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**Adam P. Liff.** "Wither the Balancers? The Case for a Methodological Reset." *Security Studies* 25:3 (July 2016): 420-459. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195624>.

**Ryan D. Griffiths.** "States, Nations, and Territorial Stability: Why Chinese Hegemony Would Be Better for International Order." *Security Studies* 25:3 (July 2016): 519-545. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2016.1195628>.

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**A**dam Liff's "Whither the Balancers? The Case for a Methodological Reset" and Ryan Griffith's "States, Nations, and Territorial Stability: Why Chinese Hegemony Would Be Better for International Order" seek to re-examine several foundational concepts in international relations scholarship. Liff argues for a more conceptually rigorous and standardized specification of balancing that sufficiently accounts for contemporary state behavior. He does so considering reactions to China by what he terms "secondary states" in East Asia and taking on the body of literature that claims an absence of regional balancing in the wake of China's rise. Griffiths aims to tackle the issues of self-determination and order, which are fundamental to the existing international system and the study of international politics. He proposes that a globally dominant China that continues to insist on its strongly-held preference for territorial integrity is likely to result in a decline in violence from secessionist movements.

That both pieces draw their key insights from examining evidence from East Asia reinforces the promise of theoretical innovation that can come from carefully exploring evidence from a greater range of cases, especially those that lie outside Europe and North America. Given an intellectual history rooted in European and North

American experiences of the World Wars and the Cold War, such perspectives remain highly influential, if not predominant, in informing critical concepts and ideas in international relations. Students of politics can benefit from greater appreciation for the degree to which it is possible to generalize common concepts across time and space. Sensitivity to the outer bounds of popular methods and theoretical explanations can as well provide more analytical rigor and precision. This despite the very significant contributions of the existing scholarship on the understanding of international relations.

### *Wither Balancing?*

Liff takes issue with the claims that there is an absence of balancing in the wake of China's rise, particularly Beijing's growing and increasingly apparent pushiness toward other regional governments. He examines the cases of Australia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam and argues that the seeming lack of balancing toward China in the Asia-Pacific comes less from behavior or policy and more from the conceptual under-specification of what balancing entails. Once recast more carefully, these governments appear to be unambiguously balancing what they see as the threats associated with a rising China, according to Liff. He offers the helpful reminder that not only is there substantive variation among balancing strategies, but also a need for greater conceptual clarity and standardization in operationalization. If nothing else such efforts help scholars avoid talking past each other, which is itself an important step for advancing knowledge.

To make his point about the need for more careful approaches to understand balancing and dynamics associated with the phenomenon, Liff traces the intellectual history of balancing and the various applications of balancing in the international relations literature. By doing so, he illustrates how scholars have been at best inconsistent and, worse, overly vague about the sorts of actions they classify as balancing strategies. These include the basket of ideas that seemed to fall under balancing behavior, including internal and external balancing and, most problematically, soft-balancing. Shifting the empirical focus of research to the maritime domain of East Asia also means that key ideas and measures developed to understand balancing on Continental Europe are inadequate and require updating, according to Liff. Likewise, technological developments mean that contemporary efforts at balancing may be far subtler and demonstrate more nuance than before.

A consequence of this conceptual under-specification is an unclear operationalization of balancing in international relations scholarship that makes it easy for work to speak past, rather than engage, other writing on the same terms. Scholars generally seem to have assumed that everyone else understood and agreed with what they meant whenever they discussed balancing, even though this may not be the case. This despite the centrality of balancing in security studies, and the fact that under-specification and insufficient operationalisation is a known issue that academic scholarship consistently warns researchers about. A long debate over relative military capabilities in Europe that occurred over the spring and summer 1988 issues of *International Security* (12:4 and 13:1) is a case in point. Different approaches to specification and operationalization led to significantly variation in conclusions about the expected outcome of an armed conflict between NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

In spite of the good sense it makes, the article could ironically benefit from better specification itself, albeit in demonstrating what non-balancing behavior looks like empirically. The Australia, Japan, Singapore, and Vietnam cases in the piece all present variation on balancing according to Liff. Readers can gain a stronger sense of how he delineates balancing if they can see an empirical case on non-balancing so as to be able to better distinguish the class of actions that fall under balancing from those that do not. If all state actions end

up looking like some form balancing, then why balancing stands out as a strategy becomes less evident and Liff's article risks falling slightly short of the greater conceptual clarity he desires. Doing so may not be easy to fit within an article length piece, but is important for grounding the argument Liff wishes to make.

Liff's article is a useful reminder to revisit the basic terms of academic debate from time to time. There is a real potential that researchers as well as policymakers end up talking past each other, given variations in the scope conditions surrounding various cases of interests and subtle differences in focus. Such dynamics may lie behind the conceptual stretching of balancing that troubles Liff. If Liff's suggestions find limited traction, this will likely owe less to the fundamental soundness of his ideas. Rather, ideas about balancing capture so much of the academic, policymaking, and indeed popular imagination that most people instinctively believe they know what it fully entails even if they do not. Balancing can end up meaning all things to all people. Scholars, practitioners, and others may be unwilling to go through the hassle of revisiting long-held assumptions, the attendant pitfalls of under-specification and inadequate operationalization notwithstanding. Liff's piece provides a useful and timely reminder to guard against such intellectual complacency.

### *China and Territorial Stability—Is Past Performance an Indicator of Future Return?*

If Liff is taking on efforts to understand what may be a key form of state behavior, then Griffiths is trying to consider changes to the ordering principles of world politics. He seeks to make the case that a hegemonic China will likely pave the way for greater territorial and, consequently, international stability. Griffiths contends that a key reason for the relatively frequent occurrence of conflict surrounding separatism and secession since the twentieth century is that the U.S.-led world order simultaneously enshrines self-determination and territorial integrity. These two contradictory principles, according to Griffiths, give rise to concurrent global impulses to support both groups trying to break territorial control away from governments that rule over them and efforts by these governments to maintain control. A Chinese-dominated world would, for Griffiths, unambiguously insist on territorial integrity, and reduce cause for conflict by removing backing for separatism and secession.

Claiming that the terms of world order, peace, and stability rest on the preferences of the hegemon is consistent with a longstanding position of hegemonic stability theory, its many updates and offshoots. Such ideas are reflective of work from Charles Kindleberger through Robert Gilpin and John Ikenberry, all of which draw on if not develop ideas about hegemony and order.<sup>1</sup> In this respect, Griffiths seems to be in solid company in terms of his argument and approach. However, there is one key difference between Griffiths's article and other work on hegemony and order. The article is forward looking and seeks to make an educated projection about what a Chinese-dominated world order may look like, and is consequently less historically situated than similar work examining China's role in shaping the larger political order it inhabited.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World in Depression, 1929-1939*, First Edition, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Nicola di Cosmo, *Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Victoria Tin-bor Hui, *War and State Formation in Ancient China and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); David C. Kang, *East Asia before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Morris Rossabi, *China among*

In boldly speculating about the future, Griffiths's article offers conceptual clarity at the expense of contingency. The expectation that a hegemonic China will stress territorial integrity over self-determination rests on the assumption that Chinese preferences will remain stable. There is good reason for skepticism. Major powers can change their minds about fundamental interests and even ordering principles, especially when their circumstances evolve. The United States has a long tradition of isolationism that only receded with its entry into World War II. This was despite becoming the world's preeminent economy by as early as the 1870s.<sup>3</sup> Washington eschewed supporting self-determination until the end of World War II, in spite of President Woodrow Wilson's exhortations during and after the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.

The United States is not alone in being capricious in its key preferences, particularly after gaining prominence. The Soviet Union's grand strategy evolved from promoting revolution in the capitalist world to accommodation and cooperation to confrontation and back to coexistence between the 1920s and 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Britain, whose imperial moment shares a close association with the freedom of the seas, actually began its ascendancy with strident opposition to this principle during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as it struggled over mastery of the seas with Holland.<sup>5</sup> The People's Republic of China's aspirations likewise developed from confronting capitalism in the early 1950s to seeking peaceful mutual coexistence from the mid-1950s and exporting revolution in the 1960s and 1970s before settling on its current emphasis on territorial integrity.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Where the Theoretical Rubber Hits the Empirical Road*

Going back to key assumptions and approaches from time to time is a useful exercise for any field of study, and this is a task that both Liff and Griffiths take seriously. Taking stock enable students and scholars in a field to reflect on and reassess how basic ideas that help to inform and even shape a field fare against evidence. Such processes are helpful reminders that there is an empirical world, which theories and concepts are merely trying to explain using convenient abstractions and heuristics. Theories and concepts, at least in the social sciences, are most useful in forwarding understanding if they make some version of reality more easily comprehensible and with a reasonable degree of accuracy. Even educated projections, which the Griffiths

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*Equals: The Middle Kingdom and its Neighbors, 10<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Yuan-kang Wang, *Harmony and War: Confucian Culture and Chinese Power Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Zhang Feng, *Chinese Hegemony: Grand Strategy and International Institutions in East Asian History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See for example 1870s GDP estimates from Angus Maddison, *Monitoring the World Economy, 1820-1992* (Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Peter Borschberg, *Hugo Grotius, the Portuguese, and Free Trade in the East Indies* (Singapore: NUS Press), 36, 78-105 and Monica Brito Vieira, "Mare Liberum vs. Mare Clausum: Grotius, Freitas, and Selden's Debate on Dominion over the Seas," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63:3 (July 2003): 361-377.

<sup>5</sup> See Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, *Russia and the World, 1917-1991* (London and New York: Arnold, 1998) and William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and Perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Robert G. Sutter, *Foreign Relations of the PRC* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2013).

piece represents, help to explicitly lay out the empirical expectations following from theoretical insights that subsequent work can use to evaluate the robustness of conceptual claims against the messiness of the real world.

To this reader, the Liff and Griffiths articles are essentially a part of ongoing—and highly welcome—attempts to test and refine existing concepts in international relations against a wider range of social and political contexts. Both pieces are entertaining and exciting to read. They stand in distinction to projects that seek to create nationally- or regionally-centered “schools” of thought that contrast mainstream international relations theory by emphasizing local exceptionalism. Both Liff and Griffiths show an interest in establishing a strong, empirical basis for cross-case comparison and participating in conversations with established work. The approaches that Liff and Griffiths take may prove especially helpful for developing new theoretical explanations and methodological insights. Future work that follow in a similar vein promises much excitement for international relations theory.

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