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BALANCING IN UNIPOLARITY: WHO IS AFRAID OF BALANCE OF POWER¹?

Augusto César Dall'Agnol²

Abstract: through a critical bias, this article aims to analyze the implications of unipolarity for balancing behavior. In order to do so, it discusses the dynamics of balance of power theory, assumed to be inoperative in the post-Cold War period by main academic debates over unipolarity: i) unipolar stability; ii) balance of threats; iii) soft balancing; iv) liberal institutionalism. We argue that these approaches, including the unipolar illusion view, tied to the balance of power theory, overestimate the effects of unipolarity on balancing behavior of other states. In this sense, we assume here that issues related to the unipolar moment are directly connected to discussions on hegemonic interregnum. Concluding that balance of power dynamics, especially those of hard balancing, are still observed in the post-Cold War era, we criticize two main conclusions from the literature: i) that balancing became inoperative and; ii) that the only available strategies to other states are soft balancing and bandwagoning. In sum, this conclusion has directly implication on strategies available both to the United States and to its main competitors.

Keywords: Unipolarity. Balance of power. Balancing.

BALANCEAMENTO NA UNIPOLARIDADE: QUEM TEM MEDO DA BALANÇA DE PODER?

Resumo: o presente artigo busca analisar, a partir de um viés crítico, as implicações da unipolaridade para o comportamento de balanceamento. Desta forma, trata-se de rediscutir as dinâmicas da teoria da balança de poder, tidas enquanto inoperantes no período pós-Guerra Fria pelos principais debates acadêmicos em torno da unipolaridade: i) estabilidade unipolar; ii) balança de ameaças; iii) *soft balancing* e; iv) liberal institucionalismo. O que se argumenta é que, inclusive a abordagem da ilusão unipolar, vinculada à teoria da balança de poder, tais abordagens superestimaram os efeitos da unipolaridade para o balanceamento por parte de outros Estados. Neste sentido, entende-se que as discussões relacionadas ao momento unipolar

¹ This title is a reference to Walt's (2017) article: "*Who's afraid of balance of power?*".

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relacionem-se, diretamente, com aquelas do interregno hegemônico. Isso porque, ao concluir que as dinâmicas da balança de poder, especialmente o *hard balancing*, ainda são observadas no pós-Guerra Fria, inverte-se as duas principais ponderações na literatura: i) que o balanceamento por parte de outros tornou-se inoperante e; ii) que as únicas estratégias disponíveis a estes Estados seriam a de *soft balancing* e a de *bandwagoning*. Em suma, tal conclusão tem implicações diretas para as estratégias disponíveis tanto para os Estados Unidos quanto para os seus principais rivais.

Palavras-chave: Unipolaridade. Balança de poder. Balanceamento.

[...] *les temps court est la plus capricieuse, la plus trompeuse des durées*³ (Braudel, 1958, p. 728).

I. Introduction

The debates over a “post-American” (Zakaria, 2008) and “post-Western” (Stuenkel, 2016) world, over the end of “American world order” (Acharya, 2014) and of the “liberal international order” (Ikenberry, 2018), as well as over the emergence of a “post-hegemonic global order” (Vezirgiannidou, 2013) have been mainly focused on discussing ongoing transformations and possible future changes to order in the system. On the other hand, the most relevant controversies on changes to polarity in the international system after the Cold War often argue that the theory of balance of power does not work now as it did before, especially because of unipolarity⁴ (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Wohlforth, 1999). Therefore, this article seeks to contribute to this special edition through a broad theory debate dealing with issues pertaining to a hegemonic interregnum that halted intense international interstate competition.

In that sense we point out that Schweller and Pu (2011), for example, correctly realized unipolarity is the only system in which balancing is a revisionist policy rather than a policy aimed at maintaining the *status quo*⁵. Therefore, “any state or coalition of states seeking to restore a balance is, by definition, revisionist” (Schweller, Pu, 2011, p. 45). Furthermore, the logic underpinning their argument is that “balancing under unipolarity must be preceded by a delegitimation phase” (Schweller, Pu, 2011, p. 46). Thus, the end of unipolarity would have to go through a *delegitimation* of the only pole in the system as well as through a process of *deconcentration* of power.

It is immediately worth pointing out that this argument is not wrong. However, we understand here that those are two different processes – albeit strongly connected. Hence, the study of delegitimation might be more appropriate for questions about the “liberal order led by the United States” (Ikenberry, 2001), while deconcentration of power is more aimed towards

³ “The short term is the most capricious, the most deceptive of time periods”.

⁴ Reviewing Waltz’s (1979) balance of power theory is not under the scope of this article. However, it is worth mentioning its two main hypotheses about state behavior. The first is that when states are confronted with challenges to their security, they mobilize their domestic resources and seek foreign assistance from their allies. Those efforts to increase security are called balancing behavior. The second hypothesis is that states emulate forms and practices adopted by each other (Waltz, 1979, p. 124-127).

⁵ For an opposite approach under which the United States are a “revisionist hegemony”, see Jervis (2006).

research designs targeted at changes to polarity in the system. Therefore, this article focuses on analyzing the implications of unipolarity for balancing, especially internal balancing, through a critical perspective⁶. Here, we consider internal balancing to be one of several different possible ways for polarity in the system to change (Dawood, 2013). In light of that, we discuss the dynamics of balance of power theory, which many academic debated about the “unipolar moment” did not believe to be appropriate for the post-Cold War period (Krauthammer, 1990).

Therefore, the discussion revolves around the validity of balance of power theory (Waltz, 1979) for the post-Cold War period. After the end of the Soviet Union, we could clearly notice an unprecedented concentration of power in the United States. Wohlforth (1999), for example, is strongly concerned with using empirical data to show how exceptional United States' concentration of material capabilities is. However, this article does not aim at demonstrating this exceptionality, as it is largely a consensus in academia. Therefore, we consider unipolarity to be a given fact. Here, we understand that "polarity is a theoretical construct; real international systems only approximate ideal types"⁷ (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2006, p. 13).

Furthermore, we also highlight that academic debate over unipolarity focused on its stability and duration. Monteiro (2011) criticizes the excessive focus of those debates on how and when unipolarity will end. It is worth mentioning that here we do not seek to deal with issues pertaining to the stability of unipolarity; its duration, however, is our main focus. This debate is aimed at different degrees of stability observed in different configurations of distribution of material capabilities among states - unipolarity (Organski, Kugler, 1980; Wohlforth, 1999), bipolarity (Mearsheimer, 1990; 2001; Waltz, 1964; 1979), and multipolarity (Deutsch, Singer, 1964)⁸.

According to Paul (2005, p. 52), “traditional balance of power theory [...] fails to explain state behavior in the post–Cold War era”. Even though the balance of power theory seeks to explain systemic results⁹ rather than behavior of states, this debate stems from the fact that

⁶ According to Waltz (1979), states balance in two ways: i) alliances, or coalitions, with other states - external balancing; or ii) mobilization of social resources - internal balancing.

⁷ I.e. polarity may vary according to criteria established for measuring it. In that sense, we must highlight the argument stating that the post-Cold War international system is tripolar (United States, China, and Russia), even though there is great asymmetry towards the United States (Cepik, 2013).

⁸ For a more in-depth analysis about stability and polarity, see Van Evera (1990).

⁹ Here, we understand that testing a theory about the system, such as the balance of power theory, against state behavior depends on a previous act of translation into foreign policy theories (Singer, 1961; Martin, 2003). This distinction is of utmost importance as it pertains to the change of one level of analysis into another within the ladder of abstraction (Sartori, 1970; Mair, 2008). Therefore, we highlight that in terms of research design, research programs applying the concept of balance of power can be divided into two different paths: i) those seeking to explain systemic results; and ii) those seeking to explain state behavior (Nexon, 2009).

“since the end of the Cold War, no major power in the international system appears to be engaged in internal balancing against the United States” (Lieber, Alexander, 2005, p. 119). Brooks and Wohlforth (2008, p. 23) also argue that “general patterns of evidence since the advent of unipolarity are [...] inexplicable in traditional balance-of-power terms”. Furthermore, after the rise of unipolarity, there has been growing academic debate about grand strategies that may be adopted by the United States. Different authors provide largely contrasting recommendations on how the United States should perpetuate unipolarity¹⁰.

Thus, we may identify five lines of arguments regarding the stability and duration of unipolarity. It is worth mentioning that these categories are set to organize debates, and there may be overlaps and points of convergence between arguments presented here. In face of that, this article is structured as follows. The first section seeks to discuss arguments about stability in unipolarity (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005; 2008; 2016; Wohlforth, 1999). Following that, the second section is aimed at analyzing propositions from balance of threat (Mastanduno, 1997; Walt, 2002; 2006) and soft balancing (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005) theories. Finally, the third section analyzes debates over liberal institutionalism (Ikenberry, 1998; 2001) and arguments from those who propose an “unipolar illusion”¹¹ (Layne, 1993; 2006a; 2006b; Waltz, 1993; 2000). The Concluding Remarks for this article will link discussions on unipolarity to those on hegemonic interregnum, especially as critical analysis about unipolarity allows for different choices both for the United States and for their main competitors.

II. Unipolar stability: prohibitive costs and ineffectiveness of balance of power

According to the unipolar stability perspective, unipolarity has made systemic balancing “prohibitively costly” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 8), especially after the unprecedented concentration of material capabilities by the United States. In light of that, the balance of power theory has become mostly inoperative (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008) after 1991, particularly because of non-observance of balancing by other states¹². Therefore, for unipolarity the relationship between distribution of material capabilities and balancing would be curvilinear. That is to say, states would balance each other up to a certain point. If the concentration of material capacities of a

¹⁰ A summary of those recommendations is not the focus of this paper but may be found in Art (2003) and Posen & Ross (1996).

¹¹ The terms “unipolar stability” and “unipolar illusion” come from Acharya (2014).

¹² According to Wohlforth (1999, p. 18), no great power is balancing the United States, and most of them reduced their military expenditure more rapidly than the United States. The author thus explains that any effort to directly compete against the United States is futile, and no state even tries to counterbalance them.

state exceeds that threshold, other states increasingly start to perceive balancing as futile, hence they would be less inclined to adopt that strategy (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p. 23; Wohlforth, 1999, p. 23; 35).

Consequently, the international system would be unequivocally unipolar, as “the United States would enjoy a much larger margin of superiority over the next most powerful state or, indeed, all other great powers combined than any leading state in the last two centuries”. In light of that, the United States would have more freedom than any other state to disregard system constraints and incentives (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 7-8). Furthermore, it is worth highlighting that the United States are the first state in modern history to enjoy a decisive prevalence in all components of power¹³ (economic, military, technological, and geopolitical) (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 13; 20). Therefore, because of an extremely uneven distribution of power, “we should expect world politics to work much differently now than in the past” (Wohlforth, 1999, 22). Unipolarity would then transform the nature of international politics, denying balancing dynamics proposed by Waltz’s theory.

The explanation for lack of balancing against the United States offered by unipolar stability is, most of all, that “the expected costs of balancing remain prohibitive” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 8). I.e., the exceptionality of the case of the United States stems from the fact that, once “no country comes close to matching the comprehensive nature of U.S. power, an attempt to counterbalance would be far more expensive than a similar effort in any previous international system” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p 23). Therefore, the United States would be “immune from counterhegemonic balancing because overwhelming U.S. military and economic power” (Layne, 2006a, p. 36) and, in light of that, “unipolarity makes balancing so costly as to render the dynamics of balancing inoperative”¹⁴ (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p. 71). Therefore, not only would unipolarity be peaceful, but also durable (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 8).

The normative component of this approach, in turn, is related to the fact that “there is no reason to expect that reducing either U.S. power or the level of its global engagement would

¹³ However, the understating that “unipolarity is a structure in which one state's capabilities are too great to be counterbalanced” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 9) seems tautological. That is to say, from that understanding, international system would be unipolar if capabilities of one state are too great to be counterbalanced. At the same time, the main argument of the theory - that balance of power dynamics are inoperative - stems exactly from the unipolar organization of the system. Not only is this a cyclical process, those criteria to define polarity are extremely vague and unprecise. After all, impossibility of counterbalancing in unipolar systems is a premise - or a desire - rather than a theory construct within unipolar stability.

¹⁴ Inoperancy of balancing dynamics are related mainly to the idea that unipolarity favors the absence of war between great powers and low levels of competition for prestige and security due to two reasons. The first one is that “the leading state's power advantage removes the problem of hegemonic rivalry from world politics”. The second one, in turn, is that it “reduces the salience and stakes of balance-of-power politics among the major states”. In light of that, systemic competition in unipolarity would be minimal (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 23; 25).

reduce other states' incentives to build up their capabilities" (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p. 96). On the contrary, Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) argue that United States' withdrawal from the world as proposed by neoisolationists could easily generate new security dynamics that produce much greater incentives for other powers to increase their capabilities¹⁵.

In light of that, the clearer the distribution of power, the more states are expected to share expectations on the high cost of balancing, which would then probably be doomed to fail (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 39). Therefore, the only remaining strategy for other states would be bandwagoning with the United States¹⁶ (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 25). However, we must take into account that the objective of primacy proposed by unipolar stability "is not merely to preserve peace among the great powers, but to preserve US. supremacy by politically, economically, and militarily outdistancing any global challenger" (Posen, Ross, 1997, p. 32). To achieve that, proponents of unipolar stability argue that military modernization should be one of the main priorities to deter other states from engaging in counterbalancing strategies. Therefore, it would be "logical for the United States military to pursue a level of qualitative superiority over potential challengers that would discourage them from entering the competition" (Posen, Ross, 1997, p. 41).

Finally, it is worth mentioning three unipolar stability arguments accepted here as they do not clearly oppose what we propose. The first is that "alliances [i.e., external balancing] cannot change the system's structure" and that "only the uneven growth of power [...] will bring the unipolar era to an end"¹⁷ (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 32). Related to that first point, the second one concerns the fact that "emulating the hegemon is hard [...] and extracting and allocating the resources needed to close the gap is harder still"¹⁸ (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p. 37). Finally, the third argument concerns the fact that "most of the counterbalancing that has occurred since

¹⁵ We understand here that the unipolar stability perspective, one of the most influential on debates about current international system, echoes "Fukuyama's popular view of the 'end of history' and the universalization of Western liberal democracy" (Monteiro, 2011, p. 10).

¹⁶ This author strongly disagrees with Wohlforth's (1999) argument that bandwagoning is the only strategy available for other states in a unipolar system. This is mainly due to the normative component that is intrinsic to the unipolar stability approach. This approach tries to convince United States politicians to reinforce unipolarity in order to avoid counterbalancing from other states. At the same time, the normative character for academics and politicians from other states is implicit: it is futile to engage in counterbalancing strategies. Considering that, we understand that there is no logical reason to believe bandwagoning is the only strategy available for other states in a unipolar system.

¹⁷ However, simply an uneven growth rate between states is not enough for internal balancing to exist – although we do agree that different growth levels in states are one of the main ways for new power poles to rise. Thus, states need to transform that growth into military capabilities (Dawood, 2013; Waltz, 1979).

¹⁸ This point is particularly relevant. On the other hand, we understand that those difficulties and limitations pertain mainly to balancing studies, as they deal with internal components of states rather than with balance of power itself. One example of such work can be found in Taliaferro (2009).

1991 has been rhetorical” (Wohlforth, 1999, p. 35), which will be discussed below when we criticize the arguments of soft balancing.

III. Balance of threats and soft balancing: benign hegemony and self-restraint

Unlike unipolar stability, balance of threats theory seeks to explain the lack of balancing after the Cold War based on the idea that unipolarity is not necessarily a threat to other states¹⁹. Therefore, the “anomaly of states failing to balance U.S. Power largely vanishes if we focus not on power but on *threats*” (Walt, 2002, p. 133). This implies assuming that the balance of threats theory can explain and predict post-Cold War international system. In that sense, although the United States are the most powerful state in the system by a large margin, this does not mean it threatens vital interests of other states (Walt, 2002, p. 139). In short, balance of threat logic is that a state understood to be aggressive may encourage other states to counterbalance it, even if not the most powerful in the system. On the other hand, even the most powerful state may avoid being counterbalanced if it is not perceived as aggressive by other states²⁰ (Pape, 2005, p. 19).

The main understanding is that through its own self-restraint a *benign hegemon* may be able to prevent other great powers from rising and engaging in balancing strategies²¹ (Mastanduno, 1997, p. 88; Walt, 2002, p. 140; 146). In light of that, we must also point out that if the United States have an interest in “discouraging other states [...] from joining forces against it [external balancing]”, then they should “eschew policies that force different adversaries to overlook their differences and to make common cause against the United States” (Walt, 2005, p. 227). However, such self-restraint does not directly imply a reduction of United States’ material power. Therefore, as unipolar stability, balance of threats understands that the enormous difference in power between the United States and other states helps them to maintain the system unbalanced. In that sense, “maintaining its material superiority is the first step

¹⁹ This approach is based on Walt’s (1987) work. The main criticisms adopted against balance of threat proposals may be found in Layne (1993, p. 13-15; 2006a, p. 20-22). We especially understand that “the theory’s most important weakness is its inability to draw a clear distinction between ‘power’ and ‘threat’” (Layne, 2006a, p. 20).

²⁰ Such understanding of lack of counterbalancing from other states because of the benign character of the United States and because of the fact that other states do not see them as a threat may be also found in Glaser (2011).

²¹ This understanding comes specially from the fact that in unipolarity - differently from bipolar and multipolar systems - the only power pole is not so sensitive to systemic constraints. Consequently, balance of threats’ argument is that, faced with this situation, the United States should restrain themselves, so they do not encourage new counterbalancing dynamics. The same criticism Schweller (2001) voices against Ikenberry (2001) regarding the possibility of self-restraint in a unipolar system may be applied to Walt (2002; 2006).

towards discouraging the formation of a countervailing coalition” against the United States²² (Walt, 2002, p. 142).

Likewise, if the United States wish to maintain their prevalent position for as long as possible, they should “persuade the rest of the world that U.S. primacy is preferable to the likely alternatives” (Walt, 2005, p. 247). Thus, what we may conclude is that, albeit indirectly, unipolarity does not represent a change in the nature of international politics, as advocated by unipolar stability. This is due to the fact that the system would only refrain from taking off-balancing actions if states did not see United States’ intentions as threatening²³. Otherwise, counterbalancing measures would be resumed. The largest issue at hand, then, is how can the United States maintain their material primacy but, at the same time, not be seen as a threat by other states²⁴. Walt’s (2002; 2006) ongoing answer to that question is self-restraint through an *offshore balancing*²⁵ strategy.

A third interpretation for unipolarity is *soft balancing* (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005). We immediately have to point out that this approach is closely related to the arguments of balance of threats (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2008, p. 61), even though that is not widely recognized. On the other hand, although those two lines of arguments are close in some major points, they constitute different perspectives on unipolarity.

In light of that, “if balancing implies restraining the power and threatening behavior of the hegemonic actor, strategies other than military buildups [internal balancing] and alliance formation [external balancing] should be included in balance of power theory”²⁶ (Paul, 2005, p. 71). Therefore, soft balancing includes “actions that do not directly challenge U.S. military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral U.S. military policies” (Pape, 2005, p. 10). In short, in a unipolar system, other states should adapt to unipolarity through balancing strategies that avoid direct military confrontation with the United States.

²² Criticism voiced against unipolar stability because of the fact that supremacy makes all counterbalancing dynamics inoperable is similar to the one expressed here against balance of threat. I.e., the existence, or lack thereof, of counterbalancing from other states is conditioned to their perception about United States’ actions and intents, and not only to excessive concentration of power in one pole of the international system. Therefore, theory arguments blend with recommendations and, mostly, with wishes from those who propose them.

²³ According to Layne (1993), because of the idea of benign hegemon, balance of threats is similar to hegemonic stability (Gilpin, 1981), mainly under a collective goods perspective - Jervis (2009) also recognizes that. We further understand that the argument about a possibility of self-restraint by the benign hegemon also links balance of threats to liberal institutionalists (Ikenberry, 1998; 2001). This point will be developed here later.

²⁴ Walt (2002, p. 153) recognizes this, albeit indirectly.

²⁵ About the offshore balancing strategy, see Mearsheimer and Walt (2016).

²⁶ We understand here that soft balancing mistakenly equates balancing with restraint or constraint. This point will be developed later.

Therefore, the international system had no balancing whatsoever during the 1990s, as the cases of Iraq (1991), Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999) show. This situation would only change “once the United States began to act in ways that would undermine its reputation for benign intent” (Pape, 2005, p. 21). Consequently, the adoption of soft balancing strategies by other states does not “lie in a shift in U.S. relative power, which has hardly changed in this short time” (Pape, 2005, p. 25). Instead,

[...] the key reason is that the Bush strategy is changing the United States’ long-enjoyed reputation of benign intent. Precisely because the United States is already so powerful, even a small change in how other perceive the aggressiveness of U.S. intentions can cause other major powers to be concerned about their security (Pape, 2005, p. 25).

In light of that, Pape (2005, p. 38) argues that after the Cold War soft balancing replaced traditional balancing “as the principal reaction of major powers to the Bush administration’s preventive war doctrine”. Such change in perception about United States’ intent entailed, firstly, soft balancing strategies and then, “if the unipolar leader’s aggressive policies do not abate, increasingly intense balancing efforts that could evolve into hard balancing”²⁷ (Pape, 2005, p. 18).

After those considerations, the remainder of this section on soft balancing shall be reserved for criticisms we voice against this approach. The first criticism will not be analyzed in-depth here but argues that soft balancing approaches do not “offer effective means for distinguishing soft balancing from routine diplomatic friction between countries” (Alexander, Lieber, 2005, p. 125). The second criticism is one of the contributions made by this article to the debate and is based on arguments by Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) – even though at the end, conclusions reached here are substantially different from those reached by those authors.

According to Brooks e Wohlforth (2005), constraints pointed out by soft balancing theorists are not a consequence of balance of power dynamics and cannot be explained by adding soft balancing to that theory. Therefore, “current practice of using balance of power concepts to describe and explain this behavior is costly in theoretical and policy terms” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005, p. 106). Thus, the “tendency to shoehorn policy disputes and bargaining dynamics into a simplistic balancing narrative has the effect of generating unwarranted support

²⁷ It is important to mention here Alexander & Lieber’s (2005) perspective on the reasons for lack of balancing. Opposing Pape (2005), those authors argue that this is mainly due to the fact that United States grand strategy after 9/11 was a threat for a very limited number of regimes and regions only. Consequently, “most countries either do not have a direct stake in the ‘war on terror’ or, often, share the U.S. interest in the reduction of threats from rogue states and terrorist groups” (Alexander, Lieber, 2005, p. 110).

for balance of power theory” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005, p. 106). And consequently, “such behavior does not validate balance of power theory” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005, p. 107).

Besides, according to them in “a unipolar world, soft balancing can be seen as the first observable implication that the world works the way balance of power theory expects it to” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005, p. 107). Brooks and Wohlforth (2005) believe that any effort to invoke an idea of soft balancing is not fruitful and strengthens balance of power theory. In short, the argument may be summarized in the idea that soft balancing is a way to “rework balance of power theory to accommodate a world without hard balancing” (Brooks, Wohlforth, 2005, p. 107). This is directly related to the recommendation from Brooks and Wohlforth (2005, p. 107) that academics “would be wise to invest their talents in investigating the novel dynamics of great power bargaining in today’s unipolar system rather than seeking to stretch old analytical concepts”.

In that sense, we understand that even though their criticism is adequate, their conclusions differ from those proposed by this article. Therefore, our understanding is that Pape (2005) and Paul (2005) seek to explain this anomaly in balance of power theory by creating *ad hoc* concepts. After all, those concepts distort – through conceptual stretching – the original concept of balancing proposed by Waltz (1979) in order to overcome criticism made to the predictive power of balance of power theory. We argue, thus, that balance of power theory does not require any *ad hoc* changes to overcome those criticisms²⁸.

Just as Brooks and Wohlforth (2005), then, we understand that soft balancing propositions are a failed attempt to stretch balance of power theory to the post-Cold War era. Unlike them, however, we assume that this failure does not come from the fact that the theory cannot be applied to that time period, but precisely from its predictive strength, which makes any soft balancing contribution unnecessary to maintain it. We argue here, hence, that Brooks and Wohlforth’s (2005) criticism, albeit partially correct, reflects a relentless effort to sustain the argument that balance of power dynamics have become inoperative after the Cold War.

IV. Liberal institutionalism and unipolar illusion: liberal order or balance of power?

The fourth approach – liberal institutionalism – is marginally related to balance of threats as it understands that the United States may be a benign hegemon or that they may self-

²⁸ Including those proposed by Layne (2006a), one of the strongest supporters of balance of power, through the idea of *leash-slipping*, as we will discuss below.

restrain voluntarily, especially through binding institutions²⁹. Ikenberry (2001, p. 54) argues, for example, that when creating “an institutionalized order”, a hegemonic state “might lock in favorable arrangements that continue beyond the zenith of its power”. Therefore, international order may remain intact even after the main pole of power loses its preeminent position in the system³⁰.

In light of that, institutions and alliances such as NATO work in predictable ways to bind not only smaller states, but also the United States³¹ (Ikenberry, 2001, p. 246-256). I.e., instead of perceiving the possibility of a long unipolar era from United States’ material primacy, Ikenberry (1998; 2001) argues that stability and duration of unipolarity are products of institutional arrangements built by the United States since the end of World War II. Therefore, unipolarity does not necessarily lead to counterbalancing by other states³².

In that sense, the United States restrained themselves through a network of binding alliances and multilateral commitments. Therefore, “American hegemony is reluctant, open, and highly institutionalized - or in a word, liberal. This is what makes it acceptable to other countries that might otherwise be expected to balance against hegemonic power, and it is also what makes it so stable and expansive” (Ikenberry, 1998, p. 77). In light of that, from a consensual and non-coercive constitutional order, the “hegemonic state gives up some freedom on the use of its power in exchange for a durable and predictable order that safeguards its interests in the future”³³ (Ikenberry, 1998, p. 56).

Finally, the fifth and last approach, unipolar illusion, indicates that the “unipolar moment” was just an interlude that would soon give way to multipolarity³⁴ (Layne, 1993; Waltz, 1993). This stems from the fact that concentration of power on a single state overcomes all dimensions that may be included in other states’ threat calculations. Therefore, United States’ unipolarity is threatening regardless of their location, intention and offense-defense balancing

²⁹ According to Layne (2006a, p. 26), for example, many primacists believe the United States may be a benign hegemon because they are a liberal democracy. Consequently, we must reflect that even with their different approaches (material x immaterial), unipolar stability and liberal institutionalist approaches are not necessarily antagonistic. This point can be seen in Brooks, Ikenberry and Wohlforth (2013).

³⁰ Even though this is relevant literature to understand the relationship between unipolarity and balancing, we will focus on liberal institutional arguments, especially because they are closer to the debate on systemic order than to the debate on system polarity.

³¹ About the argument in favor of liberal international order, see Deudney and Ikenberry (1999).

³² It is worth highlighting Kupchan’s (1998) contribution in that regard. According to him, the idea of self-restraint is fundamental also in unipolarity. He proposes the concept of “benign unipolarity”, especially for regional orders. Therefore, Kupchan (1998) assumes unipolarity in the international system may give way to a “benign tripolarity”.

³³ Criticism against Ikenberry’s (2001) work may be found in Schweller (2001). We wholly agree with the criticism voiced by the latter against the former.

³⁴ Layne (1993, p. 7) argued, for example, that unipolarity would give way to multipolarity anytime between 2000 and 2010. However, Layne (2006b, p. 147) himself admitted his prediction was wrong. This point will be further discussed below.

(Elman, 2003). In short, balancing foreseen by the balance of power theory would occur rapidly, thus neither a primacy strategy nor “benign/benevolent hegemony” could prevent counterbalancing (Layne, 2006a, p. 26).

Therefore, “faced with unbalanced power, some states try to increase their own strength or they ally with others to bring the international distribution of power into balance” (Waltz, 2000, p. 28). That means “states balance against hegemons, even those like the United States that seek to maintain their preeminence by employing strategies based more on benevolence than coercion” (Layne, 1993, p. 7). And that is because “a dominant power may behave with moderation, restraint, and forbearance. Even if it does, however, weaker states will worry about its future behavior” (Waltz, 1997, p. 915). After all, unipolarity threatens other states and makes them seek to restore balance of power (Waltz, 1997, p. 15-16).

According to Waltz (2000), thus, the structure of the international system continues to be anarchical. The difference, however, is that “for a time we will live with unipolarity” (Waltz 2000, p. 39). What changed, then, is the fact that since the demise of the Soviet Union, old limitations and constraints are more openly applied to the United States (Waltz, 1993, p. 52; 79). Furthermore, according to the unipolar illusion perspective, the United States’ position as the only power pole depends mainly on the rise of other states (Layne, 1993, p. 8). Hence, “theory enables one to say that a new balance of power will form but not to say how long it will take” (Waltz, 2000, p. 30). And that is because “in a unipolar system, the structural pressures on eligible states to increase their relative capabilities and become great powers should be overwhelming” (Layne, 1993, p. 12). In light of that, we can infer that “the United States is not exempt from the fate of past hegemons” (Layne, 2006a, p. 20) as proposed by unipolar stability.

However, Layne (2006b, p. 147) admits he and Waltz (1993; 2000) were wrong, especially in predicting that balancing against the United States would quickly restore balance of power distribution within the international system³⁵. Therefore, Layne (2006a, p. 9) introduces the concept of *leash-slipping*, through which states “build up their military capabilities to maximize their ability to conduct an independent foreign policy”³⁶. Layne’s

³⁵ Retrospectively, however, it is interesting to point out that Layne (1993, p. 37) and Waltz (2000, p. 30) understood, respectively, Germany and Japan; and the European Union, China and Japan as counterbalancing states. We will not judge here this aspect of the predictive power of their theory. We will only point out that both the proposition that states would quickly counterbalance the United States’ concentration of material capabilities and that balance of power would be restored again soon do not invalidate their theory. This will be further discussed in our concluding remarks.

³⁶ Layne (2006b, p. 143) also indicates that “we need to rethink how we define balancing [...] Thus, in today’s unipolar era [...] terrorism, soft balancing, opaque balancing, and semi-hard balancing” are examples of counterbalancing. However, those concepts suffer the same criticism as soft balancing, distancing Layne (2006a; 2006b) from Waltz’s (1979) balance of power theory in that regard.

(2006b, p. 147) analysis is correct in stating that balance of power theorists “did not foresee that virtually all the possible counterbalancers had internal problems that constrained their ability to engage in effective hard balancing against the United States”. This is exactly the point Taliaferro (2009) highlights, especially from the relationship between state power and internal balancing.

V. Concluding Remarks

We immediately have to highlight that discrepancies observed between those five interpretations about unipolarity “exist only because there is sufficiently ample empirical evidence to ground directly opposite arguments” (Magalhães, 2010, p. 40). In light of that, this article was not an effort to contrast theory proposals against empirical observations from the post-Cold War period, especially because there are evidences to support each of those views. To conclude – albeit in a partial way – the discussion on the relationship between unipolarity and balancing, it is worth mentioning three points.

First, the fact that all work mentioned here deals mainly with external balancing strategies, i.e., creation of alliances (external balancing), or soft balancing strategies. That happens in detriment of analyses focused on internal and hard balancing. Therefore, from research based on those two types of balancing, we understand that it is not necessary to amend balance of power theory. On the other hand, what has to be done is changing the focus to states’ domestic level to analyze internal balancing strategies. In that sense, for example, work by Dawood (2013), Resende-Santos (2007), Steff and Khoo (2014) and Taliaferro (2009) allow us to fully understand the post-Cold War period using balance of power theory, especially considering military innovation and emulation as internal balancing strategies³⁷. Consequently, if external balancing is not observed, the path is to analyze internal balancing, and not to multiply new concepts that express, at the end, routine diplomatic friction between countries.

Second, besides changing the focus of analysis, we understand theorists who analyzed the unipolar period to have fallen into a short-term trap as presented by Braudel (1958, p. 744). That happens because “the unipolar period is too short to test structural mechanisms” (Monteiro, 2011, p. 12). Therefore, an interpretation that balance of power is inoperative since

³⁷ One of the main criticisms voiced against Waltzian neorealism is the lack of a theory about the state (Wendt, 1987, p. 342). However, we understand that Waltz (1979) does propose a theory about the state, albeit minimalist or rudimentary (Hobson, 2000, p. 19; p. 30). The main contributions towards the development of a neorealist theory about the state may be found in Resende-Santos (2007), through the proposal of a *second image reversed* theory (Gourevitch, 1978).

the end of the Cold War because no new balance of power has been observed does not mean states are not counterbalancing the United States³⁸ (Layne, 2006a; Lobell, 2018). That is to say that even if the system remains unipolar – according to the criteria adopted by Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) – it is at least hard to deny there are ongoing balance of power dynamics, given: i) the denouncement of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2001 and the search for nuclear primacy by the United States, as well as the development of the concept of Conventional Prompt Global Strike (Lieber, Press, 2006; Woolf, 2018); and ii) consequent development of hypersonic weapons by Russia and China as a direct response to the denouncement of the ABM Treaty³⁹ (Dall’Agnol, Secchi, 2018).

The third point is that the unipolar stability perspective, one of the most influential on debates about the current international system, echoes “Fukuyama’s popular view of the ‘end of history’ and the universalization of Western liberal democracy” (Monteiro, 2011, p. 10). Just as the credibility of the “end of history” is compromised, we understand it is a matter of time until unipolar stability’s credibility also is. That is due to the fact that the impossibility of counterbalancing in unipolar systems is a premise – or a desire – rather than a theory construct. Therefore, unipolar stability may be seen under Cox’s (1981, p. 128) criticism that “theory is always for someone and for some purpose”. In this case, a theory implicitly and explicitly destined to maintain unipolarity.

Finally, we argue that the hegemonic interregnum is a moment that witnesses both reconfiguration in the order and in the polarity of the system. Therefore, this article sought to analyze factors pertaining to the application of balance of power theory to unipolarity – even though it is worth mentioning the fact that “for the first time since the 1930s, the United States has elected a president who is actively hostile to liberal internationalism” (Ikenberry, 2018, p. 7). That means, thus, that forces contrary to liberal order are found both outside the United States (Russia and China), and inside the country (Donald Trump) (Dall’Agnol, 2017). However, we must avoid the confusion of not separating changes to polarity from changes to order – for example, assuming delegitimization is a step preceding traditional balancing (Schweller, Pu, 2011). That is to say, states delegitimize the liberal order rather than United States’ unipolarity. Therefore, states counterbalance the distribution of capabilities, which is extremely concentrated in the United States, rather than the liberal order. We understand, hence,

³⁸ Lobell (2018) briefly argues for a “granular theory of balancing” to analyze the post-Cold War period. However, that author’s empirical bases concern British balancing against Germany and Italy between 1936 and 1939.

³⁹ An analysis of the development of hypersonic weapons by the United States, Russia, and China can be found in Speier et al (2017). It is also worth mentioning Russian responses to United States’ Third Offset Strategy (Kashin, Raska, 2017).

that those are two different paths, both extremely relevant to study the hegemonic interregnum period.

Likewise, the dynamics of balance of power also affect the destiny of unipolarity. Thus, cursory use of unipolarity theories may result in significant consequences for system polarity. That is due, for example, to the fact that they indicate the only available strategies for other states in a unipolar system are soft balancing and bandwagoning, i.e., strategies to accommodate to United States hegemony or with limited revisionist possibilities – if we accept a soft balancing idea. What we can conclude from that alleged limitation of options available for other states is that it seeks to: i) maintain and preserve unipolar stability, guaranteeing they are not engaged in hard balancing strategies; and ii) allow the United States to enjoy the benefits of their position within the system. Since internal balancing is a process that includes both a political and economic phase and a military phase (Dawood, 2013), we would expect this process to take some time to bring about effective change in the distribution of material capabilities in the system. However, to assume that the dynamics of balance of power do not operate in unipolarity, especially based on an idea of prohibitive costs, is to indirectly work in favor of maintaining the hegemonic interregnum by trying to convince possible competitors of the futility of trying to counterbalance the United States.

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