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Why Balancing Fails
Theoretical reflections on Stephan M. Walt's "Balance of Threat" Theory

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Abstract

Does balancing work? Despite the long history and use of this concept, no systematic (empirical) research has been done to determine whether balancing can reduce threat and provide security by weakening the threatening state or alliance. This paper aims to fill this fundamental research gap using Stephan M. Walt's balance of threat theory. In addition to Walt, we assume that the perception of a state's intention(s) as aggressive is decisive for that state being (perceived as) a threat. Given that balancing fails and, as we assume, tends to backfire i.e., exacerbating the dynamic of the security dilemma and thereby reinforcing the threat perception of the balancing state(s), the use of balancing strategies can be identified as counterproductive. Consequently, this will also bring our understanding of security into question. For the purpose of this paper, we define balancing as a state strategy that is 1) designed to counter a perceived external threat by 2) either military or nonmilitary means that are 3) either internal or external and aim 4) to weaken a state or alliance perceived as a threat.

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1 Introduction

States react to threats, not to power. This argument is forcefully advocated by Stephen M. Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory, which he developed in *The Origins of Alliances* (Walt 1987; 1990). By this, the "Balance of Threat" theory opposes the core assumption of the "Balance of Power" theory, which is a core tenet of both classical and neorealist theory[1] and predicts that states attempt to prevent a potential hegemon by balancing against it (Waltz 1979, pp. 118–121).

The latest and maybe most striking example for the accuracy of Walt's theory is the current Iran nuclear crisis (Bock 2012; 2013): The USA and Isra-

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[1] "[…] Realists believe that: (I) the state is the primary actor in world politics; (2) stares weigh options and make policy decisions in a more-or-less rational (3) security is the fundamental aim of states; and (4) power, especially military power, is the most important factor shaping international political life. Most Realists' argue that systemic forces (e.g., relative power) exert a greater influence on state than unit-level factors do, but no Realist maintains that unit-level factors exert no influence at all. In fact, Realists disagree on how much attention should be paid to or unit-level factors. […] Most importantly, Realism does not prescribe any particular strategy or national policy. Because Realists believe that the external environment heavily shapes the foreign policies of states, their policy prescriptions must rest on an assessment of the situation facing a given state at a particular point in time […]" (Walt 1992, p. 1).

el, two hegemonic powers of global regional extension respectively, are actually balancing against the much weaker Iran (measured in terms of military capabilities and economic data to which Walt refers to as "aggregate power" (Walt 1990, p. 22) – because both perceive the image of a nuclear armed Iran as threatening to regional and world security. As US-President, Barack Obama already stated in 2011: "Iran with nuclear weapons would pose a threat not only to the region but also to the United states" (The Telegraph 2011, Nov. 14). A point repeated and even enhanced by Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a United Nations General Assembly session in September 2012 and illustrated with a cartoon-like bomb:

> [J]ust imagine Iranian aggression with nuclear weapons […] Who among you would feel safe in the Middle East? Who would be safe in Europe? Who would be safe in America? Who would be safe anywhere? (Martinez 2012, Sept. 28).

"The importance of this subject is manifest" (Walt 1990, p. 1). Walt is confident that the origins of alliances are not only of scholarly interest, but also have relevance for practical political decisions (Walt 1990, p. 5). We are equally sure that analyzing the way states react to threats is also important. The reasons why states react the way they do (i. e., balancing threats they perceive) affect the security of individual states as well as of the whole international system. Hence, understanding 'Why balancing fails' could help to improve the understanding of both national and international security.

2 Walt's "Balance of Threat" theory

In 1987, Walt introduced his Balance of Threat theory as a major refinement of Waltz's classical approach (1979)[2]. He first focussed on balancing and bandwagoning (Walt 1985) and then on providing a convincing new contribution to the theory by not focusing exclusively on power units like military or offensive capabilities but also on threats (Walt 1987; Walt 1990, pp. 25–26): "[S]tates that are viewed as aggressive are likely to provoke others to balance against them" (Walt 1990, p. 25).

Waltz understands Walt's approach as a foreign-policy application of the Balance of Power and not as theory reformulation (Waltz 1997, p. 916). He praises it as "[…] the marriage of theory and practice is consummated in the pages of Steve Walt's book. It is the best work on alliances that I know of" (Waltz on the blurb to Walt 1990). Robert O. Keohane (1988) uses his review of Walt as a general critique of neorealism; in his eyes, the Balance of Threat theory "requires so much information about perceptions as well as objective facts that it has relatively little theoretical power of its own" (Keohane 1988, p. 172). He later admits that, within neorealistic thinking, Walt makes a major contribution to this line of theory.

In 1992, Robert G. Kaufman and Eric J. Labs took interest on Walt's theory and started a debate in *Security Studies* (Vol. I, No. 3). Kaufman stud-

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[2] Theoretical based on the classical realism in International relations (Carr 1939; Spykman 1942; 1944; Morgenthau 1948; Herz 1951), Kenneth N. Waltz create the Balance of Power theory (Waltz 1979) as a structural form of realism that focus on the structure of the international system ('third image' (Waltz 1959)). This system, in which states are the dominant, unified actors and different only by dissimilar capacities (1979, p. 195), is characterized by anarchy (1979, pp. 114 ff.) wherein each state acts in a self-help approach to defend his specific territory and vital interests (1979, p. 107) and use the method of balancing or bandwagoning to react to stronger powers that could attack them (1979, p. 126) balance of power emerges due to the system (automatically). Waltz theory predict, that strong powers are a threat because of their power, negligible if their behavior in the international environment is aggressive or not.

ied alignment decisions in 1930s Europe, blamed Walt for being insufficiently complex (using Christensen and Snyder 1990), and drew the wrong conclusions (Kaufman 1992) while Labs investigated the alignment behavior of small states. Labs reinforced Walt's theory and recommended the differentiation of six different strategies (Labs 1992).

In his response, Walt supported Labs' advancements by arguing that Kaufman's analysis consisted of misinterpretations and that his own results, in contrast, supported the Balance of Threat theory (Walt 1990). The theory remained dormant until Cooper (2003) analyzed the formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council and modified Walt's argument of astate-centric Balance of Threat theory, which meant that he regarded states from a classical-realistic perspective, wherein national elites react to external and internal threats (Cooper 2003, 309). Gause (2003) was able to reaffirm Walt's arguments by examining the alliance choices made by Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria between 1971 and 1991. In a large-N study, using a Balance of Power version similar to Walt, Fritz and Sweeney found that "Great powers pursue costly balancing policies only when they are forced to counter significant external threats" (Fritz and Sweeney 2004, p. 303). Kratochvíl (2004) transferred the basic assumptions of the Balance of Threat theory to the analysis of Russian foreign policy and created a model that brought together the perception of threat, the construction of threat, and the reaction to threat. Finally, Yetiv (2006) compared the prognostic potential of the Balance of Power with the Balance of Threat theory by analyzing US interventions in the Persian Gulf. He found evidence that the Balance of Threat theory performs much better than the Balance of Power theory and even identified three hypotheses/variables that improved upon the Balance of Threat theory. This three enhancements are:

First, external balancing against threat is more likely when the balancer believes it is unlikely to engage the most threatening actor, through a variety of incentives, in lieu of tougher approaches such as balancing. […] Second, balancing against threat is more likely when the outside state faces a regional military threat rather than a political or ideological threat. […] Third, global pressures did not play as great a role […] States […] [do] balance against threat at the regional level even when that contradicted balancing against power at the global level (Yetiv 2006, pp. 101-102).

After a summary of Walt and his reception, we will focus on the core of balancing concepts and the recent debate.

3 Balancing – what it is and how states do it

Balancing is an age-old and fundamental concept in the study of international relations and politics. David Hume, for example, regarded the balance of power as a scientific law, and Waltz argued that "if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance of power is it" (Waltz 1979, p. 117).

Even the Peloponnesian war (431–404 BCE) can be explained in terms of "balance", "power" and "threat" (Saltzman 2012, p. 2). It was the threat of a potentially rising new hegemon (the naval power of Corinth) that convinced Athens to declare war and balance against Corinth – as long as this city state was still weak compared with the Athenian power. It was a decision that made Sparta finally balance against Athens, or as Thucydides writes in his famous *Peloponnesian War*:

The real cause I consider to be the one which was formally most kept out of sight. The growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Lacedaemon [Sparta, the authors], made war inevitable (Thucydides 2009, v. 1.23).

In other words: The perception of a growing Athenian threat made Sparta balance i.e., joining the conflict that ultimately led to the Peloponnesian war in opposition to Athens and on the side of Corinth. The Peloponnesian war can therefore be treated as a very early example of Walt's Balance of Threat theory (Walt 1987; 1990).

So far, so good. But the long history and use of the concept of balancing notwithstanding, as Susan Martin correctly notes, "there has been little analysis of what it means for a state to 'balance'" (Martin 1999, p. 1). And there has been done even still less analysis on the consequences of balancing behavior: Does it really work?

In the following three sections, we give an overview of the current debate on and the definitions therein used of the concept of balancing, which we try to summarize in an own working definition of balancing. Finally, we present a classification of balancing behavior that helps to shed light on what balancing is and what it really aims to accomplish—a necessary prerequisite to determine whether balancing really works.

3.1 What is balancing?

A good starting point to discuss the concept of balancing is to determine whether it is a state behavior or an international political outcome (Elman 2003, p. 8). If balancing is simply taken as an international political outcome, the Athenians were right in claiming "that the coming of the Peloponnesian war was only a question of time" (Thucydides 2009, v. 1.44), i.e., that war

was inevitable. But then balancing is something just happening in state relations of, leaving no space for states to choose how to behave. But as Walt emphasizes, "balancing is not an instantaneous or automatic process" (Walt 1992, p. 449). Therefore, in the following we will focus on an understanding of balancing that describes foreign policy as: "that is, what a state does" (Elman 2003, 8).

In the eve of the Peloponnesian war, the Athenians formed a powerful alliance, the Delian League, and presumably built up arms, two classical forms of balancing behavior which Waltz referred to as internal and external balancing (Waltz 1979, p. 168). This conceptualization is still predominant. Walt, for example, almost exclusively focused on the founding of alliances (external balancing) as the typical form of balancing behavior (Walt 1987; 1990).

Along these lines, Randall Schweller suggests that "balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or the political and military domination of the state by a foreign power or coalition" (Schweller 2006, p. 166). But as Kai He rightly points out, "military alliances and arms buildups are not the only balancing strategies states can use to pursue security under anarchy" (He 2012, p. 156). Timothy W. Crawford argues in the same direction:

> If State A has five chips, and Threat B has ten, A can balance against B either by adding one chip to its own stack or subtracting one chip from B's. If A can do both at the same time by adding (that is, allying with) one from B's stack, it is a real coup. But that is not necessary to improve its position, for just by taking B down to nine—neutralizing one of B's

chips if you will—A can increase the relative strength of its five (Crawford 2008, p. 3).

The broader understanding of balancing that underlies He's statement can already be detected in the definition of Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Thompson (Morgenthau and Thompson 1950). They define balancing as "the attempt on the part of one nation to counteract the power of another by increasing its strength to a point where it is at least equal, if not superior, to the other nation's strength" (Morgenthau and Thompson 1950, p. 103). As Daniel H. Nexon rightly points out, this may encompass strategies aiming to enhance or pool the state's capabilities, or to reduce the capabilities of the threatening state as " there is no compelling reason to exclude strategies that involve nonmilitary instruments" (Nexon 2009, p. 344). Robert J. Art also offers a somewhat open definition of balancing:

> 'Balancing' refers to behavior designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalition of states by adding to the power assets at its disposal, in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition (Art 2006, pp. 183–84).

This understanding is open to a wide range of potential state reactions: military build-up as well as the forming of alliances, economic sanctions, or diplomatic pressure.

Although there is obviously some disagreement about the meaning of balancing, it is nevertheless possible to identify the central tenets nearly all balancing conceptions rest on: Balancing is a state behavior (He 2012, p. 161), its purpose is to pursue security (He 2012, p. 161), and its aim is "to counter

an external threat" (Martin 1999, p. 8), i.e., to shift the state's relative power[3] to its advantage compared to the threatening state's power (He 2012, p. 161). Consequently, balancing is directed at a particular target i.e., "the most threatening state or the most powerful state, that is, a potential threat or even a traditional rival" (He 2012, p. 163).

In line with the balance of threat theory, we define balancing as a state strategy (Morgenthau and Thompson 1950, p. 103; Elman 2003, p. 8; Walt 1992, p. 449) designed to counter a perceived external threat by either military or nonmilitary means (Martin 1999, p. 8; Elman 2003, p. 8; Pape 2005, p. 26; Levy and Thompson 2005, p. 1; Crawford 2008, p. 3) that are internal or external (Waltz 1979, p. 168) and that aim to reduce of the threat and maintain security (He 2012, p. 161). The purpose of balancing is to weaken a state or alliance perceived as a threat. Balancing can take on four different forms: it can be either hard or soft balancing and either positive or negative.

Given this (working) definition of balancing, we are now able to offer a more nuanced view on the way in which states balance. States may use military or nonmilitary means (i.e., hard and soft balancing[4]), which are either directed against the threat or threatening state (He calls this "negative balancing" (He 2012, p. 156)) or "to strengthen a state's own power in world politics" (He 2012, p. 157), which He calls "positive balancing" (He 2012, p. 156).

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[3] Power or capability is here understood as an aggregate concept that encompasses a state's total resources (for example, population, industrial and military capability, and technological prowess) (Walt 1990, p. 22).

[4] Since the ongoing dominance of the US after the Cold War (Layne 1993; 2006; Mastanduno 1997; Waltz 2000; Lieber and Alexander 2005; Goh 2005; Foot 2006; Ratti 2006; Mowle and Sacko 2007; Brooks and Wohlforth 2008; Walt 2009; Levy and Thompson 2010; He 2012) and especially after the struggle of Iraq war 2003 between the US and many European states, the debate over 'soft balancing' emerges (Pape 2005; Paul 2005; Kelley 2005; Lieber and Alexander 2005; Layne 2006; Ross 2006; He and Feng 2008; against: Brooks and Wohlforth 2005) and the rise of China reinforced this discussion (Ross 2006; Chan 2010; Wilkins 2010; Mahnken 2011; Dobbins 2012; Zhang 2012; Le Mière 2013).

3.2   How do states balance?

This broad understanding of balancing[5] as either

1.   soft (nonmilitary) and internal (positive);

2.   soft (nonmilitary) and external (negative);

3.   hard (military) and internal (positive);

4.   hard (military) and external (negative);

allows us to identify a wide range of policy options as balancing behavior. An evolution of the concept of balancing that Walt appreciated. Walt approves Labs' (1992) expansion of possible state responses to a perceived threat, like "non-alignment, free-riding on a Great Power, fighting alongside a Great Power, balancing with other weak states, fighting alone", as "a more elaborate typology" (Walt 1992, p. 469). Before we go into details, the following four-field matrix shows different types balancing behavior divided into internal/positive and external/negative forms and soft and hard balancing methods:

Fig. 1: Balancing typology

	Soft-balancing	Hard-balancing
Internal (positive) balancing	• Balancing through public goods substitution • Territorial denial • Economic strengthening	• Military buildup • Leash-slipping • Balance and Not Fight
External (negative) balancing	• Divide-and-balance • Proxy balancing • Binding	• War-fighting alliances • Chain-ganging

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[5] The following list is of course illustrative and by no means exclusive and complete; there may even be different explanations or definitions of the forms of balancing listed in the table.

	Wedge Strategies	Buck-passing
	Transcending	Balance und Fight
	Weak States Alliance	Fight Alone
	Entangling diplomacy	
	Signals of resolve to balance	

(own graphic)

Based on the basic presentation in Figure 1, we go now more into details and describe every balancing type with a short quote by relevant scholars:

Fig. 2: Forms of balancing behavior

	Description	Soft	Hard	Positive	Negative
Territorial denial	"Denying access to this territory can reduce the superior state's prospects for victory, such as by increasing the logistical problems for the superior state or compelling it to fight with air or sea power alone, constraints that effectively reduce the overall force that a stronger state can bring to bear against a weaker one" (Pape 2005, pp. 36–37).	x		x	
Divide-and-balance	"Divide-and-balance strategies seek to correct security deficits by directly targeting the ability of rivals to engage in collective mobilization. […] First, balancers might seek to convince an actor's allies (or potential allies) to defect from the cooperative arrangement, remain neutral, or switch allegiances. […] Second, balanc-	x			x

	ers might encourage factions within a target to oppose its power political policies or even actively resist its leadership" (Nexon 2009, p. 345).				
Proxy balancing	"Proxy balancing refers to transfers of resources, particularly armaments, to third parties with the aim of limiting a state's power projection capabilities or rectifying a regional imbalance of power. Proxy balancing does not involve formal alliances and may not even carry with it any operational input into the use of transferred capabilities" (Nexon 2009, p. 345).	x	(x)[6]		x
Balancing through public goods substitution	"States seeking to enhance their political autonomy and perhaps weaken the influence of another state in a region or issue-area may form arrangements to provide public goods equivalent to those offered by another state or coalition of states" (Nexon 2009, p. 346).	x		x	
Binding	"Binding strategies seek to constrain or enmesh targets in institutions, agreements, or forms of interdependency so as to weaken their ability to pursue autonomous policies" (Nexon 2009, p. 346).	x			x

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6 Even as Nexon see proxy balancing as a form of soft balancing, because of the transfer of weapons it could sorted into the category of 'hard balancing'; see Pape (2005, p. 9).

Entangling diplomacy	"[S]tates may use international institutions and ad hoc diplomatic maneuvers to delay a superior state's plan for war and so reduce the element of surprise and give the weaker side more time to prepare; delay may even make the issue irrelevant" (Pape 2005, p. 36).	x			x
Economic strengthening	"One way of balancing effectively, at least in the long run, would be to shift relative economic power in favor of the weaker side. The most obvious way of doing this is through regional trading blocs that increase trade and economic growth for members while directing trade away from nonmembers" (Pape 2005, p. 37).	x		x	
Wedge Strategies	"Wedge strategies can be a form of external balancing whose purpose is to increase a state's relative power over external threat, by preventing the grouping or causing the dispersal of threatening alliances" (Crawford 2008, p. 3).	x			x
Leash-slipping	"States engaging in leash-slipping do not fear being attacked by the hegemon. Rather, they build up their military capabilities to maximize their ability to conduct an independent foreign policy" (Layne 2006, p. 9).		x	x	

Chain-ganging	"In multipolarity, the approximate equality of alliance partners leads to a high degree of security interdependence within an alliance. Given the anarchic setting and this relative equality, each state feels its own security is integrally intertwined with the security of its alliance partners. As a result, any nation that marches to war inexorably drags its alliance partners with it. No state can restrain a reckless ally by threatening to sit out the conflict, since the demise of its reckless ally would decisively cripple its own security" (Christensen and Snyder 1990, p. 140).		x	x	
Buck-passing	"In the face of a rising threat, balancing alignments fail to form in a timely fashion because some states try to ride free on other states' balancing efforts. They may do this because they wish to avoid bearing unnecessary costs or because they expect their relative position to be strengthened by standing aloof from the mutual bloodletting of the other powers" (Christensen and Snyder 1990, p. 141). See also Mearsheimer (2001, p. 157–162).		x		x
Signals of resolve to balance	"If multiple states can cooperate, repeatedly, […] they may gradually increase their trust in each other's willingness to cooperate against the unipolar leader's am-	x			x

	bitions. Thus, a core purpose of soft balancing is not to coerce or even to impede the superior state's current actions, but to demonstrate resolve in a manner that signals a commitment to resist the superpower's future ambitions. Accordingly, the measure of success for soft balancing is not limited to whether the sole superpower abandons specific policies, but also includes whether more states join a soft-balancing coalition against the unipolar leader" (Pape 2005, p. 37).				
Transcending	"A strategy less common, but far from unusual or unknown, was transcending, i.e., attempting to surmount international anarchy and go beyond the normal limits of conflictual politics: to solve the problem, end the threat, and prevent its recurrence through some institutional arrangement involving an international consensus or formal agreement on norms, rules, and procedures for these purposes" (Schroeder 1994, p. 117).	x			x
Balance and Not Fight	"[…] states may join the coalition opposing the aspiring hegemon, but their contribution to the alliance or the battle can vary" (Labs 1992, p. 390).		x		x
Weak States	"If no Great Power is willing to		x		x

Alliance	oppose an aspiring hegemon, [weak] states threatened by an aggressive Great Power may try a collective alliance to provide common security" (Labs 1992, p. 390).				
Balance und Fight	"A [weak] state may choose to balance against an aggressive state and provide the maximum contribution it can afford" (Labs 1992, p. 390).		**x**		**x**
Fight Alone	"A [weak] state may find itself confronting alone an aggressive Great Power. It may be isolated, or other states in the system, Great and may be unwilling or unable to provide it aid. Instead of bandwagoning, the weak state may choose to fight for its sovereignty rather than yield its territory without trying to defend itself" (Labs 1992, p. 390–91).		**x**		**x**

(own graphic)

The research literature offers a few more types policy strategies labeled as 'balancing', but these do not constitute balancing behavior as defined above. To be exact: these strategies do not aim to weaken a state or alliance perceived as a threat and are therefore not balancing strategies (Martin 1999, 8; Elman 2003, p. 8; Pape 2005, p. 26; Levy and Thompson 2005, p. 1; He 2012, p.161). For the sake of completeness:

Fig. 3: Other policy strategies labeled as 'balancing'

	Description
Omnibalancing	"As with the leaders of great powers, Third World leaders, too, seek to appease secondary threats in order to counter those that

	are more pressing. But in the Third World, this often means appeasing other states (which often pose less pressing threats) in order to counter the more immediate and dangerous domestic threats. They seek to split the alignment against them and focus their energies on their most dangerous (domestic) opponents. To do this they appease the international allies of their domestic opponents. […] Omnibalancing […] incorporates the need of leaders to appease secondary adversaries, as well as to balance against both internal and external threats in order to survive in power." (David 1991, p. 236). 'Omnibalancing' a highly specific form of balancing (against internal threats) established by David for the Third World (1991) was also used to analyze balancing behavior in the post-Soviet region (Miller 2006).
Strategic Non-cooperation	"When a state rejects cooperation, it does not necessarily do so because it worries that the other state will attack it in the future. Rather, it rejects it because accepting highly asymmetrical gains is in and of itself a poor long-term optimizing strategy. As such strategic non-cooperation represents a form of intra-alliance bargaining" (Kelley 2005, p. 156).
Hedging	"Hedging is defined here as a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality" (Goh 2005, VIII). See also Tessman (2012).
Hiding from threats	"This could take various forms: simply ignoring the threat or declaring neutrality in a general crisis, possibly approaching other states on one or both sides of a quarrel to get them to guarantee one's safety; trying to withdraw into isolation; assuming a purely defensive position in the hope that the storm would blow over; or, usually as a later or last resort, seeking protection from some other power or powers in exchange for diplomatic services, friendship, or non-military support, without joining that power or powers as an ally or committing itself to any use of force on its part." (Schroeder 1994, p. 117).

3.3   Does balancing work?

Balancing is a state's reaction to a perceived threat—this could be "an imbalance of power, geographic proximity, ideology, or something else" (Martin 2003, p. 70)—which aims to reduce the threat and maintain security. The possible strategies, as we have seen, are ample; but all strategies listed above (or not listed but will fitting our definition) are directed against a threatening state (or, like the Delian League in the Peloponnesian war, against a threatening alliance) with the intention to weaken it. Thus, the underlying purpose of any balancing strategy is to change "a [threatening] state's relative power versus the rival's to its own favor" (He 2012, p. 162) i.e., to weaken it by military or nonmilitary means, which are either internal or external. After their victory in 404 BC, the Spartans stripped Athens of its walls, its fleet, and all of its overseas possessions so that Athens would not be a threatening power to Sparta.

Despite the extensive literature on balancing, no[7] (empirical) research has been done to determine whether balancing can fulfill its purpose: to reduce the threat and provide security by weakening the threatening state or alliance. We aim to fill this research gap.

4   Why Balancing Fails

The identified research gap can be transferred to our leading research question:

> *Can balancing fulfill its purpose—and reduce the threat states react to and provide security by weaken the threatening state or alliance?*

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[7] At least we could not found one scholarly work that addresses the question if balancing really works.

The assumption underlying this research question is that the balancing behavior favored by states in reaction to a threat is not successful i.e., balancing does not reduce the threat that it is reacting to. The Iran nuclear crisis may again serve as evidence: military action (e.g., an air strike) against Iranian nuclear facilities would be counterproductive because it would only slow down the nuclear program instead of permanently hindering it. If anything, an attack on Tehran would strengthen the belief that Iranian nuclear weapons are a necessary means of deterrence and self-defense (Bock 2012; Bock 2013). Therefore, doubt whether balancing really works and believe that it may actually increase the threat.

4.1 A Threat?

But what makes a state a threat? Walt distinguishes four different sources of threat (Walt 1990, pp. 21–26):

- Aggregate power means "a state's total resources" (Walt 1990, p. 22); the greater the aggregate power, the greater the threat a state can pose.

- Geographic proximity refers to the distance that lies between the potential competitors; the greater the distance, the more limited "the ability to project power" (Walt 1990, p. 23), and the more limited the potential threat.

- Offensive power refers to the size of "offensive capabilities" (Walt 1990, p. 24); the greater the offensive power, the greater the threat a state can pose. Offensive power is closely related to both aggregate power and geographic proximity.

- Aggressive intentions refer to how states perceive a potential enemy (Walt 1990, pp. 25–26).

We assume that neither aggregate power, nor geographic proximity, nor offensive power is decisive for constituting a threat. Along these lines, Thomas Schelling suggests that "[T]here is not much that nuclear weapons can do that cannot be done with an ice pick" (Schelling 2008, p. 19). It is not the availability of weapons but rather the intent that constitutes a threat:

> With a combination of bombing and blockade, eventually invasion, and if necessary the deliberate spread of disease, the United States could probably have exterminated the population of the Japanese islands without nuclear weapons. It would have been a gruesome, expensive, and mortifying campaign [...] (Schelling 2008, p. 19).

During the Cold War, the nuclear weapons of the US, GB or France were not threatening to Germany despite the tremendous supremacy of the US alone in terms of aggregate and offensive power (given the vast amount of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), the remoteness between the US and Germany was of no importance). The image Germany had/has of the US and the neighbors GB and France was, and still is decisive: Germany neither perceives the US as aggressive nor as hostile. Therefore they are not a threat.

Thazha V. Paul provides and analogous example with the Kosovo War led by NATO and headed by the US. Russia and China practiced extensive soft balancing behavior[8] that should have ultimately culminated in a Russian-Chinese-Indian Strikingly, this alliance finally failed to materialize because "the principal powers began to perceive the likelihood of 'potential

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[8] Russia and China soft-balanced against the US-led NATO war: "Moscow suspended its participation in the Russia-NATO Founding Act and the Partnership for Peace Program; it withdrew its military mission from Brussels and suspended talks on setting up a NATO information office in Moscow; it attempted to improve its military ties with CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States; the authors] allies; and it conducted joint military exercises with Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan" (Paul 2005, p. 61). And China, after "the mistaken U.S. bombing of China's embassy in Belgrade on May 8, Beijing cut off all military exchanges and human rights dialogues with the United States and stepped up its strategic collaboration with Moscow, including the activation of a hotline" (Paul 2005, p. 63).

American military intervention in their internal wars of secession in Kashmir, Chechnya and Xinjiang' as extremely low" (Paul 2005, p. 63). Despite the tremendous military power of the US, Russia and China perceived the US as non-threatening. Therefore, we assume that the perception of a state's intentions as aggressive is decisive for that state being (perceived as) a threat.

4.2   The Cuban Missile Crisis or balancing at the brink of war

At this point, one may wonder why balancing a state perceived as a threat would be counterproductive. The Cuban Missile Crisis, which we believe is symptomatic of a fundamental security policy problem, is as a textbook example.

Three reasons can be identified for Nikita Khrushchev's decision to station nuclear missiles in Cuba, which all can be described as efforts to balance. The first was the need to protect Cuba from renewed US aggression. The second was the feeling of strategic vulnerability. The third was the need to repay in kind. On the other hand, John F. Kennedy's motivation for the US-policy concerning both post-Batista Cuba and the Soviet Union can equally be described as balancing.

Since the successful revolution and expulsion of the dictator, Fulgencio Batista in January 1959, the regime of Fidel Castro had been confronted with a number of US attempts to change the system or, more precisely, to bring about a counter-revolution in Cuba. This provides some clear examples for hard-balancing behaviour (Bock 2013, pp. 84–85). The first, on April 17th, 1961, was an attempt by Cuban exiles with US support to overthrow Castro. But the invasion failed, and Kennedy was humiliated. Between November 1961 and February 1963, the CIA, via numerous covert

operations under Operation Mongoose repeatedly tried to destabilize the regime in Havana and kill Castro. At the same time, the US held off a series of large-scale maneuvers which—albeit poorly disguised—constituted preparations for a possible invasion of Cuba (Lebow and Stein 1994, p. 30).

However, Khrushchev did not only see himself challenged in Cuba; although he did make an honest effort to generate the feeling of Soviet superiority in the US after the successful Sputnik Mission of October 4th, 1957, the US was indeed superior to the Soviet Union—both in terms of number as well as the technical maturity of nuclear ICBMs. This was not unknown to Khrushchev. In response to the increasingly bellicose rhetoric of Khrushchev—from the perspective of the US—which, in October 1961, had caused near-catastrophe at Checkpoint Charlie in divided Berlin, on October 21st 1961, Kennedy allowed Deputy Secretary of Defence, Roswell L. Gilpatric, to publicly declare the military superiority of the US. While Kennedy saw the appeasement as a means of moderation, Khrushchev took it as an open threat. Gilpatric's declaration showed the Soviet Union that its nuclear arsenal was no longer a credible deterrent for the US. For Khrushchev, the possibility of a US first strike must have inevitably appeared as a realistic option—and the missiles in Cuba as a necessary means of self-defence (Bock 2013, pp. 85–86).

Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba, which could have reached and destroyed Washington without problem, were, from the perspective of the US, an unprecedented provocation. The missiles were presumably a provocation, but they were certainly not unprecedented because, in 1959, the US had begun to install nuclear missiles in several NATO partner states. First, medium-range Thor missiles with a maximum range of 5.500 kilometres were stationed in the UK. Medium-range Jupiter missiles with a

range of more than 2 000 kilometres were then stationed in Italy. In April 1961, Jupiter missiles were additionally stationed in Turkey. This decision of the Eisenhower administration was a direct response to the US's fear of the Soviet Union's strategic superiority, which was provoked by the Sputnik. Therefore, for the US, these missiles were merely a defensive means of deterrence. Khrushchev, however, perceived it differently. For him, these missiles—especially the Jupiter missiles stationed in Turkey—were a threat. On one hand, they could have easily reached and destroyed the Soviet capital. On the other hand, and probably more important for questioning the value of these weapons, the "Jupiter" missiles were extremely vulnerable; even with conventional weapons, they would not have survived a Soviet attack. Consequently, the Soviet Union considered them to be offensive weapons, even though they were meant to have a purely defensive function—to deter a possible Soviet attack on Europe and the US (Bock 2013, pp. 86–87). The efforts of Khrushev and Kennedy to balance against the threats perceived from the opposing side led the world to the brink of nuclear war:

> At the time [of the Cuban Missile Crisis; the Authors], John F. Kennedy estimated the likelihood of war to be 'somewhere between one out of three and even'. Nikita Khrushchev was equally pessimistic. A week after the crisis, he told newsmen in Moscow that 'we were on the edge of the precipice of nuclear war. Both sides were ready to go (Lebow and Stein 1994, p. 5).

The problem here was that any action that the US or the Soviet Union took in order to increase its particular security was been perceived by the other as a reinforcement of its particular threat perception, which only caused more rigorous countermeasures. This made the security situation for both sides

even more precarious. John Herz described a mutually reinforcing process, as a security dilemma (Herz 1950, p. 157). This dilemma is highly dependent on the perceived intentions of the potential adversary.

An explanation for this "perception problem" is offered by Richards J. Heuer, who describes perception as "an active rather than a passive process; it constructs rather than records 'reality'" (Heuer 1999, p. 7). This process, in which people construct their own version of reality is "strongly influenced by their past experience, education, cultural values, and role requirements, as well as by the stimuli recorded by their receptor organs" (Heuer 1999, p. 7). Figure 4 is a simple example to demonstrate the influence of expectations on our perceptions. Looking at the three phrases, what did you read?

Fig.4: (Mis)Perception according to Heuer

(Heuer 1998, 8)

In each of the phrases, the article is written twice. That is commonly overlooked because perception is influenced by our expectations about how these phrases are grammatically correctly written (Heuer 1999, 8 Fn. 20). This example demonstrates one of the most fundamental principles concerning perception: "We tend to perceive what we expect to perceive" (Heuer 1999, p. 8).

Therefore, with respect to the policy against a perceived threat, it is irrelevant whether the state (or alliance) under suspicion really plans to attack the US (as the Kennedy administration wrongly apprehended during the Cuban Missile Crisis) or just wants to satisfy a need for security. Ultimately decisive is how the relevant key players perceive and judge the intentions of the threatening state (or alliance); a perception which is strongly influenced (not to say: determined) by an image already formed. This can be considered a vicious cycle.[9] The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the image influences the perception and the perception fosters the image. This dynamic process is described in the following section.

4.3 How Balancing backfires

How this dynamic process may work in international politics can be illustrated by the crisis over Iran's nuclear program.

Fig. 5: Implementing a policy
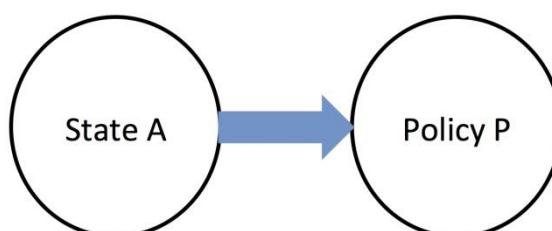
(own graphic)

State A (e.g., Iran) implements a policy P (buying clandestinely uranium centrifuges) (Figure 5). How is policy P perceived by state B (e.g., the USA or Israel)? They may perceive the clandestine purchase of centrifuges as clear and convincing evidence for an Iranian nuclear program i.e., as

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[9] Also known as the Thomas theorem: "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas 1928, p. 572).

a threat. Given the particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli Iranian rhetoric and the proximity of Israel to Iran, Jerusalem will presumably perceive the possibility of an Iranian nuclear weapons program as a greater threat than the US (Figure 6).
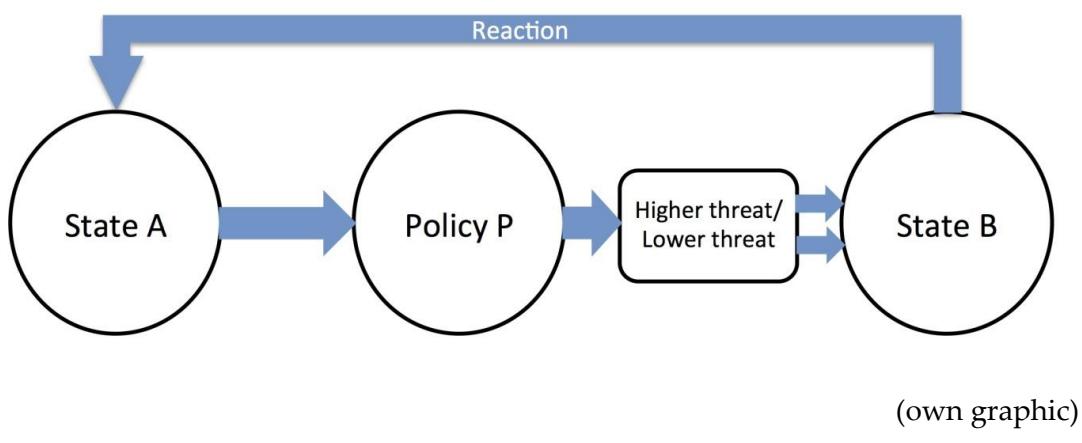
Fig. 6: Perceiving a policy
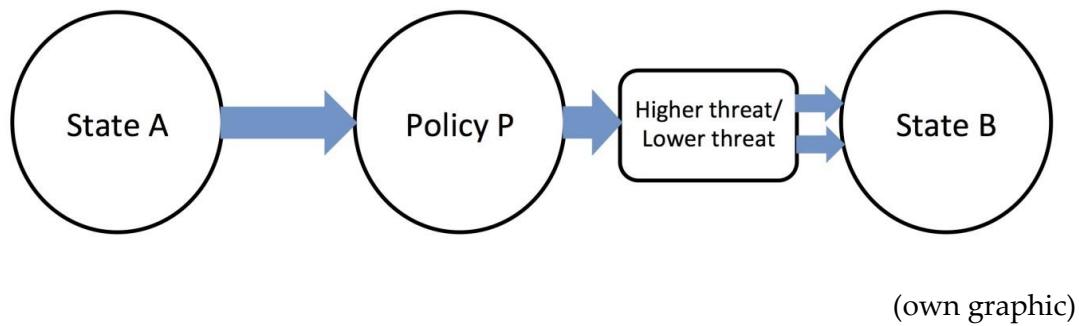
(own graphic)

The way state B (in our case: the US and Israel) will react (Figure 7) depends largely (if not exclusively) on the perception of the intentions underlying this policy P i.e., the intentions that state A (here: Iran) is assumed to have.

Fig. 7: How states react

(own graphic)

The perception of the intentions underlying this policy P is strongly influenced (not to mention determined) by an image already formed: Iran is aggressive, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli. The image of a state as aggressive and the perception of its intentions as aggressive are mutually reinforcing: the

image of Iran as aggressive, anti-Semitic, and anti-Israeli influences the perception of policy P as aggressive and the perception of policy P as aggressive conversely fosters the image of Iran as aggressive, anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli (Figure 8).

Therefore, with respect to the policy on Iran, it is irrelevant whether Teheran actually seeks the bomb or merely control the nuclear fuel cycle.

Fig. 8: Images influence perceptions
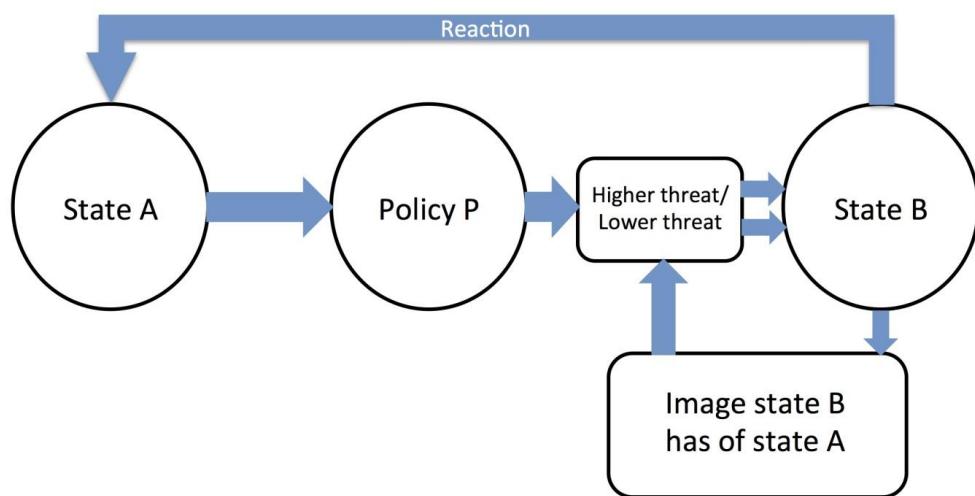
(own graphic)

Balancing the perceived Iranian threat (i.e., the perceived aggressive and particularly anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli Iranian intentions) tends to backfire. Balancing aims to weaken Iran, but to weaken Iran means to threaten it. This entails convincing the leaders in Teheran that a nuclear weapons program is a necessary means of deterrence and self-defense (Bock 2012; Bock 2013).

Assuming the correctness of our reasoning, balancing against Iran will backfire (Figure 9). It will enhance (or, in the worst case, even create) rather than reduce the threat of a nuclear armed Iran by reinforcing the policy that initiated the balancing behavior in the first place. This means that the dy-

namic process just described also works the other way (Bock 2013, pp. 82–83; Blight et al. 2012, pp. 25–54).

Fig. 9: How balancing backfires
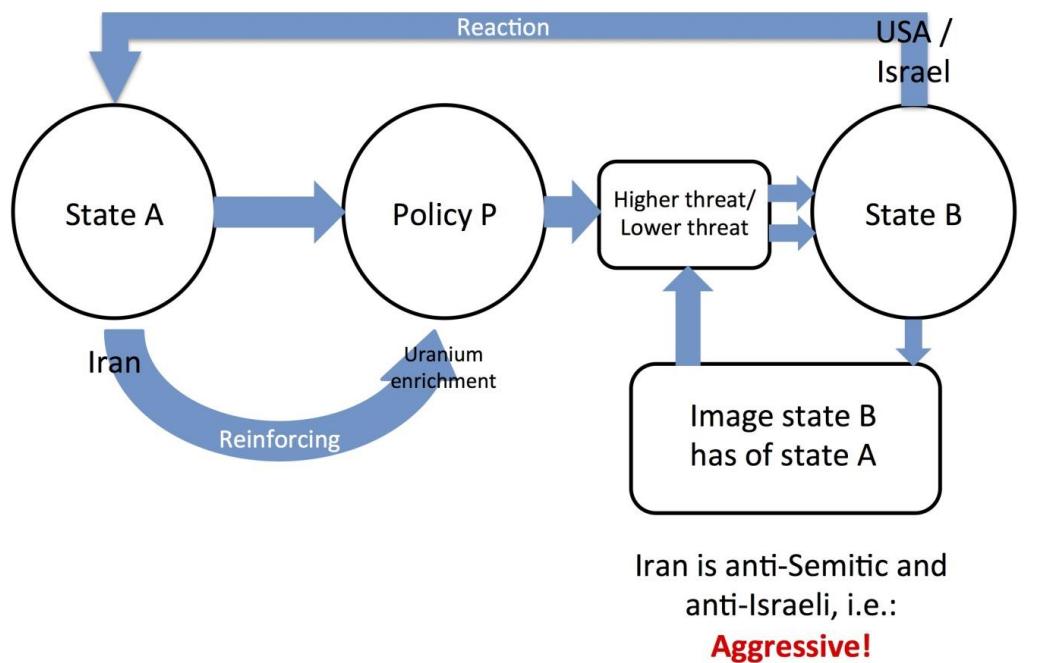
(own graphic)

By changing state A and B, you get the same self-reinforcing vicious cycle with Iran feeling threatened and under pressure to react. From Iran's perspective, adherence to a nuclear weapons program would then be quite rational i.e., a security measure to reduce the vulnerability of the country and a safeguard for the regime against external attempts to bring about a regime change. At the same time, however, it leads Iran, Israel, and the US to the brink of war. And this will make both sides feel even more threatened and less secure.

Provided that our hypotheses are valid, an alternative approach to react to threats will be needed.

5 Outlook – an alternative approach to cope with Iran?

Balancing Iran in the current nuclear crisis will backfire. But how will a reaction to the Iranian threat seem? Actually, there is no established alternative to balancing in the repertoire of reactions to external threat. Nevertheless, the Iran crisis may offer some insight into finding an alternative approach to coping with threats.

Looking at the history of the Iran crisis, we find that this conflict involves more than the nuclear program (Bock 2013, pp. 88–90). Therefore, the underlying problem will be to restore the confidence that was destroyed on both sides in the last decades. In fact, we believe that there is no alternative to de-escalation if one wants to sustainably defuse the conflict with Iran.

In order to defuse the conflict, one side must take the first step towards de-escalation—and make concessions. This can only be the US. The US can reach out to Tehran without endangering its security because even a nuclear-armed Iran represents no significant threat to the US. Conversely, the US is the greatest threat to the regime in Tehran (Bock 2013, pp. 88–92). Any concessions to Washington would therefore be interpreted as a sign of weakness and increase Tehran's sense of insecurity. Therefore, this step is hardly to be expected.

The first step towards de-escalation has to be a moderate rhetoric against Iran. A different rhetoric, which doesn't threaten Tehran with military strikes and perceived systems changes, could reduce the sense of threat on the part of Iran and thus contribute to a détente.

Second, the US and Europe must deal with the reality of the Iranian theocracy and accept Ali Khamenei, the leader of the Iranian Revolution, as

an interlocutor. Finally, in cases of doubt, it is Khamenei who will make decisions regarding the realignment of Iranian security policy. Thus, contacts with religious leaders of Iran are prerequisite to increasing the feeling of security on the part of US and its allies.

Third and finally, a sustainable solution to the nuclear dispute must aim to sustainably change the threat perception on the side of Tehran (Jones 1998, p. 39). The focus is once again on the US. As it did against North Korea (Department Of State. The Office of Electronic Information 2005) and probably also against Muammar al-Gaddafi's Libya, Washington must present Tehran with a credible offer of regime security. In 2003, Tripoli abandoned its mass destruction program (Litwak 2007, pp. 169–70), and in 2005, Pyongyang had at least contractually obliged to dismantling its plutonium reactor (which could not, however, prevent the nuclear test in 2006).

The road map established by the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami in 2003 could serve as the basis for the offer to Tehran (Bock 2012, p. 4; 2013). It addresses the essential concerns of both sides: Iran would accept the two-state solution in the Israel-Palestine conflict, cease support for militant Palestinian groups, and disclose its nuclear program. In return, Iran would receive explicit security guarantees from the US and the assurance that Iran's sovereign rights to civilian use of nuclear energy would remain untouched.

But could this provide more security? If Tehran believes the US guarantee to be credible, this would alter its perception of the importance of the nuclear program—given that the nuclear program itself would make the security guarantee of the US impossible. Consequently, the nuclear program would present a perceived threat to the Iranian security; the pursuit of atom-

ic weapons would no longer be a rational means of self-defense (Bock 2013, pp. 94–97).

The possible measures described all focus on the underlying causes of the perceived crisis with Iran and try to enhance the security of all involved actors (i.e., Iran, Israel, and the USA) without implementing the core tenet of all balancing strategies (as defined above): to weaken the threatening state. This could be the starting point in the search towards a new understanding of security.

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