

# The Balance of Power: a Cause of War, a Condition of Peace, or Both?

Written by Harry Booty

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## The Balance of Power: a Cause of War, a Condition of Peace, or Both?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/01/31/the-balance-of-power-a-cause-of-war-a-condition-of-peace-or-both/>

HARRY BOOTY, JAN 31 2011

The theory of the balance of power-where the distribution of power is equally shared amongst the appropriate entities-is a concept crucial to the study of International Relations and of war. When studied in relation to the nineteenth century, we can see that the concept is a major part of both contemporary and modern literature, thinking and politics. When analysed in relation to this era-a time where 'no general or systemic'[1] war occurred- the theory has been taken to act as a cause of war, a condition of peace and an amalgamation of both. Arguably the final conclusions are subjective, but there are several factors to be examined to gain a proper overview of the theory's application to this time.

If we study it in relation to it being a cause of war, there are substantial areas where there is evidence to suggest that this is a viable argument. The first of these is the so-called 'security dilemma'-a concept generally integrated within the balance of power. We can see that this era was characterised by the view that since 'all states may at any time use force, all states must be prepared to do so'[2]. This climate of fear that was created manifested itself in arms races, formation of alliances and in many cases open conflict. This was made possible by the nature of the anarchic system of European international politics. This system, ever since the Westphalian eradication of the Papacy and Holy Roman Empire as the leaders of European policy was characterised by the lack of higher authority than the nation-state, meaning that each entity was sovereign. The inference from this is well noted by analysts, and it is therefore logical to suggest that 'in anarchy, security is the highest end'[3]. The lack of overall authority meant that a self-help system of alliance and military force dominated the region and the idea that war was a 'corollary of the balance of power'[4] with the consequence that it was frequently turned to as a solution of a threat to the equilibrium of the international system, which in turn substantiates the idea that balance of power theory acted as a cause of war in the nineteenth century.

This idea is closely linked to the next area of argument. Since it is true that 'power...matters in a relative'[5], it encouraged statesmen to do as much as possible to solidify and strengthen their own position. Consequently the use of alliances and coalitions was a fundamental strategy of the age. States would form alliances for immediate purposes and then switch them when a better opportunity presented itself. Whilst this was perhaps not as fluid as the preceding century, it was still a factor-for example Britain and Russia fought as allies against France up to 1815, whilst forty years later (1854-56) Britain and France were now allies fighting Russia. Whilst it was argued that this system encouraged peace, the obligations of alliances resulted in war in areas outside purely national interests, a good example of which would be the massive French contribution to Sardinia-Piedmont's cause in the 1859 war on Austria. Therefore this adds to the idea that the concept of the balance of power acted as a cause of war in nineteenth century Europe, as this quest for 'geopolitical counterpoise'[6] therefore made war more frequent rather than less, as states had more areas where conflict could-and did-arise.

Two fairly minor issues-tied in with the preceding arguments- also have an impact. Imperialism, a dominant force in this era, had a considerable impact upon the balance of power in Europe, despite most of the activity taking place outside the continent. Imperialism arguably made 'the system unworkable and a general war more likely'[7], since the pursuit for Empire by the European powers expanded the potential for competition from a regional to a global

## The Balance of Power: a Cause of War, a Condition of Peace, or Both?

Written by Harry Booty

level. The other factor that should be mentioned is the fragility of the balance. Centred mainly on the unification of Germany, which created 'structural factors that made it difficult to maintain the status quo'[8], the system was ultimately shown to be only as strong as its participants who, in practice, failed to maintain the balance at the end of the century. Whilst this is arguably the failure of the international equilibrium rather than the system itself, it nevertheless acts as support (along with the imperialism factor) for the argument that the concept of balance caused war.

Conversely however the balance of power can legitimately be considered to be a condition for and component of peace. The first area of this argument centres on the clear leniency shown to defeated powers at the conference table throughout the century. For example, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 France, despite putting Europe through almost two decades of unprecedented bloodshed, was allowed to return to its pre-war borders, and subsequently returned to Great Power status in the following decades. This was mainly due to the belief that the balance of power theory had to be used 'for managing and restraining both opponents and allies'[9]. In other words, no single state wished any other-even an ally-to gain an opportunity to enhance its influence in a power vacuum that the defeat of a Great Power (such as Napoleonic France) was bound to create. After the 1815 settlement the Great Powers in the so-called 'Concert of Europe' actively attempted, through Congresses and general diplomacy to 'preserve the balance of power that was defined by the territorial settlement (of 1815)'[10]. It should also be noted that this was regularly successful, as a study of the events of 1839-40 show where France, offended at its lack of inclusion in a four-Power intervention in the failing Ottoman Sultan's regime, took part in several actions that hinted that it was preparing for war, but 'when the four power concert held fast, France backed down'[11]. Therefore we can see that the balance of power can be legitimately seen to be a condition of peace in this area, as European desire to ensure the balance in the wake of conflict meant an informal collective security system was established after major wars (with varying degrees of success).

A further area of argument partially connected to the above section is that the system was 'purported to generate stability'[12]. There is a legitimate argument this is not the case-i.e that the constant pursuit of balance resulted in the 'security dilemma' discussed above. However, there is evidence to suggest that this, at least in some cases, was true. Events such as the suppression of French aggression in 1839-40 (discussed above) as well as European interventions in the Ottoman Empire (despite a general opposition to its existence) support this view. We can see that states were prepared to let small slights and long standing national rivalries-that may have in preceding eras led to war-rest for the sake of wider strategic stability. A good example of this would be Prussian Chancellor Bismarck's calculated mercy towards the Austrians following their crushing defeat at Sadowa that was motivated not by compassion but by a fear that the destruction of Austria would remove a useful political entity that was holding down his south-eastern flank. This stance characterised by Bismarck's concept of *realpolitik* (making decisions based on the practical reality rather than ingrained preferences) has been described by some as a 'logical...response of European statesmen to the problem of running a state system'[13]. It is legitimate to say that it did in many ways secure European peace much more frequently than had previously been possible. The system was fragile and certainly not fool-proof-as events such as the Crimean War show-but the pursuit of stability through diplomacy was nevertheless an integral factor of European statesmanship, and therefore cannot be ignored when studying the impact of the balance of power as a condition of peace, as acknowledgement of the issues of stability often tempered hot-headed desires for war.

There is a final area, touched on above, that cannot truly be ascribed to either side, but should nevertheless be examined when studying the impact of the balance of power in the nineteenth century. This is the point that it was not always a decisive factor in European international relations of the era-there was no 'balance of power rule' that meant that states always acted in a certain way when responding to certain triggers. If we study a single incident-the unification of Germany in the early 1870's-we can add credence to this point. On this occasion, Prussia, which had steadily been substantially growing in power for the last decade, and had been a main protagonist in two European wars during this time (which is especially damning considering the infrequency of war in the nineteenth century, as was noted in the introduction) was allowed to attack and defeat France and use the political impetus to unite the remaining southern states and create Imperial Germany. This event, which over night made Germany the strongest power in Europe; thereby creating an 'intractable problem to the European balance'[14] went unopposed by the other Great Powers. There was no international condemnation or intervention as one may expect from states who had in

# The Balance of Power: a Cause of War, a Condition of Peace, or Both?

Written by Harry Booty

1815 agreed to enforce the boundaries of nations collectively, mainly due to other factors (far too detailed to go into here) which were influencing European politics at the time. Whilst only a single case, it does serve to enforce the point being made, and although it may seem unnecessary to make what could be seen by many to be a fairly obvious point-that the balance of power did not always dictate matters- it must nevertheless be acknowledged if we are to consider the impact of the balance of power on nineteenth century European war and peace effectively.

In conclusion, the balance of power played a crucial role in nineteenth century politics, as the considerations of the theory impacted upon a wide range of policies, be they bellicose, pacifistic or even indirect-such as the economic and technological advancement of the nation. Subsequently the concept played a central part in the political thinking of the age as well as the historical analysis of today. In relation to the question, we can see that considerations of the balance of power impacted upon decisions to respond militarily-such as the British involvement in the Crimea in 1856-as well as forming an integral part of the aims of Great Powers at the peace table-such as at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the ensuing Concert of Europe. Therefore, it is to a large extent agreed that the balance of power was both a cause of war as well as a condition of peace in the Nineteenth Century as it is difficult-if not impossible-to attribute the theory wholly to either factor-which were in many ways inseparable when applied to specific cases.

## Bibliography

- Little, Richard *The Balance of Power in International Relations* (2007)
- Schroeder, Paul, 'International Politics: Peace and War 1815-1914', in Blanning, T., *The Nineteenth Century: Europe 1789-1914* (2000)
- Sobek, David, Chapter 3 "Balance of Power", in *Causes of War* (2009).
- Waltz, Kenneth N. 'Chapter Six: Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power' from *Theory of International Politics* (1979), p102-129.
- Vose Galick, Edward, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (1955)

—

*Written by: Harry Booty*  
*Written at: Kings College London*  
*Written for: Dr Ruth Deyermond*  
*Date written: November 2010*

[1] p158, Schroeder, Paul, 'International Politics: Peace and War 1815-1914', in Blanning, T., *The Nineteenth Century: Europe 1789-1914* (2000)

[2] P102, Waltz, Kenneth N. 'Chapter Six: Anarchic Orders and Balances of Power' from *Theory of International Politics* (1979)

[3] p126, Waltz, Kenneth N. (1979)

[4] P88, Vose Galick, Edward, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (1955)

## **The Balance of Power: a Cause of War, a Condition of Peace, or Both?**

Written by Harry Booty

[5] P 68 Sobek, David, Chapter 3 “Balance of Power”, in *Causes of War* (2009)

[6] P72, Sobek, David (2009)

[7] P188, Schroeder, Paul, (2000)

[8] P118 Little, Richard *The Balance of Power in International Relations* (2007)

[9] P159 Schroeder, Paul (2000)

[10] P114 Little, Richard (2007)

[11] P163 Schroeder, Paul (2000)

[12] P72 Sobek, David (2009)

[13] P299 Vose Gallick, Edward (1955)

[14] P116 Schroeder, Paul (2000)

---

### **About the author:**

Harry Booty is currently a Commissioning Editor for e-IR. He is currently studying a BA War Studies degree at King’s College London.