the group as a whole, not just a part of it. There must also be a reasonable chance that, if the group unites, the enemy can be defeated. With respect to this book's concerns, Coser's logic yields several general expectations with regard to the degree of precrisis social cohesion and balancing behavior. States with high levels of political and social integration will be most likely to balance against external threats. Conversely, fragmented states will underreact to dangerous threats, responding with inefficient balancing, bandwagoning, buck-passing, distancing, incoherent half measures, or ineffective policies defined by the lowest common denominator. Moreover, severely fragmented states in the precrisis period can be expected to further disintegrate and even crack under external pressure, surrendering to the enemy and undergoing a civil war or revolution.

Finally, the degree of regime or government vulnerability is an important factor in determining whether a state will be able to balance effectively. Weak regimes or unstable governments, by definition, lack legitimacy and policy capacity. Illegitimacy further depletes already weak domestic capabilities and makes policy capacity rigid and ineffectual. To ensure its survival, a weak regime must use coercion or attempt to co-opt and appease the opposition. These policies rapidly exhaust the nation's capabilities and scarce resources. They also erode domestic policy capacity by decreasing the citizenry's loyalty to and compliance with government policies and decisions, by inhibiting the government's ability to mobilize material and human resources when crises arise, and by reducing the government's capacity to coordinate and implement effective policies. In addition, vulnerable rulers seldom create and mobilize mass armies because they fear, for good reasons, that weapons put in the hands of a newly energized, nationalist public are just as likely, if not more so, to be fired at them as they are to be used against the external threat. Illegitimate rulers will also be less able than legitimate ones to persuade the public of the

existence of national security threats and of the need to make sacrifices to resist them.

These four independent variables combine in various ways, depending on their sequence and intensities, to produce several (five, to be precise) distinct causal schemes that explain and predict underbalancing. When they are in the “wrong” direction (e.g., elite and social fragmentation, high degree of regime vulnerability, elite disagreement), they present formidable domestic hurdles to balancing behavior, and as such they frustrate the state’s ability to extract resources for balancing purposes. In short, they increase the risks and costs of internal balancing behavior.

DOMESTIC POLITICS AND STATE MOBILIZATION CAPACITY

Although national power has many bases that vary over time and space, one may conveniently divide them into two dimensions: material and administration. The first includes familiar elements such as population size, territory, number of armed forces, as well as the type, level of development, and scale of the nation’s economy. The second and mostly overlooked dimension of national power is the “administrative capacity and the political structure of the state—its ability to command the population and to tap their resources; the quality of its institutions of government; the nature and the attitudes of the political classes which influence its decisions and the élite which takes them.” The interaction of these two dimensions of power “converts material power from crude to finished form—from demographic and economic resources to military forces of given quality and quantity. The first determines the potential power of a state, the second how much of it can be tapped, and how effectively.”³⁸

Balance-of-power theory assumes that all states have similar extractive capacity, such that aggregate national resources may be equated with actual state power and global influence.³⁹ This assumption of “constant mobilization capability” allows balance-of-power and other systemic theories to ignore the politics of extraction, treating responses to threats as if there were no significant variations across time and space in elites’ ability to mobilize domestic resources in pursuit of foreign-policy aims.⁴⁰ Like all assumptions, it is not a factual statement but a simplification of reality that is useful for theory construction. Thus, efforts to create an elegant systemic theory of international politics set aside differences in unit attributes such as state extractive capacity.

This gain in the power and elegance of third-image theory, however, comes at the expense of its explanatory and predictive accuracy, that is, its empirical fit. In Klaus Knorr’s words: “If analysis is content with comparing merely the capacity of nations to produce energy, steel, motor vehicles,

etc., it proceeds on the implicit assumption that the utilization of those resources will show no . . . differences among countries. This assumption is grossly unrealistic.”⁴¹ And just as countries with the same manpower and economic resources may not be equally powerful, states confronted by similar threats and opportunities may not respond in the same way or with the same degree of effectiveness “because of such factors as the internal cohesiveness of the society in question, its ability to mobilize resources for state action . . . and its diplomatic capacities.”⁴²

Structural theory fails to capture the trade-off between internal and external stability that states typically make in their extractive-capacity decisions; this trade-off exists not only for weak states but great powers as well. Consider, for instance, the great powers’ response to the French challenge of the “nation in arms” in 1794. Like his fellow leaders in other threatened countries, King Frederick William II of Prussia rejected the proposed counterresponse to summon the *levée en masse*. It would be “infinitely dangerous” to the internal social and political order of Prussia, the king warned, “to assemble such a mass of men.”⁴³ Napoleon’s rout of Prussia at Jena in 1806 revealed that the Prussian king, in weighing the external threat of France against the potential internal risks to the ancien régime posed by a massive mobilization campaign, had struck a balance that underestimated the external danger in relation to the internal one. He was not alone. All the regimes of the old order deliberately limited their capabilities to wage war for fear of disrupting a fragile internal order; as the massive disequilibrating force unleashed by revolutionary and Napoleonic France so dramatically showed, the “balance of power in Europe depended, in turn, upon these strong internal checks on the military weight each power could throw into the scales of international power.”⁴⁴

Along these lines, Edward Azar and Chung-in Moon offer a useful distinction between “security hardware”—the physical (e.g., economic, military, and manpower) capabilities of a country—and “security software,” which they break down into three primary components: regime legitimacy, national integration, and policy capacity. Essentially, security software assesses the external and internal environments and then attempts to manage and convert hardware assets to meet various threats. The “software side of security management, which involves the political context and policy capacity through which national values are defined, threats and vulnerabilities are perceived and assessed, resources are allocated, and policies are screened, selected and implemented,” is a vital determinant in “the conversion mechanism linking security environment and hardware to the final policy outcomes and the overall security performance” of the state.⁴⁵ Simply put, a state’s hardware assets are only as good as the performance of its security software.

Realists, for their part, have typically paid lip service to software-related concepts such as political stability and competence, national will, cohesion, and character, and the quality of government. Yet, they rarely, if ever, include these software items in their operationalizations of state power.⁴⁶ Instead, standard balance-of-power theory makes predictions solely on hardware elements of national power measured strictly in terms of military capabilities.⁴⁷

Of course, one might argue that whatever the shortcomings of structural balance-of-power theory, when states act according to the theory's predictions, we have a powerful and sufficient explanation for their behavior. Hence, we need not search any further.⁴⁸ This is the law of Occam's Razor—the preference for the most parsimonious explanation of the behavior at hand. There are two problems with this line of argument. First, external pressures are rarely intense enough “to transform the actors into something like automatons lacking all freedom of choice.”⁴⁹ Second, structural theory claims to predict only the outcomes and consequences of state actions and coactions, not the specific actions, intentions, or foreign-policy goals of individual states at any given time. As Waltz points out, “structures shape and shove; they encourage states to do some things and to refrain from doing others. Because states coexist in a self-help system, they are free to do any fool thing they care to, but they are likely to be rewarded for behavior that is responsive to structural pressures and punished for behavior that is not.”⁵⁰ Here again, although I agree with the thrust of Waltz's statement, we should not assume that all state actions that do not conform to the theory's predictions (*viz.*, actions that appear unresponsive to structural pressures) are therefore “foolish.” Instead, such seemingly irrational state actions when viewed solely through the lens of systemic pressures may appear quite rational when viewed through the lens of domestic politics.

EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING

Ordinary usage makes little distinction between the words “explanation” and “understanding.” Every explanation, whether causal in a positivist or some other nomothetic sense, furthers our understanding. But understanding implies “intentionality” in a way that explanation does not. “One understands the aims and purposes of an agent, the meaning of a sign or symbol, and the significance of an institution or a religious rite.”⁵¹ Explanations in the social sciences almost invariably involve understanding, since the meaning of human behavior is rarely explicable without reference to intentions and purposes.

As in most works in international relations, the dependent variable in this study is a type of state behavior, underbalancing, which appears as a common historical occurrence. This is to say that underbalancing is a generalizable behavior, as opposed to a unique or individual occurrence, that shares certain distinguishing features, such that it forms a class of historical cases. The dependent variable is, therefore, a historical phenomenon that is deemed to be important, common throughout space and time, and so requires explanation.

As with all historical inquiries, this study's use of the term "cause" has several meanings and purposes. In one sense, cause implies an explanation for the question Why did this happen? The typical response would be a set of antecedent conditions that were *jointly sufficient*, though not *necessary*, to explain the event.⁵² Unlike structural-systemic theories, which explain international-political outcomes and not specific foreign policy decisions, the theory offered in this book centers on the behavior and choices of policymaking elites. It is a theory about foreign policy and, therefore, necessarily concerns human agency. Thus, the *why* question in this study must explain what causes a person to act. Borrowing from R. G. Collingwood's logic of causality in history, cause "means affording him a motive for doing it"; what "made," "compelled," "induced," or "persuaded" the actors to make the choices they did.⁵³ The force of the cause is said to be a rational one because the actor (1) believed that the decision (strategy) was the best means to achieve his/her preferred outcome or (2) perceived, even if incorrectly, that the action (the effect) was rationally required given the conditions under which s/he was operating.

In another sense, causal explanation responds to the less demanding question How could this thing have happened? Here one is concerned with permissive causes, not profound or proximate ones. The answer to this question is an antecedent condition or set of conditions that permitted or allowed the event to happen, such that one should not be surprised by its occurrence. Thus, when Waltz speaks of anarchy as a permissive condition for war, he is using the term "cause" in precisely this sense; he is explaining *how possibly* they happen rather than *why* any given war breaks out.⁵⁴ In the present study, I claim that elite and social fragmentation, elite dissensus, and regime/government vulnerability are all antecedent conditions that are conducive to underbalancing behavior: they allow it to happen. Each individual causal factor, when extremely intense, may by itself cause underbalancing to occur in a given case. But the variables are, in one sense, additive; that is, the more that each variable is present (absent), the higher the probability of underbalancing (balancing) behavior. Thus, we should not be surprised when we see the above set of antecedent conditions and states fail to balance an unappeasable and dangerous aggressor or they do so ineffectively.

To say that the variables are additive is not to imply, however, that sequencing is unimportant. Indeed, the variables combine in various ways to form unique causal schemes, and the particular causal mechanisms that work in the cases must be specified as precisely as possible. Why is this important? Because simply to point out that a state underbalanced because there was an elite consensus against balancing behavior or elite dissensus regarding any grand strategy begs the question: Why did all or most elites choose nonbalancing policies in response to a dangerous aggressor? This question forces consideration of the three other “less proximate” independent variables in the causal chain. Thus, the answer may be that social fragmentation made balancing too risky; or that elites had competing parochial interests; or that government instability prevented a consistent and costly grand strategy, or various combinations of any or all these types of problems that can theoretically thwart the formation of an elite consensus to balance against an aggressor.

To put this another way, permissive causes by themselves do not provide full explanations of anything; for that, they must be joined with proximate ones. Oxygen and dry fuel, for instance, are permissive conditions for there to be a fire. But there must also be a spark, the proximate cause. By this analogy, disagreement among elites or a consensus not to balance is the proximate cause for underbalancing;⁵⁵ the other variables, social and elite fragmentation and regime/government vulnerability may be seen as permissive conditions.⁵⁶ More precisely, the proximate cause (elite consensus/dissensus) combines in various ways (to be discussed) with the other three variables to form several unique causal schemes for or pathways to underbalancing—each comprising a complete set of *jointly sufficient conditions* that fully explains instances of underbalancing behavior. None of the four variables, however, are *necessary* antecedent conditions for the occurrence of underbalancing behavior, since states can, in theory, underbalance for reasons that have nothing to do with domestic politics, for example, cognitive factors at the decisionmaking level of analysis (to be discussed). An elite consensus to balance, however, is a *necessary* condition for balancing behavior.

Strongly related to this notion of causation as “allowing something to happen” is the causal and value-laden judgment that, in the case of underbalancing behavior, elites were in some sense to blame for the wars that ensued. As mentioned, a theory of underbalancing is a theory of mistakes; notwithstanding the fact that it commonly occurs throughout history, underbalancing is a wrongheaded behavior that defies balance-of-power logic. A claim of this sort is quite obviously a value judgment on my part about what is prudent and reckless behavior under certain conditions: something “ought” to have been done by elites that was not done. Readers should not be overly alarmed by this subjectivity, however, since the term

“causa” originally meant “guilt,” “blame,” or “accusation.”⁵⁷ Indeed, the notion that causation amounts to assigning blame for a tragic and avoidable event is a common practice among historians, especially diplomatic and military historians.⁵⁸ Moreover, unless one accepts a rigidly deterministic view of historical events, the notion of free will and human responsibility must apply to any actual state of affairs and to human actions.⁵⁹ That noted, “mistakes” may be recognized in three ways: (1) *ex post facto*, by the results, (2) *ex ante*, by observing biases in the decisionmaking process, and (3) by the actors’ failure to learn expeditiously to correct policies that have failed. This method of identifying mistakes works best when all three methods are used in conjunction.⁶⁰

Finally, the notion of causation in this theory is probabilistic rather than deterministic. Causes (or reasons) that are said to “compel,” “induce,” or “persuade” must in some way limit the freedom of action of the agent(s). In other words, they must pressure the actor to do something that s/he otherwise would not want to do; if they do not constrain the actor, they cannot be seen as “causal” in any sense of the term. But actors always retain some measure of free will, such that they can and often do make different decisions under the same set of conditions. For this reason, human actions cannot be said to be necessitated by general laws of nature. One can reasonably argue, for instance, that Britain under Winston Churchill would have balanced earlier and more effectively than it did under Neville Chamberlain or any other possible British leader at the time. What we can say is that human actions are more predictable and understandable when they have sufficient conditions in antecedent events and the actors *accept* these historical conditions as their causes.

OVERVIEW

The book is organized as follows. Chapter 1 explores the conditions under which power shifts are dangerous and what types of policies can be employed to manage changes in the balance of power. The theory presented is both explanatory and normative-prescriptive. The argument centers on the extent of the revisionist aims (limited or unlimited) and the risk propensity of the rising challenger. These variables mainly determine what types of policies should be adopted in response. The chapter also presents a discussion of threat perception—a key intervening variable between power shifts and state responses—and cognitive biases in information processing that often distort the perception of threat. The value of this chapter and its relationship to the main “domestic politics” argument is that it provides a baseline expectation of “prudent” behavior in response to threats, such that *ex ante* judgments can be made about historical cases. Without this

baseline, the labeling of a particular instance of state behavior as “underbalancing” and, therefore, mistaken would appear more subjective and capricious than it need be, even in hindsight.

Chapter 2 presents the domestic theory of underbalancing behavior. Building on the insights of the domestic hurdles to national extractive capacity, I construct a neoclassical realist theory that predicts how states operating under various domestic situations will respond to threats. Five causal schemes composed of various combinations and sequences of the four independent variables—social cohesion, elite cohesion, elite consensus, and regime/government vulnerability—are outlined as explanations of underbalancing behavior. Following an analysis of each variable and its implications for balancing behavior, I offer a lengthy theoretical discussion on the historical taproot of elite fragmentation. In-depth analysis of this particular causal variable is necessary to explain why elite fragmentation can lead to both overexpansion, as Jack Snyder contends, and underbalancing, as I argue, and the conditions under which one or the other behavior is likely to arise.

Chapter 3 presents three case studies of great powers, Britain and France during the 1930s, and France from 1877 to 1913. The two interwar cases may be seen as “crucial” ones for the theory in a sense that they have come to define the theoretical concept and outcome of underbalancing behavior.⁶¹ They are great-power exemplars of the concept, so to speak, and so the theory must provide a satisfactory and compelling explanation for these cases. The French 1877–1913 case was chosen because there is both variation on the independent and dependent variables. The case is divided into two parts, 1877–99 and 1900–1913. At this juncture, all four independent variables almost simultaneously switched values in such a way that the theory would predict an abrupt change from underbalancing to appropriate balancing behavior, and this is precisely what happened. The focus on great powers and the unmistakable nature of the threats mean that these cases are “easy” ones for structural realism and relatively “hard” ones for a domestic “balance-of-power” theory that turns on the differences between coherent and incoherent states.

Chapter 4 explores a case of three small powers, Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, and the War of the Triple Alliance, 1864–70. This longitudinal case study has rich implications for the validity of the theory’s explanatory power. Nineteenth-century Paraguay was the prototypical mobilizing state, and it initiated a war against Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay. Though the war had truly catastrophic consequences for Paraguay, it held its own on the battlefield far longer than anyone would have expected given its size. In terms of case-selection criteria, the independent and dependent variables take on extreme values for all three states, and so the case presents a nice test of the theory. Argentina and Brazil were badly

divided nations, and, as the theory predicts, they underbalanced against Paraguay. In contrast, Paraguay was, in a sense, a hypermobilizing state; it built the nation on the premise that it was surrounded by enemies and had to build arms, transform its military institutions, equip them with the best military technology from Europe, and, most important, instill its population with a strong sense of patriotism and national identity. Thus, Paraguay was far ahead of the other states in South America in terms of its process of nation-building. Indeed, it was the only true “nation” with a fervent nationalist spirit in Latin America; and this nationalism and social and elite cohesion was the key goal of its leaders’ policies from Paraguayan independence up until the war.

If I am correct that fragmented states can be expected to underbalance, then an ideal mobilizing state (those with high levels of internal unity), when surrounded by such “underbalancers,” can be expected to try to exploit the situation by attacking its internally divided neighbors and, thereby, filling the power vacuum in its immediate external environment. And, indeed, this is precisely what Paraguay did: it saw that Brazil and Argentina were highly fragmented and sought to take advantage of this window of opportunity to expand at their expense. As the theory predicts, Paraguay not only balanced against its materially stronger neighbors but hypermobilized and then overexpanded against them. In all these respects, nineteenth-century Paraguay provides an exemplar of the causal statement $\text{no } X \rightarrow \text{no } Y$; whereas Argentina and Brazil are exemplars of the causal statement $X \rightarrow Y$. By exploring the behavior of Paraguay and its severely fragmented neighbors, the study avoids the error of selecting on the dependent variable, that is, the problem of no variation in the dependent variable among the cases.

Finally, chapter 5 extends the theory to cover cases of underexpansion and underaggression: the suboptimal reluctance to use force or build up military power in pursuit of profit or security or both. Simply put, why are states so timid? This question may strike some readers as heretical. Yet it follows from the way much of the existing literature explains state behavior. In the world as portrayed by some major theories of international politics, and not just offensive realism but many versions of rational-choice bargaining theory, there should be many more attempts than have actually occurred in history to achieve security and relative gains by building military power through conquest and expansion, and then using that added strength to attack with force to make even greater gains. If these theories are correct, in short, there should be more Paraguays.

My domestic-politics theory explains why this has not been the case for most regions throughout much of international history. In the course of making the argument, I maintain that the ideal “mobilizing” state is, in practice, best captured by a fascist state. Fascism provided the rationale

and “mobilizing passions” required for bold state action, while it eradicated the kind of internal dissent that I argue inhibits balancing and expansionist behaviors. In contrast, realist theory, which surprisingly shares many of the geostrategic assumptions and views of the state that motivated the rise of fascism, cannot generate the political heat necessary to launch costly mobilization campaigns for offensive purposes; its structural balance-of-power logic is too arcane to be of much use to elites as a mobilizing ideology in an age of mass politics. Most realists, even those who claim that states should seek to maximize their relative power for reasons of security and profit (e.g., E. H. Carr and John Mearsheimer), openly acknowledge realism’s political deficiencies. Still, realists have not moved to fill this large normative-prescriptive hole in the theoretical perspective.

The question, therefore, remains: How do and how should modern elites sell to their publics the offensive schemes that many realists approve for structural-systemic reasons? It is not surprising that realists have not addressed the issue. A theoretical exercise that sought to make practicable the realist proposition that states should expand when they can inevitably raises terribly complicated and wrenching moral issues that, when worked out, would most likely generate hideous prescriptions that no contemporary realist would entertain much less endorse. It is my view that fascists, many of whom were influenced by the realist musings of Carl Schmitt and others, did in fact undertake this task; some did so deliberately, others unwittingly. Rooted in social Darwinism and geopolitics, fascism may be described as “ideologized” power politics for mass consumption. To be sure, fascism’s diabolical solution to the problem wound up throwing the realist baby out with the bathwater. Whereas fascism offered the necessary political content and internal unity for expansionist behavior, it failed miserably as a guidepost for prudent or moral state action. Rather than seizing sensible opportunities for expansion, fascist leaders, who did not believe in the balance of power, pursued excessive and greedy expansion that resulted in total disasters for themselves and the rest of the world.