

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE RELEVANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER  
DOCTRINE IN THE EXTANT INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Power as we know is the currency of international politics the more a state has, the more it seeks. Hence, an implicit understanding among the rulers of great powers that the perpetuation of the existing power distribution benefits them mutually. Simply stated, the term “balance of power” has several thousand possible meaning all hinging on the fact of ‘equilibrium’ of the type represented by a pair of scale. When the weights in the scales are equal, the result is the balance. It is therefore necessary to maintain peace and prevent war, hence states seek to achieve their national interest by relating together and the extent of this relationship can be measured by theoretical applications. Thus the place of theory in international relations can’t be underestimated, this is because they provide us with the bricks with which we construct our buildings in the international system. Without theory, international relations would have been reduced to super stories. Herein lies the task of this work which seeks to examine the relevance of the balance of power doctrine (theory) in the extant international system.*

**PREAMBLE**

Ever since Machiavelli produced his prince (1513), and Hobbes his leviathan (1651), the concept of ‘power’ has become the foundational touchstone of national as well as international politics. Hence, it is frankly affirmed by the protagonists of the ‘power school’ like F.L. Schuman, H.J. Morgenthau and G.F. Kennan that what energy is to physics, or wealth is to economics, so power is to politics. So essential is the idea of power that we, in the words of Max Lerner, cannot live without it in spite of the fact that, to live by it becomes brutal and sterile. (David Kin 1995. 418) whether it is the municipal domain or international sphere, whether it is a religious crusade or a humanitarian campaign, whether it is a question of world peace or global confrontation, whether

it is a matter relating to colonial nations that are united in their dependence, the use of power is important to achieve policy goals. (Crabb 1968:28). This work adopts descriptive analytical method using secondary data from textbooks, journals and other relevant publications.

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The nature of the contemporary international system has seriously called into question the relevance of balance of power as a means of managing power relationship among states especially at a time when country like United State of America is growing beyond the reach of other countries in terms of nuclear power accumulation making it to be ahead of others naturally.

Although, historically it has succeeded in preventing or delaying some wars but it has equally failed to prevent many wars as well. As it did not prevent Japan from annexing large part of China in 1930s, neither did it prevent United States from invading Iraq after September 11, nor was it effective in stopping world powers like Russia and US from pursuing their vested interest in Syria, which consequently led to over six years of civil war and proliferation of refugees across Europe, Asia and some part of Africa. All these and many more constitute major worry to keen observers of international system.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Admittedly, the system might have contributed to long periods of peace in the international system, the vital questions now is;

(i) Whether the doctrine is still relevant in contemporary time?

(ii) Are the conditions that facilitated its operation still  
present in today's world?

### **OBJECTIVE**

While the general objective of this work stands at examining the relevance of balance of power doctrine in the extant international system, the specific objective however remains;

- (i) To know the conditions or assumptions that facilitated the doctrine in the past.
- (ii) Also to know whether they are relevant or responsible for its success or failure in contemporary time.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This work adopts the Realist theory as its theoretical guide.

The work of early scholars like Thucydides, Machiavelli and Morgenthau led to the offshoot of this theory.

The general assumption underlining the theory maintained that states are like human being in the international system and they are out there to maximize their interest at the expense of other nations. Therefore, since the first law of nature is self-preservation, every country tries to exert its relevance in the international system and this is done and measured in terms of power a country possesses. This explains the reason why states quest for more, even though in real term, the power is not distributed equally (Morgenthau and Thompson, 1950). The power possessed by the United States for instance is not in any way commensurate to any country in the world, thus other countries of the world had chosen to trek the realist part by forming alliance that will serve as balancer to check it from excessively using its power.

However, it is undeniable that this endless acquisition of power will naturally cause competition for scarce resources thus precipitating conflict. A situation like this, if not regulated could lead to misuse of power by one country over the other which will have adverse effect on human race in the long run.

Meanwhile, the need to check these excesses by and among states necessitated the Balance of Power Equilibrium. The central message here is that states are only being realistic in response to true situations in the international environment which is sometimes characterized by aggression, thence, the need for a balancer.

## **CONCEPTUAL DISCOURSE**

The term ‘balance of power’ has been in use from ancient times in the spheres of national and international politics. It was used by the Greeks in respect of relations among the majority-states of that time. In modern times it was frequently used by the statesmen of Britain, France, Austria-Hungary, Spain, and Russia. The early American leaders used it in respect of their own domestic political system based on the doctrine of ‘separation of powers and checks and balances’ as well as in the relations of their country with those of the Western hemisphere. It remained the hallmark of European diplomacy for more than a hundred years after the Vienna settlement of 1815 (Pollard, 1962:442-477). Britain pursued it till the outbreak of the Second Great War in 1939. Even in the period following the Second World War, it was used in relation to the ‘balance of terror’ as well in the context of a situation mistakenly identified with the ‘power vacuum area.

In each case, however, this term refers to something about the relative strength of the individuals, groups, states and the like for the purpose of maintaining a state of equilibrium conducive to the environment of peace as required by the interest of the super-actor (or actors) holding the ‘balance’ in its (or their) hands. Thus, according to a great scholar of the subject of world politics, it “refers to an actual state of affairs in which power is distributed among several nations with approximate equality ( Morgenthau 1973:155). Out rightly rejecting the view that the term ‘balance of power’ has “so many meanings and it is virtually meaningless, we may go ahead with this affirmation that, despite not being a precise and easily measurable concept, we cannot discard it for the reason that it is very close to the core of international politics having these prerequisites (Coulombis and Wolfe 1978:207).

## **POSTULATIONS OF BALANCE OF POWER THEORY**

- a. There must be a multiplicity of sovereign political actors,
- b. Absence of single, centralized, legitimate and strong authority over these sovereign actors;

- c. Relatively unequal distribution of status, wealth, size (i.e. power) among the political actors that make up the system permitting differentiation of state into at least three categories; great powers, intermediate powers and smaller nation-state;
- d. Conscious but uncontrolled competition and conflict among sovereign political actors for what are perceived as scarce world resources and values; and
- e. An implicit understanding among the rulers of great powers that the perpetuation of the existing power distribution benefits them mutually (See, Ojo and Sesay, 2011).

Simply stated, the term ‘balance of power’ has ‘several thousand possible meanings’ all hinging on the fact of ‘equilibrium’ of the type represented by a pair of scales. When the weights in the scales are equal, the result is the balance

## **CHARACTERISTICS**

Irrespective of the fact that the term ‘balance of power’ has diverse and even mutually exclusive connotations, Palmer and Perkins 1942:24-45 present a synthesized view by throwing light on its following essential characteristics.

1. As the term itself suggests equilibrium or balance, almost the only certain thing about history is that it is subject to constant, ceaseless change, shifting political patterns and power relationship in short, to disequilibrium.
2. It is established by the active intervention of man. The states cannot afford to wait until it happens, they may go to war to preserve the balance. Thus, it is a case of diplomatic contrivance, not a matter of historical causation.
3. Though balance of power desires a status quo to be maintained, a policy which regards the forces making for change is doomed to eventual failure. To be effective, a balance of power policy must be changing and dynamic.
4. A real balance of power can seldom exist, and it probably would not be recognized if it did exist as such. The only real test, presumably, is that of war, and resorting to war not only upsets the balance but also creates the very conditions which a balance of power policy is supposedly designed to prevent.

5. It offers both a subjective and an objective approach. The state of balance is coextensive with the interest of the country. Hence, nations which play the balance of power game seek not a balance, but an imbalance in their favour.
6. The balance of power seems to be a policy that is suitable neither for democracies nor for dictatorships. Unless geographical, political, military and other considerations are peculiarly favorable, a democracy is a reluctant player and a poor leader in the balance of power polity only in periods of crisis. On the other hand a dictatorship is usually interested in dominating the continent in establishing rules to suit its own convenience and in gathering in all the rewards.
7. The balance of power game is obviously one for the great states of the world. Although small or smaller states are vitally concerned in the outcome, they are more often victims, or at best spectators, rather than players.

#### **THE RELEVANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER THEORY: CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The relevance of balance of power can be traced to European history, that is the principles of the balance of power is as old as the Greeks; it was demolished first by the imperialistic endeavour of Alexander the great and then of the Roman empires which entailed the end of this principle (Taylor, 1954). It witnessed no place during the middle ages when the entire Christendom was under the final authority of the pope. It, however, witnessed its revival in a very vigorous form in the modern period. Machiavelli referred to balance of power as one of devices that a ruler must resort to for implementing the goal of a strong and united State. Thereafter, it became a very important principle of the statement at the hands of Roman, Spanish, French, English, Russian and the Turks in order to prevent Charles V of the Hapsburg from stabilizing and expanding his empire. These are the first modern examples on a grand scale of the balance of power operating between an alliance and one nation intent upon establishing a universal monarchy. (Morgenthau and Thompson, 1950).

The thirty years war came to an end in 1648 and then the peace of Westphalia firmly established the modern nation-state system. It led to the resurgence of the corporate mentality

of the various autocracies ruling the European countries. Now the balance of power began to play a greater role on an unprecedented scale. The statesmen of Britain and the Netherlands openly opposed the plans of French king Louis XIV (1643-1715) who wanted to upset the balance by making France as the most powerful empire of Europe. Then, the treaty of Utrecht (1713) not only closed the matter of Spanish succession (in which a coalition led by Britain had defeated France) expressly stated that its provision for the division of the Spanish inheritance between the Bourbons and the Hapsburgs were made a 'conservatism' in European equilibrium. Thenceforth, this expression was repeated in a good number of bilateral and multilateral treaties culminating in the treaty relating to the partition of Poland in 1772. Thus, the period (1713-72) "has been acclaimed as the golden age of the balance of power in theory as well as in practice. (Palmer and Perkin 1942: 382 -383).

A significant change in this direction occurred after the French revolution of 1789. Henceforth nationalism witnessed its powerful development. Before this, the ruling circles of the major European powers found much more in common with one another than with their own people. It resulted in the era of political and economic homogeneity to a considerable extent. But the French Revolution intensified the wave of nationalism that assumed aggressive overtones under Napoleon Bonaparte to meet the menace of French imperialism, victory at the total defeat of France in 1814. The congress of Vienna (1814-15) sought to maintain a new balance of power through the instrumentality of the concert of Europe based on the principles of legitimacy and, as far as possible, the preservation of the status quo. Prince Metternich of Austria-Hungary and Czar Alexander of Russia played a leading part in the Vienna settlement. Thus "a new era of the balance of power was structured" (Coulombia and Wolfe, 1978).

The nineteenth century may then, be called the second golden age of the classical balance of power. Now the Balkan area engaged the attention of leading statesmen of Europe. Alarmed at the growing incapacity of Turkey and the rising influence of Russia in the Balkan Peninsula, three countries (Britain, Russia and Austria-Hungary) banded together in 1854 so as to preserve the Ottoman Empire for the sake of maintaining the balance of power. For this

sake, Britain involved herself in the Crimean War. Later, the Berlin congress of 1878 forced Russia to revise the Treaty of San Stefano that had been imposed by it on the defeated Turkey. This action of the then major European powers “must be explained as another attempt to prevent a great power from gaining a position of dominance in the Balkan cockpit.”

Situation changed significantly when two rival triple alliances came to have their existence in the early phase of the present century. The triple entente (France, Britain and Russia) and triple alliance (Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary) stood like two armed camps. Deterioration of situation could not be checked as there was no ‘balancer’ in the field. Britain had changed its role to become a partner of the triple alliance. The first world war occurred. After the war, however, Britain once again, tried to assume the role of a balancer. She took every possible care to keep French power in check by the provisions of the treaty of Versailles. More than this, she supported the case of German resurgence so much so that after 1930 the weight of appeasement. The Second World War entailed the end of the classical model of balance of power with the final exit of Britain as the traditional balancer and the emergence of bipolar diplomacy in an environment of cold war (Waltz, 2000).

It is widely, though not correctly believed that the history of the balance of power ends with the termination of second Great War in 1945. Facts, however, suggest that while the classical model prevailing since the sixteenth century has gone forever, it has assumed a new form of its own in the age of bipolar and multi-polar diplomacy. The two super-powers are engaged in increasing their nuclear power more and more so as to maintain a balance interest. The military blocs under the leadership of the US and the USSR are but exercise in the same direction. A new type of balance has come to occur as a definite consequence of mutual fear. No super-power tries to escalate the theatre of confrontation in any part of the world like Berlin, Vietnam, Korea, Cuba, Palestine etc, great statesmen of the countries possessing nuclear and thermo-nuclear weapons like Nixon, Kissinger, Shultz, Brezhnev, Kosygin and Gromyko “are witnessing a new global attempt to restore the classical balance of power system, albeit somewhat modified, to accommodate twentieth-century development. (Coulombis and Wolf quoted in J.C. Johari: 1985:253).



### **THE RELEVANCE OF BALANCE OF POWER: CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE**

It is evident from the previous analysis that peace is most in jeopardy when power is rather evenly balanced and war less likely when there is a preponderant power. Certainly both major world wars of the century came at a time when the sides appeared to be of nearly equal strength. Moreover, now that terror is balanced, there is more fear of war in the United States and probably more in the non-communist nations than was the case when the power mobilized potential of the United States seemed, clearly to be superior to that of the Soviet Union.

The Relevance of balance of power in the contemporary world can also be view from the perspective of collective security, a good example is when countries of Europe and the United states of America came together to fight the aggression of Adolf Hitler in the 2<sup>nd</sup> world war, thereby putting an end to his hegemony as far as geo-politics is concern. Who knows, if the other power blocs had been unable to stop him, then the whole world would be under his feet thus making him become an absolute dictator.

The existence of the Security Council in the United Nations no doubt is another product of the doctrine of balance of power. By the creation of the Security Council that consist of countries from Europe, Asia and America, it's aimed at reducing the concentration of power in the hand of a single country and thus creating room for collective decision making. Further attempt is equally made by the UN to expand the Security Council in order to give other continent like Africa as sense of belonging, and consequently bringing more balances in the power (equilibrium).

Although, that does not mean that a country in Africa e.g Nigeria will be equated with super powers like USA for now, but their presence in the Security Council will have more influence in world politics especially when it comes to issues that concern Africa.

The balance of power theory assumes that one of the countries should be a giant who would provide leadership and deploy resources for the overall good of the systems, though carrying other countries along. This explain the reason why the USA will like to seek the support of Britain and Japan in invading Iraq and that of China in stopping Iran from advancing her nuclear

programme, not that the USA can't do that alone. It is just in exercise of equilibrium of power in the international system. The same thing applies to Nigeria within the ECOWAS sub-region seeking the opinion of Senegal and Ghana over peacemaking in Sierra-Leone and Liberia.

### **CRITICISM**

The principle of the balance of power and its practice have been criticized for being uncertain, unreal and inadequate to the preservation of peace and security in the international sphere for these reasons;

1. It affords no quantitative criterion to judge the respective strength of a state, nor does it provide suitable measures to understand or recognize the real intents of other states.
2. It contradicts the principles of reality since it aims at preventing the occurrence of a war. It also leads to the procreation of those conditions that eventually push things to that end. War is an evil, but sometimes it becomes a necessity and, as such, its prevention becomes disastrous.
3. It proves exceedingly difficult to reconcile the principle of the balance of power with peaceful and orderly change in the international environment. Fay cited in Crabb(1988) says that it aims "primarily to preserve peace and the status quo. Yet nations are never almost static; some are growing others declining. Equilibrium between them is, therefore unstable." In the post-war period, how would the successful pursuit of the balance of power have allowed for the independence of the Arab states? Could France have simultaneously pursued the balance of power and relinquished its former position of influence and dominance in North Africa? Could Britain at the same time adhere to the idea of the balance of power and grant independence to one Africa country after another? Could both the United States and the Soviet Union endorse the organizations of Africa Unity, when officials in both countries know that the organization may in time greatly add to Africa's power in world affairs? This may be treated as the 'final limitation' inherent in the idea of the balance of power and may be in some respect its 'gravest defect.' (Crabb, 1968).

4. The observance of the principle of balance of power leaves an impression that it is like a half-way house between order and chaos in the world, the former referring to a pervasive authority powerful enough to impose a given order of things upon various political actors and the latter implying political actors restrained only by the law of the woods.
5. Above all, the balance of power is an inadequate remedy for the reason that it cannot ensure permanent peace on this earth. It is merely a temporary palliative. Sooner or later, wars break out to destroy the old and establish the new balance of power.

For these pertinent reasons, the principle of the balance of power has not been appreciated as a very effective and perfect instrument to offset the fears of war. A great writer on geopolitics like N. John Spykman observes: It is easy to balance mechanical forces, because they can be measured but there is no measuring stick for political power.

## **CONCLUSION**

The place of theory in international relations can't be over looked, this is because they provide us with the bricks with which we construct our buildings in the international system. Without theories international relations would have been reduced to stories. The many problems of the world cannot be solved by unilateral state actions nor can they be alleviated except the sovereign nation states of the world are able to cooperate together in their own best interest there by making the future to hold promises for mankind.

Power as we know is the currency of international politics the more a state has, the more it desires. It is however, recommended that, the principles of balance of power should further exercise a moral impact by ensuring that, the states should refrain from doing anything to the common detriment and incase one does, the other should forestall or countervail it for common benefit.

States should also be bound and organized in such a way that, an act of aggression cannot succeed unless it is so moderated and directed that the prevailing opinion of the powers approve it. The most that can be said in favour of the doctrine of balance of power is that "it sets rational limits to expansionism"

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