

# Realism and Power Transition Theory: Different Branches of the Power Tree

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## Realism and Power Transition Theory: Different Branches of the Power Tree

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CARSTEN RAUCH, FEB 3 2018

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After the end of the Cold War, realism or, to be more precise, almost all power based approaches to International Relations, have been largely written off by scholars for their failure to predict the conflict's ending, as well as for their inability to deal with the phenomena that became most relevant for IR in the decades that followed, for example norms, ideas, the impact of regime types and so on.

However, the comeback of great power conflicts and the blatancy of global power shifts has led to a kind of resurgence of theoretical approaches that focus on the role of power. In Syria and Ukraine the US and Russia are supporting different sides, and Cold War frontlines seem to re-emerge. Considering the fate of Ukraine (a country that voluntarily gave up its nuclear weapons after the Cold War for security assurances by the great powers including Russia), some scholars have even begun to wonder whether realists who praised nuclear deterrence (and thus warned countries that had already acquired nuclear weapons not to give them up) were not right after all. And considering the meteoric rise of China, scholars are increasingly beginning to utilise the theoretical lens of power transition theory (PTT) to evaluate its potential impact on international security (Lee 2015; Kim and Gates 2015; Lim 2014; Jeffery 2009; Levy 2008; Lemke and Tammen 2006).

But even though both, realism and PTT, emphasise the influence of international power constellations, it makes a stark difference which of the two approaches one uses for assessing the international situation. While both are often merged together (mostly by scholars who subscribe to neither), it is important to regard and embrace them as different branches of the power tree that, most of the time and despite some common roots, lead to quite different analyses and policy prescriptions.

In the following article I will first describe what I understand as (balance-of-power) realism and power transition theory. I will then trace their conceptual differences and show under what conditions they lead to the same (less often) or differing (more often) conclusions. Finally, I show how the rise of China calls for quite different policies depending on the theoretical choice between realism and PTT.

### **Realism, Power Transition Theory and their Major Differences**

Realism and power transition theory are both well-known approaches to the study of international politics, so it might suffice to summarise them in a nutshell here. Realism can be traced back to thinkers like Machiavelli and Hobbes. Modern proponents include scholars like Hans Joachim Morgenthau (1954), Kenneth Waltz (1979) and John J. Mearsheimer (2001), among many others. After classical realism had put much emphasis on human nature and the *animus dominandi*, more recent versions have rather focused on the structure of the international system (anarchy),

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the functionality of the units (same) and the distribution of capabilities. Waltz famously explained that only two requirements are necessary for his theory to work: 'that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive' (Waltz 1979, 121). Whenever these conditions are met, Waltz maintained, balance-of-power politics prevail. Balance-of-power theory in turn can be summarised as arguing 'that changes in the distribution of power are often dangerous' (Lobell 2016, 33).

Power transition theory was originally brought forward by A. F. K. Organski (1958) and has been further developed by Organski, Jacek Kugler and a number of other scholars. Its central claims are that the international system is usually hierarchically ordered with a dominant power at the top that creates and sustains the international order; that, because of uneven growth rates, new powers are regularly rising; and that the risk of war is highest in a situation when a dissatisfied rising power has reached parity or even overtaken the declining dominant power (Lemke 2004, 55-6).

Both (balance-of-power) realism and power transition theory are concerned with war and peace in the international system, focus on the state as the central actor and put a special emphasis on the role of power. Because of these similarities, PTT is often regarded as a variant or branch of realism. Some scholars go as far as to blend both approaches in a kind of imaginary 'realist power transition theory' (see for example Silvius 2014; Khoo 2013; He and Feng 2013; Herrington 2011; Changhe 2008; Christensen 2001). On the following pages I challenge this view and highlight the differences between realism (more specifically balance-of-power realism) and power transition theory.

Despite the obvious fact that realism's perspective on international politics and the distribution of power is rather cross-sectional (looking at a certain point in time), while PTT's perspective is rather longitudinal (looking at a development over time), and the ontological disagreement whether the international system usually resembles more anarchy (realism) or a hierarchy (PTT), there are two major differences that I want to discuss below: the meaning of different power constellations and the relevance of the sub-systemic factor of satisfaction with the status quo. Taking these differences seriously, I argue, leads to widely differing policy prescriptions depending on which perspective one employs.

## *Same Constellations, Different Analysis*

The first central difference that I want to highlight in this article concerns the question of how a system should be configured to achieve the highest possible stability and peacefulness. All kinds of realism are united in that they believe that a harmony of interests between the differing powers in the international system is only an illusion and that interests are rather colliding constantly. In order to ensure peace among these conflicting interests, a stable balance of power is necessary. 'From the perspective of balance-of-power theorists, the power preponderance of a single state or of a coalition of states is highly undesirable because the preponderant actor is likely to engage in aggressive behavior' (Paul 2004, 5). When this balance of power is disturbed or when one power strives to (and succeeds in) enhancing its power position disproportionately, war becomes likely (Lobell 2016, 33). Thus, those who want to preserve peace would be wise to organise their foreign policy (and choice of alliance partners) in a way that preserves or restores the balance of power in the international system.

PTT pioneers have always questioned this reasoning and understood themselves as antipodes instead of proponents of such a view. This becomes especially apparent when PTT authors ponder how the international system should be configured in order to minimise the probability of (great power) war. Proponents of PTT believe that an equilibrium of power (at least between the top two competitors) is indeed not a guarantee of peace but quite the opposite: an invitation to war (Siverson and Miller 1996, 58). A system, according to PTT, is more peaceful when there is no balance but a large imbalance and the most powerful state is predominant. Only in such a case is the result of an armed conflict clearly foreseeable and it thus does not make sense for either side to risk it. 'A preponderance of power on the one side [...] increases the chances of peace, for the greatly stronger side need not fight at all to get what it wants, while the weaker side would be plainly foolish to attempt to battle for what it wants' (Organski 1968, 294-5). In cases where predominance is not established and either side can conceivably hope for victory (or at least for preventing defeat), war is a much more attractive option. Therefore, a main difference between balance-of-power realism and PTT is, as Tammen and Kugler put it: 'Under balance of power, relative power

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equilibrium insures the peace. Under power parity or power transition, relative power equilibrium increases the probability of war' (Tammen and Kugler 2006, 40, Footnote 6).

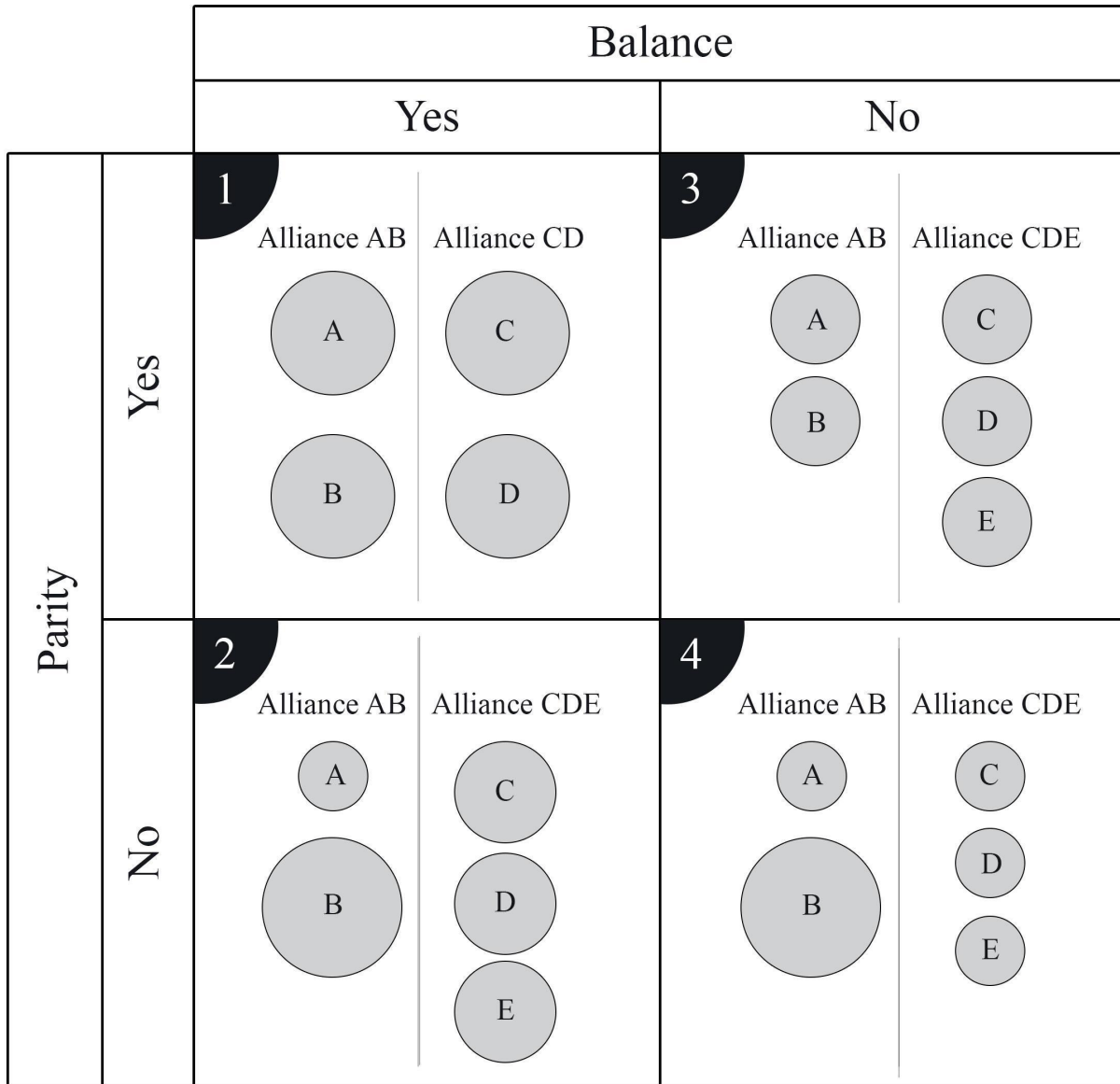
However, when proponents of PTT criticise balance-of-power realism they often use an understanding of *balance* that is more akin to their own theoretical concept of *parity* (see for example Lemke and Kugler 1996, 5ff). It thus appears necessary to define the differences between the concepts of balance and parity.

Parity – in the sense of PTT – means that in a dyad or group of states all participating states have a comparable amount of power (usually +/- 20% constitutes the corridor of parity, that is a power A with 100 units of power is in parity with all other powers that have between 80 and 120 units of power). The (political) relations between these powers are not relevant. A balance, on the other hand, is in effect in the international (or a regional) system when there is equilibrium between the most important alliances taken together, while the power-relation between single protagonists might be subject to grave disparities. Figure 1 illustrates this with different models or ideal-types of power constellations.

## Figure 1: Balance and Parity in Different Constellations

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Model 1 in the upper left shows four great powers with a similar amount of power. As all great powers are in the 80% corridor of the dominant power, there is a situation of parity between them. As they are also organised in two opposing alliances of equal strength we can also say that the system is balanced. Model 2 in the lower left shows a system with five great powers. There is one power (state A) that is clearly predominant. No other state reaches at least 80% of its power capacity; thus there is no parity. At the same time, A is allied with the weakest power (state B) so that the combined capacity of their alliance equals that of the alliance made up of C, D and E. The system is thus in balance.

In Model 3 in the upper right we have five powers again, but this time of equal strength, thus creating a five-way parity. However, as the alliance of A and B is much weaker than the alliance of C, D and E, the system is in imbalance. Finally, Model 4 in the lower right shows a system where there is neither balance, nor parity. Among the

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five great powers in the system, state A is clearly predominant. This mirrors Model 2. However, differing from Model 2, the two alliances in this system are not balanced. A is not allied with the weakest power (as in model 2) but with the second strongest power (state B). The alliance of A and B is thus much more powerful than the opposing alliance of C, D and E; the system is therefore in imbalance.

The four models in Figure 1 thus show different possibilities for relating parity and balance to each other under different configurations of power and alliances. As we can see, there are configurations that can be seen as both (Model 1) or neither (Model 4) in balance and/or in parity. Models 2 and 3 furthermore show that there are situations possible in which a power configuration is in balance, but not parity – or vice versa. Depending on which concept (and underlying theoretical reasoning) one uses, differing valuations of these configurations become possible. If we do not properly differentiate between the two concepts, proponents of PTT, for example, might accuse realists of certifying Model 3 a relatively high peacefulness, given the distribution of power among the five actors shows a situation of parity. However, Model 3 might show parity but still no real balance of power as the alliance CDE is clearly stronger than alliance AB.

*Ceteris paribus* – and in a simplified way – realism and PTT agree on the relative peacefulness of these models in two of the four cases, that is when parity and balance do *not* concur (Model 2 and 3). In Model 2 with no parity but balance both would suggest that the system will likely be rather peaceful; in Model 3 with no balance but parity both would suggest that conflict is likely. Regarding the other two models, however, realism and PTT come to contrary conclusions. In Model 1 where we can speak of both parity and balance, PTT expects conflict between the dominant power and at least one of the other powers in parity, while realism expects peace through a stable balance of power. In Model 4 where we have neither parity nor balance, PTT expects the preponderance to foster peace, while realism fears that the imbalance might lead to conflict.

## *The (Un-)Importance of Satisfaction with the Status Quo*

The second central difference between the theories that I want to discuss here relates to the fact that realism is notorious for treating the state as a unitary actor and, even more, a black box. States are essentially the same and only differ because of their different placement in the international system and their different amount of capabilities (Frankel 1996, 321; Waltz 2008). While it is true that classical realists have worked with concepts like revolutionary and status quo powers (Aron 1966; Wolfers 1962; Kissinger 1957) and some modern realists have striven to 'bring the revisionist state back in' (Schweller 1994; also see Rynning and Ringsmose 2008), revisionism and dissatisfaction remain out of the purview of balance-of-power logic. According to this logic, it is not the properties of any given state that decides how it behaves internationally but rather the existing distribution of power or, maybe, the distribution of threat (Walt 1987).

Power transition theory, on the other hand, depends on the unit level variable of satisfaction with the status quo which – in order for the theory to prevent becoming self-referential – cannot be dependent on the state's placement in the international order a.k.a. its amount of capabilities (Rauch 2014, 209–15). It belongs to the core of PTT that rising powers are often (but not always) dissatisfied with the international order, an order that – according to PTT – has been created by the dominant power (Lemke 2004, 56–7). This dissatisfaction stems from the fact that the order in many ways benefits its creator along with its allies, while rising powers are being disadvantaged or at least perceive themselves so (Tammen et al. 2000, 9). For this reason, dissatisfied rising powers become challengers to the international order, striving at least to reform and at most to shatter the existing order and to build a new one. The dominant power, on the other hand, is not inclined to give up 'its' international order voluntarily. In order to establish a new order, the rising power thus has to resort to the use of force (Rauch 2014, 49–52). This is why great power war happens according to PTT. Peaceful power transitions, on the other hand, are possible if the rising power is satisfied with the status quo (Kim and Gates 2015, 220; Paul and Shankar 2014; Tammen et al. 2000, 26). The power constellation thus only tells us half of the story according to PTT. It is the combination of opportunity and motivation, of a parity-situation and dissatisfaction that constitutes a danger for the stability of the international order (Nolte 2010, 888; Lemke 2004, 57). (Dis-)Satisfaction is thus a variable. Realists, on the other hand, often regard dissatisfaction – if they consider it as all – as an analytical constant. Mearsheimer (2001, 35), for example, posits that 'states do not become status quo powers until they completely dominate the system', thereby rendering *all* non-

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dominant great powers necessarily dissatisfied. And even if state preferences are not regarded as fixed, the logic of the security dilemma demands to always assume the worst from your neighbours as non-aggressive intentions might a) change quickly and b) might diminish one's own security (even if unintentionally).

To sum up: The most important differences (among some others) between balance of power realism and power transition theory concern a) the different meaning of balance and parity, which leads to differing evaluations concerning the conflict-proneness of the same power constellation in two out of four ideal types; and b) the different significance both approaches ascribe to the factor of satisfaction with the status quo of the international order.

### **The Rise of China: Balance it? Embrace it? Manage it?**

What do these differences imply for the analysis and interpretation of global power shifts in general and the emergence and rise of powers like China and India in particular? Utilising gross domestic product as a crude power indicator we can describe the current global power constellation as follows.

If we take nominal GDP ratings as indicator for state power, as of 2015 the United States is still in a leading position globally. Its GDP of 17,946,996 million current US Dollars is only slightly lower than that of the following three powers (China, Japan and Germany) combined. Additionally, two of these three powers (Japan and Germany) are allied with the US. Even if we look at the rest of the top ten-ranked countries according to GDP, we find a number of powers allied or on good terms with the United States (France, United Kingdom, Italy and India), no committed ally of China and two powers whose allegiance is as of yet unclear (Brazil and Russia). An imbalance of power thus exists and it favours Washington.

Turning to power developments we see, however, that this might change. According to GDP growth rates, the United States was in decline in relation to China (growing more slowly) in all years between 1990 and 2013, in decline in relation to India in all but two years (1997 and 2000), in decline in relation to Brazil for 15 years, and in decline in relation to Russia for 13 years and in all but one year since 1999 (see Figure 2).

### **Figure 2: GDP growth trends of the Top 10 Powers according to nominal GDP in 2013 over time (in constant 2012 billion US\$)**

The rise of China in particular (but also India and to a lesser extent Brazil) becomes even more pronounced when these growth rates are projected into the future. Taken together, the BRICS (Brazil, India, Russia, China, South Africa) will – according to a UNDP report – surpass the combined GDP of the Europe and the United States by 2020 (Lobell 2016, 34). China alone will – according to Goldman Sachs – match the United States GDP by the end of the 2020s (O'Neill and Stupnytska 2009, 24). The BRICS, however, are not a stable alliance that would support China under all circumstances (Nossel 2016, van Agtmael 2012, Bosco 2011). While Moscow might lean closer to Beijing given its conflicts with Washington (Sputnik News 2016), New Delhi has in the recent years rather strengthened its ties to the United States (Müller and Schmidt 2009, Rauch 2008). The US itself, on the other hand, has – as has been pointed out above – a number of powerful allies in all parts of the world, from other NATO members up to Japan and Australia. Let us try to situate the current and expected future power constellations within the typology introduced above: The current situation (US still much more powerful than China, US alliance much more powerful than China

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and its friends) might resemble most closely model 4 (no balance, no parity). If the rise of China goes on as expected this might change into a situation that rather resembles Model 2 (no balance but parity).

Balance-of-power theory suggests that such a rise – as in fact any meaningful rise of power of any actor in the international system – might become problematic as it disturbs the current power configuration. This theory might furthermore suggest that the best reply to the rise of China and India could be to create strong alliances (or strengthen the existing ones) in order to build stable counterbalances. Maybe one of the rising powers (most likely India) can even be utilised to help balancing the other one (most likely China). However, looking at the snapshot of the current global power constellations, China still remains far removed from the leading position which is still held by the United States. Taking into account alliances, the imbalance (in favour of Washington) becomes even more pronounced. A different picture emerges only when one explicitly focuses on the Asian theatre where China's rise has already had a much larger impact. President Obama's Pivot to Asia (Liegl and Wolf 2016) might thus seem a sensible move in order to bring the region back into balance.

The outlook based on PTT is generally characterised by concerns, too. Looking not only at the present power constellation but also the underlying dynamics it would highlight that for at least two and a half decades China has been growing faster than the United States, and that these trends give reason to expect a continuing catching-up process of (at least) China. However, PTT would also suggest that conflict is most likely when China or India reach parity with the United States or with each other. As at least the former seems to be a little down the road (especially once the power of the US' allies is taken into consideration), one policy advice of PTT for the United States would be to ensure that this power gap does not close. Preponderance brings peace and parity is prone to war. Hence, Washington should do everything it can to prevent a peer competitor to emerge or, at a minimum, strengthen its own power position. On the other hand, PTT, while being alarmed by the impending conversion of the power trajectories of the dominant and the rising power, would also ask whether the rising powers are satisfied with the status quo of the international order. Herein lies the key to conflict and peace. If the rising powers are found to be extremely and irredeemably dissatisfied, then PTT proper would suggest counter measures in the same as does balance-of-power theory. If, however, the rising powers are found to be only slightly or not at all dissatisfied, PTT would counsel not to risk causing dissatisfaction by alienating the rising powers but rather to put measures in effect that mitigate dissatisfaction and make the rising powers share and stakeholders of the international order (Paul 2016; Rauch 2014, 275–80).

Unfortunately, not all PTT research and PTT-driven commentaries take the centrality of the satisfaction variable seriously. All too often one finds perspectives that I call *PTT light* camouflaging for PTT (Rauch 2014, 65-8). PTT light is characterised by its focus on power transitions (often even between great powers as such and not only at the top of the international order) and its careless to total neglect of satisfaction with the status quo. While this is a mere nuisance in academia (for example when 'PTT' is tested without including satisfaction in the research design) it can become dangerous when it transgresses into actual politics. Slogans like 'history teaches us that rising powers are likely to provoke war' (Shirk 2007, 4) or '[t]hroughout the history of the modern international state system, ascending powers have always challenged the position of the dominant (hegemonic) power in the international system – and these challenges have usually culminated in war' (Layne 2008, 16) may sound pronounced but have little in common with a sophisticated PTT perspective and risk turning into a self-fulfilling prophecy.

## Conclusion

Though balance-of-power realism and power transition theory are related by their mutual focus on the distribution or development of power in the international system, I have argued that both are distinct and differing research agendas. For starters, they disagree about which power constellation is least war-prone. PTT suggests that the most peaceful international order is one with a power preponderance, while realism prefers a stable equilibrium of power. And even if their central concepts of *balance* and *parity* sound comparable, they should not be mixed up. There are constellations in which balance and parity fall together, yet there are likewise constellations in which a balance exists but no parity and vice versa. Thus, their joint focus on power does not lead balance-of-power realism and power transition theory to similar conclusions.

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Applying this to the current power shifts and, most notably, the rise of China, I have argued that balance-of-power realism and power transition theory not only come to differing evaluations concerning the perilousness of the situation but also prescribe quite different policy choices to deal with the situation. This article is not about which of these perspectives is (analytically, empirically or normatively) more sound, but about highlighting that these differing perspectives exist and that it matters a great deal whether one regards current events through balance-of-power or power-transition glasses.

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## About the author:

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