

China's Military Modernisation

Written by Layla Dawood

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LAYLA DAWOOD, FEB 8 2018

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By balance of power, scholars frequently mean the systemic situation or condition in which an objective equilibrium of power is observed among the major units of a given international system, power being understood in terms of material resources (especially military capabilities).^[1] The term can also refer to a policy or a principle that guides policy formulation. Balancing policies and behaviours are related to the expectation that systems' units will act to prevent the formation of concentrations of power and that states will counteract concentrations already formed.

Accordingly, balancing can take two main forms: *internal balancing* and *external balancing*. The employment of the first concept often implies economic, technological and especially military efforts taken by a state using its own means to counter the accumulation of military capabilities by a possible opponent; the second refers to the creation of military alliances to deal with the possibility of war (Waltz 1979). Nonetheless, scholars diverge when empirically identifying balancing behaviours (Martin 1999, 2003; Nexon 2009).

As a systemic theory, Waltz's balance of power theory (1979) focused on explaining the tendency of international systems to bipolar and multipolar equilibriums, but did not produce a thorough characterisation of balancing behaviours. In turn, theories of balancing have sought to explain the conditions under which states will engage in balancing policies, trying to establish which states are most likely to balance (Nexon, 2009).^[2]

Nevertheless, balance of power theories fail to clearly specify how balancing can be empirically identified, and when they attempt to do so, they focus on external balancing (i.e. the formation of alliances) to the detriment of internal balancing. Exemplifying the focus on external balancing, Kaufman and Wohlforth (2007) and Wohlforth et al. (2007) undertook a series of tests to verify the capacity of balance of power theories to explain systemic change. The scholars analysed the rise and fall of previous unipolar systems to verify the concrete operation of the balance of power theory's expectations. In short, in opposition to balancing predicted by the balance of power theory as the cause of transformation of unipolar systems, Kaufman and Wohlforth (2007) maintain that the final collapse of past unipolarities is more properly understood as resulting from the classical effects of imperial overstretch^[3]. In addition, Wohlforth et al. (2007) affirm that balancing occurs, and that it can be an important phenomenon, but its effects are minimised by collective action problems in the formation of alliances and by domestic obstacles to emulating the pole's advances (thus hampering internal balancing).

At first glance, these works suggest that unipolar systems cannot be transformed by means of balancing and that imperial overstretch is a better way of explaining hegemon's decline. In contrast, this chapter argues that these scholars have primarily signalled that alliances (external balancing) were historically ineffective in producing systemic balance in unipolar systems. Nevertheless, the process of internal balancing should not be discarded by the specialised literature as a source of international systemic change.

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In sum, this chapter intends to contribute to the debate concerning the current state of Realism by exploring an underdeveloped realist concept: internal balancing. Subsequently, China's rise, more specifically the recent naval modernisation efforts, will be analysed as a possible illustrative case of internal balancing. The chapter tests the hypothesis that China is changing the current unipolar systems by means of internally balancing the US.

Towards a Theoretical Model of Internal Balancing

The primary aim here is to develop criteria to identify global internal balancing, that is, balancing pursued against the United States, the sole pole of the international system inaugurated with the fall of the USSR. Balancing can also happen at a regional level, but since the purpose of this chapter is to verify if the whole system is changing by means of internal balancing, it is important to design ways to differentiate among efforts forged to counter regional enemies and efforts that deal with the unipole. Accordingly, internal balancing is here considered as a process comprising a group of behaviours that do not need to be consciously directed to forge equilibrium but that must have the potential to do so. Moreover, the effective accomplishment of global systemic balance cannot be used as a criterion to identify global balancing practices. This would neglect the possibility that both effective and ineffective balancing behaviours could take place.

With that in mind, this chapter argues that global internal balancing (that is, balancing directed towards the poles of a system) refers to a process comprising a group of actions which, over the years, have the potential to reduce the capabilities gap between the balancer and existing opponent poles. In the current unipolar system, to qualify as global internal balancing, a group of behaviours must increase the balancer's capabilities to deal with the US in case of a major war. Obviously, the same efforts and capabilities used to balance the US could also help the balancer deal with other possible regional adversaries. By major war, this chapter means a war involving vital interests of all sides, that is: a war of life and death to all parties.

Therefore, internal balancing has an essential military component, which increases the balancer's capabilities to either attack an existing pole or to defend itself against it. However, there is another important component of this process, which helps to differentiate balancing behaviours from ordinary defence improvements: the concomitant rise of economic and political capabilities (e.g. the economic growth of a country and the improvement of central government ability to impose internal taxes and transform private gains in public goods). Economic and political capabilities do not, by themselves, immediately increase a balancer's capabilities to win a war, but they make victory possible by generating resources needed to invest in military capabilities.

When carried out by states that qualify as *poles* in multipolar and bipolar systems, internal balancing can lead to various results. When it is unsuccessfully performed, it might transform bipolar systems into unipolarities and multipolar systems into bipolarities due to the decline of the state which failed to balance. In contrast, when successful, it can guarantee the maintenance of the systemic balance, in which case no systemic change is observed since equilibrium is preserved. It can also lead to the disproportional rise of the balancing pole contributing to the decay of its opponent, either because the latter cannot keep up with the pace of investments in defence or because it eventually loses a war for lack of military capabilities.

In turn, in unipolar systems, when successfully carried out by a *pole candidate*, internal balancing can change the system when it equalises a balancer's capabilities with the current pole(s), consequently changing the system's polarity (from unipolar to bipolar, or from bipolar to multipolar). When internal balancing is successful, a pole candidate not only becomes better at defending itself against an enemy, but becomes able to potentially win a major armed conflict against current global powers. And, to win a major conflict, weapons are of course needed, but so are economic and political capabilities to sustain investments in military capabilities in times of war and peace.^[4]

To sum up, the internal balancing model herein developed assumes that the continued economic and political improvements achieved by a pole or a pole candidate (and the maintenance of these achievements in time) enable the occurrence and continuation of the second component of the internal balancing process (which is military in nature). In addition, successful internal balancing necessarily comprises a military build-up which increases the balancer's prospects of winning a major war against the pole(s) of a system.

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Finally, to deal with an opponent pole's military capabilities, a balancer might choose a combination of the following behaviours: 1) off-setting – which refers to an increase in the number or quality of weapons already at the disposal of the balancer; 2) emulation – to copy or to reproduce the opponent's capabilities; and/or 3) innovation – to come up with new capabilities that help counter the ones owned by a potential opponent (Elman 1999; Resende-Santos 2007; Taliaferro 2007).

This chapter focuses on the second component of the internal balancing phenomenon: it verifies if the Chinese military modernisation efforts count as internal balancing and if these behaviours have been effective in changing the current international system^[5].

Is China Internally Balancing the US?

China and the US disagree especially in what concerns the Taiwan issue and America's influence over seas and oceans near China. Therefore, Chinese authorities have been trying to improve their naval capabilities, which would be essential to respond to the set of capabilities at the disposal of the US in case of a war in Asia (O'Rourke 2012). In view of the Chinese current focus on naval capabilities^[6], this chapter attempts to check if these modernisation efforts provide China with better chances of victory in case of an armed conflict against the US. In other words, the next sections verify if the Chinese naval improvements can be understood as internal balancing and analyse if these behaviours have the potential to change the current unipolar system.

The naval capabilities acquired by China during the 1990's and 2000's reflect a new emphasis by the Chinese authorities and scholars on the development of naval power.^[7] China's naval modernisation began during the 1990s and was boosted after 1996, when the United States deployed two aircraft carriers to Taiwan's surroundings in response to Chinese missile tests and naval exercises near Taiwan (Cole 2009, 2010). The modernisation efforts 'comprise a broad array of weapon acquisition programs, including programs for anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs), surface-to-air missiles, mines, manned aircraft, unmanned aircraft, submarines, aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, patrol craft, amphibious ships, mine countermeasures (MCM) ships, hospital ships, and supporting C4IS'^[8] (O'Rourke 2012, 3).

Particularly, new submarine building programs contributed to significant changes in the composition of China's naval force during the past two decades. China went from having two modern attack submarines in 1995 to 39 in 2014. The new submarines are regarded as quieter and, consequently, less detectable. (O'Rourke 2016, 16).

There is a long-lasting Russian influence on the Chinese navy, especially in terms of the design of its vessels. However, the Chinese are reportedly seeking to emulate the US naval warfare network^[9]. For that purpose, investments have been made on enhancing information technology and PLAN's communications capabilities. Improvements can be identified in relation to the construction of a national fibre optics network and of space-based C4ISR capabilities (Erickson and Chase 2008, 25).

Nevertheless, a technological innovation, the ASBM, might aid the Chinese to perform its sea-denial strategy, permitting China to use ballistic missiles to attack moving surface warships. Traditionally, ballistic missiles were not considered efficient against ships at sea since ships are moving targets and missiles, once fired, could not change trajectory to account for target motion. However, the PLA is reportedly trying to place seekers in high-explosive missile warheads that would activate as the warhead descends into the target area and guide the warhead to the moving ship. If the Chinese succeed in achieving such innovation, it could pose a huge challenge to US forces (McDevitt 2011).

Therefore, the behaviours of *offsetting* (represented by the acquisition of more submarines, frigates and destroyers), *emulation* (of an American networked fleet, for instance) and military innovation (the creation of anti-ship ballistic missiles) seem to be present when Chinese modernisation efforts are analysed.

However, for this chapter, it is important to inquire whether these modernisation efforts are enough to qualify as internal balancing against the US. For that, a comparison between the Chinese and the American navies is in order.

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Navies should not be compared only in terms of capabilities, but also in terms of preparedness to fulfil their missions and objectives (O'Rourke 2012, 36). Chinese military observers such as McDevitt (2011) and Shlapak et al. (2009) claim that the near-term objective of China's naval military modernisation efforts is to improve this country's ability to deal with the Taiwan issue in case it turns into an armed conflict with the US. To prepare against American interference in a conflict with Taiwan, naval power seems indispensable to China since the US would use its own maritime capabilities to deal with China. Accordingly, China is believed to be adopting an anti-access strategy, which aims at deterring or at least delaying a potential US intervention in a conflict between China and Taiwan.^[10]

This sea denial strategy is also referred to as near-seas active defence (in opposition to the near-coast defence strategy adopted during the Cold War) since the aim is to cover a much larger sea area than the coast. The near-seas active defence covers the first island chain (which stretches from the Kurile Islands through the islands of Japan, Ryukyu Archipelago, Taiwan and the Philippines to Borneo Island), the Yellow Sea, East China Sea, and South China Sea, sea areas adjacent to the outer rims of this island chain and those of the north Pacific. The concept does not cover the south Pacific and the Indian Ocean (Li 2011, 116).

The submarine forces are the most important PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) capability to perform the sea-denial strategy. Assuming it takes three submarines to keep one on station (one on station, one going home, one getting ready to go), McDevitt (2011) estimates that a sea-denial strategy requires around 60 to 75 modern submarines to deal with US carriers. The PLAN has currently 39 modern attack boats. That means that it is not unequivocal that China's forces can effectively perform the strategy of sea-denial (McDevitt 2011, O'Rourke 2016).

On the other hand, in terms of far seas operations, China has been slow to increase its navy's ability to remain at sea for extended periods. At the same time, it has been working to overcome some of its limitations. In 2013, two new FUCHI replenishment oilers were added to the force. These ships rotate in support of Gulf of Aden (GOA) counter-piracy deployments. Also, the amphibious force is being modernised; yet China has not significantly expanded its capacity in this area yet.

Concerning the acquisition of foreign bases, observers such as Khurana (2008) have stated that China is building a series of bases in the Indian Ocean to support Chinese naval operations along the sea line of communication linking China to the oil sources of the Persian Gulf, which has been referred to as a 'string of pearls'^[11]. However, this information is disputed by analysts such as Kosticka (2011) and Erickson (2010) who argue that China has built commercial port facilities in the Indian Ocean, but not naval bases. These scholars claim that China is pursuing a strategy of having 'places not bases', which involves diplomatic agreements with other states' governments that allow access to their facilities to obtain essential supplies, such as fuel, food, and freshwater for deployed forces. Such agreements can also involve reciprocal guarantees of military support in such areas as training, equipment, and education. In other words, China is seeking to guarantee that its navy would have places to visit, not staying permanently anywhere abroad.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the behaviours which are part of the military component of the internal balancing process (off-setting, emulation and/or military innovation) can be identified among China's naval modernisation efforts. Moreover, the timing of China's actions in what regards naval capabilities indicates a correlation between the Chinese naval modernisation and US unipolarity. Although China is not simply emulating American naval capabilities, it seems to be trying to offset American naval power through the adoption of an anti-access strategy greatly based on submarine war.

Nonetheless, it is not clear if all the criteria herein proposed to qualify a group of actions as internal balancing are met: Chinese efforts are potentially directed to diminishing the gap between the US and China's capabilities, but the Chinese efforts do not considerably increase its chances of winning a major war against the US. Nevertheless, Chinese maritime modernisation efforts have improved its ability to deter a possible US intervention in the Taiwan Strait. If a war breaks out near Taiwan, Chinese capabilities might be enough to coerce the US out of this conflict, especially in case the American authorities do not consider the defence of Taiwan as a vital American interest.

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Nonetheless, naval modernisation still fails to provide China with the resources necessary to project power outside the so called 'first island chain'. Particularly, China has the disadvantage of relying on SLOCs for vital products such as energy sources. Consequently, the capability of protecting its SLOC is essential to raise China's chances of winning a major war against the US, since the latter, in case its vital interests were at risk, could impose a naval embargo on China that would damage Chinese war efforts, making victory a lot harder.

In a nutshell, China's naval force modernisation, at most, enables China to win a war over Taiwan, but not enough efforts are being taken to enable China to win a conflict farther in Asia. In other words, modernisation efforts seem not to be sufficient to guarantee victory on a major conflict, that is, a conflict over which the unipole would be willing to use all its resources to win.

Therefore, China's efforts to acquire adequate capabilities to perform a sea-denial strategy are only consistent with an early stage of the internal balancing process. An unequivocal internal balancing movement would necessarily encompass the acquisition of capabilities to protect China's SLOCs and/or to project power beyond the near seas. To the extent that balancing is already occurring, it has been inefficient in changing the current unipolar system. This means there are no empirical signs to support the hypothesis that guided this study; consequently, internal balancing cannot yet be said to be changing the current international system.

In sum, realist balance of power theory remains challenged in its capacity to explain systemic change. Nonetheless, this research does not necessarily refute the theory: there is no evidence to support the claim that internal balancing will not change unipolarity in the long run. Thus, future research should explore why internal balancing has been slow in the current unipolar system.

Notes

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[1] This being the case, the opposite systemic situation involves the concentration of power by a single actor, which can take the form of unipolarity (when there is an especially powerful actor in the system), hegemony (when international rules are determined by a single actor) or empire (when the less powerful units lose autonomy to the most powerful) (Nexon 2009, 334-5).

[2] For examples of this kind of theory, see the works of Walt (1990), Schweller (1994) and Christensen and Snyder (1990), who elaborate on the frequency of balancing behaviour and the conditions under which it is expected to occur.

[3] Imperial overstretch refers to the loss of economic dynamism and the consequent decline of a hegemon due to excessive spending on defence (Wohlforth 1999).

[4] In this respect, various theories drive attention to different domestic and economic features which inspire the characterisation of the first component of the model on the global internal balancing process. Power Transition Theory (PTT) stresses that transformations in productivity and population are related to the rise of global powers and Gilpin (2002) drives attention to transformations in sectors such as transportation, communications, and in the economic system itself. In addition, Long Leadership Cycle Theory (LLCT) highlights the causal relation between economic innovations and the rise and fall of great powers. According to the supporters of this last theory, the rise of a dominant power is the result of some sort of invention related to the leading sectors of world economy which provides the inventor with the sort of advantages that usually derive from monopolies. In contrast, the decline of a dominant power is caused by the diffusion of its economic innovations to other states (Rasler and Thompson 1994; Tammen et al. 2000). In terms of political features, the PTT and Gilpin (2002) work with the concept of political capacity, which relates to the distinction between state power and national power: the latter being the sum of a

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country's assets and the former being comprised by what state authorities can really use for public purposes. As indicators of political capacity, PTT suggests the use of fiscal and tax policy numbers.

[5] For the complete test of this model against China's economic, political and military rise, see Dawood (2013).

[6] This does not mean that naval modernisation is China's sole means of balancing. Nonetheless, this chapter concentrates on naval modernisation due to the attention the Chinese government has been giving to these efforts.

[7] Surely, this new focus would be better characterised if one could show increases in naval spending over the years, but no official breakdown of defence spending by service is available for China. However, various Chinese publications seem to confirm this new emphasis. According to Fravel and Liebman (2011), Chinese navy officials are increasingly casting the PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy) as the protector of China's economy. It is often argued that the heart of China's economy is more and more concentrated in coastal areas and that China's dependence on maritime shipping is growing, turning the protection of China's sea lines of communication (SLOCs) to a priority (Fravel and Liebman 2011, 74-5). Chinese official sources also point to this new focus. A White Paper published in 2006 states that the country aims at extending the strategic depth of offshore defensive operations and at enhancing its capabilities in integrated maritime operations. Another White Paper published in 2008 for the first time referred to the ground forces as a service equivalent to the navy, air force, and second artillery. It emphasises the objective of developing the navy's capabilities to conduct cooperation in distant waters (Erickson and Goldstein 2009, 47-8; Hartnett and Vellucci 2011). In 2013, a new White Paper stated the objective to develop blue water capabilities (the capability to operate globally, that is in open oceans and deep waters) (O'Rourke 2016).

[8] C4IS stands for Command, Control, Communications, and Computers Information System.

[9] In defining network centric warfare, scholars emphasise the use of new technologies to produce information and improve results in war. In other words, there is a focus on 'the new technologies used to create more effective sensor and communications architectures. These architectures, it is argued, will enable us to create and exploit a common situational awareness, increase our speed of command, and "get inside the enemy's OODA [observe, orient, decide, and act] loop"' (Smith 2001, 59).

[10] It is important to emphasise that 'anti-access' and 'area denial' are US terms and not Chinese ones. Those terms, first employed by the US Department of Defense in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, are often used interchangeably by analysts to characterise the attempt to prevent a US military intervention if China attacks Taiwan. In particular, the assumed Chinese objective is to impede US aircraft carriers from getting within tactical aircraft operating distance from China (McDevitt 2011, 192).

[11] This theory was a creation of a 2004 study commissioned by the US Department of Defense entitled *Energy Futures in Asia* and is broadly accepted as true in the US and India.

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About the author:

Layla Dawood is a Professor at the University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ). She holds a PhD in International Relations from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. She has published papers, book chapters and articles on different issues of the International Security field, including Latin American Security. Her research interests encompass International Relations Theory and International Security with a focus on balancing, nuclear policy and non-proliferation.