Review – Unanswered Threats

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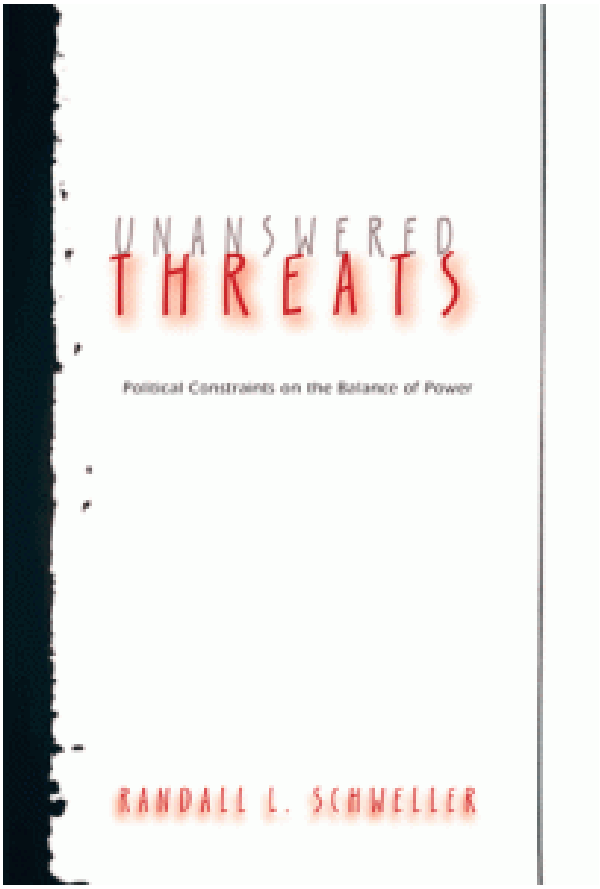
LUKE M. HERRINGTON, MAR 19 2012

Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power
by Randall L. Schweller.
Princeton University Press (2006)



One of the fundamental predictions of structural realist theory is the balance of power thesis, or the idea that states will balance against their neighbors' threatening and dangerous over-accumulation of power by building or otherwise acquiring arms or by forging alliances with friendlier states.

However, Randall Schweller asserts that most of the states "inside *and outside* of the Eurocentric domain" (emphasis added) can resist the theoretical logic of balancing, despite its European origins (11). Moreover, he argues, "even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing" (1).

Schweller defines this phenomenon as a failure to recognize the emergence of dangerous states, a failure to react to

those states, or a tendency to otherwise underreact to them in "paltry and imprudent ways" (1, 3). This, he says, occurs when a '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.' (10)

Thus, adopting underbalancing as the primary theme—indeed, the very subject—of his book, *Unanswered Threats*, Schweller attempts to answer two questions: 1) What conditions are necessary for the proper function of the balance of power?; and 2) what factors confound the logic and predictions of the balance of power theory (11)?

Underbalancing and Domestic Politics

Schweller's work represents an attempt to address deficits in the balance of power literature, by focusing on the causes and consequences of underbalancing behavior. While the balance of power naturally lies within the theoretical confines of the international level of analysis, Schweller's bold task fits within the context of neoclassical realism because he seeks to understand the impact that domestic political pressures have on balancing. He notes that issues such as buck-passing and bandwagoning are determined not by systemic factors at the international level, but through the national defense discourse of the domestic political process (8-9). This argument is hinged on the idea "that states rarely conform to realism's assumption of units as coherent actors" (11). In other words, suggests Schweller, if a state resembles a unitary actor, then realism's—more precisely, the balance of power theory's—predictions may appear more accurate. However, a lack of internal cohesion disrupts states' abilities to behave in harmony with these theories.

Schweller conceives of four domestic-level factors that undermine balancing behavior by disrupting the state's ability to function as a unitary actor. First, he asserts that a lack of elite consensus can frustrate foreign policymakers' balancing attempts. Disagreements over the nature of a threat, cost of response, and type of response, for instance, can impede efforts to counter the growth of threatening states. Second, a related factor involves the fragmentation of elites along partisan, religious, ideological, or cultural lines. Furthermore, the division of bureaucracy can also undermine elite cohesion, as different agencies, departments, and offices may have separate goals, interests, and constituents. Ergo, the division of elites can polarize debate over the appropriate response to an emerging threat, even leading some opportunistic elites (in a worst case scenario, no doubt) to collaborate with enemies to advance their own agendas. Fragmentation can also lead to disagreements about the level of danger posed by the rise of multiple threatening states, and to disagreements "about with whom the state should align" (11-12).

Another type of fragmentation—this time, societal—also factors into a state's ability to balance against perceived threats. Schweller insists that group unity can contribute to the defeat of an enemy, especially if the group, in this case, a society, perceives itself as in jeopardy. Conversely, fragmentation can be extremely dangerous, not only because it leads to underbalancing behavior, but because it can, as Schweller forecasts, serve as the impetus for surrender and even civil war. Finally, the fourth factor incorporates regime type and stability into the framework of Schweller's thesis. Weaker regimes and governmental instability foster illegitimacy vis-à-vis the state's citizenry. Consequently, policymaking capacity diminishes, and compliance with government rule erodes. Under these circumstances, rulers fear revolutionary activity, making it difficult to compete in any kind of arms race, for one, and also undermining their ability to mobilize public concern regarding security threats (12-13).

Understanding these variables is essential in Schweller's analysis to understanding the impact of domestic politics because each directly relates to a state's mobilization capacity. Looking beyond the traditional elements of national power, such as demographic, military, and natural resources, Schweller seeks to elucidate an understudied aspect of power including the efficacy of a state's political structure, administrative and bureaucratic capacity, institutional quality, and political attitudes. This is integral to Schweller's argument, as states with better internal capacity are more capable of converting their traditional power resources into quality military forces. Whereas the balance of power theory takes states' "extractive capacity" for granted, Schweller illustrates that the ability to mobilize resources effectively translates into real power. Therefore, elites' abilities "to mobilize domestic resources in pursuit of foreign-policy aims" can be hamstrung by "the politics of extraction" (13). Said differently, the structure of the state matters; it contributes to cohesion and fragmentation, and it can drastically affect the way one state responds to a threat (as compared to another responding to the same threat). Finally, states with more effective internal structures are going

to be able to facilitate the extraction and conversion of resources more usefully than others, on one hand, while states lacking in internal efficacy will fall prey to underbalancing, on the other. In essence, the mobilization of extractive capacity and the four factors hindering a state's balancing efforts indicate that a state must have both the will and ability to participate in the balance of power in order to balance an aggressive neighbor successfully.

Case-Studies: Underbalancing in Action

Schweller advances his arguments through a series of case-studies, including an examination of Britain and France's behavior in the 1930s, a look at France's actions prior to the First World War, and an analysis of the Latin American War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870). First, Schweller argues that Britain's policies of appeasement toward Germany in the interwar years represent an especially important "case of poor strategic adjustment," primarily due to the fact that Britain had been engaged in a protracted, extremely violent conflict with Germany just twenty years earlier. Here, however, Schweller demonstrates that the balance of power is constrained at the domestic level—at least within the case of British foreign policy—by "the trade-off between internal and external stability" (69-70). The refusal of British policymakers to jeopardize internal stability for the sake of external security was a decision made to protect the British sociopolitical system. Consequently, policies of appeasement and isolation from the European mainland were implemented in direct opposition to the balance of power strategy that had been a hallmark of English foreign policy just prior to World War I. Britain was thus unwilling to participate in new alliances, for fear of undue foreign influence in British domestic politics, and probably also to prevent itself from being pulled into another conflict on the continent, though Schweller does not say this outright. This began a conscious program of underbalancing in British defense policy: the Royal Air Force and anti-aircraft weapons were strengthened, but only as a half measure to prevent bombing raids from across the channel. Even as mounting evidence suggested that Germany really was a threat, sociopolitical stability remained the priority at the expense of rearmament. The British public was simply unwilling to acquiesce to increased military spending, particularly since the Great Depression had given them reason to demand spending on social programs instead (70-71).

The case of British appeasement illustrates at least two of Schweller's factors in underbalancing rather effectively. First, it demonstrates that "elite consensus regarding policy preferences is not necessarily accompanied by a similar consensus on grand strategy or elite cohesion." Second, it reminds readers that even if there is consensus, this is not necessarily "a sufficient condition for appropriate balancing behavior" (72). Take, for example the fact that the British eventually agreed that Germany was emerging as a threat to the state's security, elites fragmented into two factions (recall Schweller's second factor, or variable in balancing efforts), one supporting a more aggressive policy of engaged appeasement, the other adopting Winston Churchill's call for a grand offensive-defensive alliance with the Soviet Union and France (73).

France, like Great Britain, turned inward during the interwar years. In the case of France, however, it was because the nation was deeply divided, and struggling with internal decline. Class and ideological divisions undermined the political system, and fostered indecision and poor leadership. Regime instability was high during the French Third Republic: political longevity was essentially nonexistent, as the prime minister changed thirty-five times in addition to twenty-four other ministry changes. Moreover, elite cohesion with regard to Hitler's aggression was also absent. Factions divided into three camps, including the optimists, who naively believed Hitler was only grandstanding, the realists, who assumed that only the threat of war could check Hitler's expansive ambitions, and the pessimists, who agreed with the realists that Hitler was a threat, but who were willing to sacrifice Eastern Europe to Germany in an effort to maintain peace in Western Europe. In this context, French foreign policy elites could not agree on the means with which to confront Germany, leading to a very dangerous case of underreaction. Schweller argues that with this, France was "[p]aralyzed by elite fragmentation," making it "politically incapable of choosing sides and forging a reliable and internally consistent alliance system." So, as the dogs of war came barking, France was left virtually alone in the fight against Germany. Ultimately, France's response to Germany's rise was replete with "elements of balancing, buck-passing, bandwagoning, and appeasement." It was a worthless "grand strategy" that scapegoated its allies, and created a superfluous chain of events that prevented balancing against Germany with Poland simply because the British would not also intervene (76-77).

In contrast, France's behavior prior to World War I was more in line with the predictions made by balance of power

theorists. Schweller divides his second case-study on France into two periods. The first shows the more erratic behavior that characterized the first case-study, explaining that between 1877 and 1898, France was just too divided to effectively balance against Germany. Even after Otto Von Bismarck began altering the balance of power to establish "his hub-and-spoke alliance system" French elites were divided into at least six groups, including pro- and anti-colonialists, royalists and republicans, and Catholic clerics and anticlerical factions. This was significant primarily because it prevented the elites' ability to increase defense spending (anticlericalists and republicans feared spending could help the Church and the royalists reassert their position in society, for example) was stymied by factional disputes. Moreover, French foreign policy was marked by a pragmatic conservatism that carefully considered its options in terms of cost over benefit. Such an approach kept France from taking any action believed to be too risky to internal stability, or too costly with regards to external affairs. As a result, dedication to the balance of power against Germany was minimal 79-80).

However, after 1898, the disestablishment of the Church and the royalists' loss of political salience removed these groups' influence from elite circles. This, of course, mollified the fears that these groups could use a stronger military to regain their positions held by republicans and anticlericalists. Further, colonial expansion lost steam, and the economy began growing rapidly. Taken together, these new factors improved the government's ability to extract and mobilize resources without jeopardizing internal stability, enabling the French to engage in more prudent balancing behavior (83).

In Schweller's final case-study, he examines Paraguayan expansionism and its triggering of the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1867). Owing in part to the fact that both Brazil and Argentina underbalanced against Paraguay, the latter was able to initiate a war against the former two that lasted five years. Even the combined forces of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay—two being geographic giants wealthy in demographic resources—could not match Paraguay's forces. Ironically, speculates Schweller, Paraguay probably could have routed Brazil and then "soundly defeated the weaker Argentina" had it not been for Paraguay's "inept diplomacy, military strategy, and battlefield tactics" (85-86). Moreover, the reckless invasion of Argentina, for instance, served as the impetus for the signing of the Treaty of the Triple Alliance (1865), which paved way for a more appropriate response than underbalancing.

Schweller tries to advance Paraguay as his example to support the logic of his arguments by saying that "incoherent, divided states will not balance or will do so ineffectively" (88). This, coupled with Paraguay's reckless expansionism created the "alluring motivation to expand." In reality though, Paraguay was not trying to balance against these larger powers. Save for the fact that it looked at Brazil's earlier invasion of Uruguay as an affront to small powers (and its goal of having a buffer state between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay), Paraguay's actions were meant more to create "a place in the sun," than to balance against its giant neighbors (87-88). In this regard, Schweller would have been better served by looking more exclusively at the Brazilian and Argentine response to Paraguay's violent expansionism.

Underbalancing and Systemic Polarity

By and large, Schweller's arguments are compelling, and *Unanswered Threats* makes a solid contribution to international relations theory and the balance of power literature. His perspective on the case of Paraguay and the Triple Alliance seems somewhat inverted, but that does not fault the entire book. However, there are some other areas of his research that are not quite as convincing. For example, Schweller notes that

one state [can be] 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. The other states do not balance against the hegemon because they are too weak… and, more important, because they perceive their well-being as inextricably tied up with the well-being of the hegemon (10).

Yet, he fails to concede that the very existence of a hegemon seemingly undermines the validity of balance of power theory.[1] At least, the consensus seems to be that the purpose of the balance of power is to prevent the emergence of a hegemon.[2] Consider the case of the Italian city-states, which first institutionalized the balance of power in the

Peace of Lodi, in effort to check the ambitions and power accumulation of the peninsula's five leading cities.[3] Perhaps underbalancing plays a role in the creation of unipolar systems. This would have been an interesting way to explain the erosion of the traditional balance of power in the context of hegemonic stability, but Schweller never addresses this.

Additionally, Schweller's treatment of the balance of power in differing degrees of polarity was rather superficial. A more nuanced analysis of the way the balance of power operates in different types of polar systems could be very intriguing, as it asks a host of questions: how do states balance or underbalance in a multipolar system versus a tripolar or bipolar one?; in which system is the balance of power more stable?; in which system does it have the greatest longevity?; can a balance of power exist in a unipolar system?; how does it operate under unipolarity?; does it become a tool of the hegemon, or does it constrain the lead state's actions?; and finally, does underbalancing contribute to the emergence of hegemonic powers or specific forms of polarity?

Conclusion

Generally speaking, *Unanswered Threats* is an excellent and intriguing book. The broad scope of the book may seem ambitious, but even Schweller concedes that he underestimated the scope of his endeavor to understand "the domestic politics of the balance of power" (xi). Of course, its pioneering look at underbalancing makes it an advanced theoretical work inaccessible to the general reader. While Schweller is likely targeting International Relations (IR) experts, this book also has applications for advanced political science undergraduates and IR graduate students, who will no doubt enjoy its slim size. *Unanswered Threats* challenges preconceptions about the prevalence of balancing behavior, and as such, could easily be packaged with T.V. Paul's, James J. Wirtz's, and Michel Fortmann's *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*. Ultimately, *Unanswered Threats* deserves serious scholarly attention, especially from those interested in the multi-level analysis of international affairs. Hopefully, it will not be the last such work to examine the phenomenon of underbalancing.

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[1] Admittedly, some hegemonic stability theorists do not necessarily see power balancing or different types of polarity as being contradictory to hegemony. For instance, those who accept that Great Britain served as hegemon in the 1800s would need to recognize that the European balance of power was in many ways used as a political tool of the British. Save for the period of time when Otto Von Bismarck was trying to isolate France, Great Britain effectively rested on the fulcrum of the balance of power.

[2] For example, see T.V. Paul, "Introduction: The Enduring Axioms of Balance of Power Theory and Their Contemporary Relevance," in *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, ed. T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michel Fortmann (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), 4; Karen A. Mingst,*Essentials of International Relations* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004), 32; and John J. Mearsheimer, "Structural Realism," in *International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity*, ed. Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki, and Steve Smith (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2010), 80-81.

[3] Frederic C. Lane, *Venice: A Maritime Republic* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 234.

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