
An Unbalanced Critique of Bush

What the international relations experts get wrong

BY GERARD ALEXANDER

The Bush administration's foreign policy has come under withering attack in recent months. Critics accuse the administration of crossing the line that separates a foreign policy strong enough to secure U.S. interests from one so muscular that it provokes other countries to block us instead. The charge boils down to this: Bush is creating new enemies faster than he is deterring old ones.

If this line of criticism is correct, then many conservative assumptions about foreign policy may be dangerously flawed. Conservative hawks want to vigorously pursue U.S. security in a world of new and uncertain dangers. But they have no desire to do it so zealously that they cause a self-defeating backlash. In this, they have no better authority than George W. Bush, who said in 2000 that if "we're an arrogant nation, they'll resent us."

The problem is that it's unclear where the line is drawn. A vocal minority claims that U.S. "aggression" has provoked worldwide resentment and "blowback," including September 11 itself. But most American observers would disagree, insisting that this country is unthreatening when compared to almost all other great powers of history, which is why the United States has provoked so little animosity. Theorists of the "realist" school of international relations explain this by describing the United States as an "offshore balancer." In this view, American forces have been committed to Europe or Asia only when an aggressor threatened to dominate those regions, and only in cooperation with local allies. Because U.S. forces were clearly there not by choice and not to stay, American intervention was generally wel-

comed. Whatever the reasons for its restraint, America's behavior was unlike that of normal great powers. Others detected that difference, and responded accordingly: Whereas they "balanced" against other great powers by expanding their militaries and seeking allies, America provoked very little balancing.

This view survived well after America emerged as the sole superpower. As recently as May 2000, prominent international relations scholars met to try to explain why countries were still not balancing against the United States. Stephen Walt, a prominent realist and a dean of Harvard's Kennedy School, described this absence in a chapter of the book *America Unrivaled*:

Disagreements and policy disputes are hardly a new development in U.S. relations with its principal allies, yet there have been no significant defections [from U.S. alliances] in the ten years since the Soviet Union imploded. Russia, China, North Korea, and a few others have occasionally collaborated . . . but their efforts fall well short of formal defense arrangements. . . . [U.S.] allies may resent their dependence on the United States and complain about erratic U.S. leadership, but the old cry of "Yankee, Go Home" is strikingly absent in Europe and Asia. . . . No one is making a serious effort to forge a meaningful anti-American alliance.

Walt concluded that "balancing tendencies—while they do exist—are remarkably mild. It is possible to find them, but one has to squint pretty hard."

In the past 18 months, hawks have been bombarded with warnings that squinting is no longer needed. They are being warned that the Bush administration's policies are likely to provoke other countries to frustrate our goals rather than help us achieve them. The result would be diminished rather than enhanced U.S. security. The *New York Times* has editorialized that Bush's "lone-wolf record" and "overly aggressive stance" risk "undermining the very interests that Mr. Bush seeks to protect" by inspiring "the enmity rather than the envy of the world." This has become practically the official foreign policy

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stance of numerous intellectuals and commentators, the AFL-CIO, and the entire Democratic presidential pack.

It is also echoed by usually sober international relations scholars. The University of Chicago's Robert Pape argues that the administration's "threat to wage unilateral preventive war" crucially "changed America's long-enjoyed reputation for benign intent" and is inspiring others to balance against the United States. Stephen Walt says that Washington today is in the position of imperial Germany in the two-decade lead-up to 1914, when that country's expansionism caused "its own encirclement." Chicago's John Mearsheimer joined Walt this past winter to argue that the proposed Iraq operation was likely to "reinforce the growing perception that the United States is a bully." Each was among the nearly three dozen international relations scholars who warned in an open letter in the *New York Times* that the Iraq war would provoke "increasing anti-Americanism" worldwide.

These critics link three basic claims. The United States traditionally gained cooperation by being unthreatening. The Bush administration is departing sharply from that tradition. And this convergence with the behavior of normal great powers is causing other countries to begin balancing against us. In yet another way, history is back, except this time we are inflicting it on ourselves.

What do these critics believe is causing this seismic shift? Even before September 11, 2001, the Bush administration "unilaterally" rejected four treaties or near-agreements. It withdrew from the ABM treaty and began deploying a provocative missile defense. It expanded NATO up to Russia's borders. After September 11, it invested heavily in power-projection capabilities. Bush's 2002 *National Security Strategy* called for the United States to make "preventive" war and declared it a primary U.S. goal to prevent any other country from developing the military resources to rival us. Consistent with that doctrine, the United States invaded Iraq over the stated opposition of most governments.

Hawkish conservatives believe these policies represent no more than a robust protection of national security in the face of new threats. But that would be of small comfort if others perceive them as threatening and balance against us as a result. How do we decide who is right? The critics claim the verdict is already in, and that it favors them.

Their evidence comes in two forms. First, they showcase rising criticism of the United States as revealed in public opinion surveys, especially the ubiquitous Pew Research Center's 2002 polls con-

ducted in 44 countries. These surveys show that high and rising percentages of people in many countries have "unfavorable" views of America, believe the United States is unilateralist, and are increasingly prone to fearing the U.S. could threaten their country. In case the policy implications of these results are not clear enough, Pew analysts helpfully conclude that "the U.S.'s perceived unilateral approach to international problems and the U.S. war on terror play large roles in shaping opinion toward the U.S." Madeleine Albright—the head of the Pew global survey project—says, "I never thought the day would come when the United States would be feared by those it has neither the intention nor the cause to harm."

Second, critics say these fears of America are already being translated into balancing actions against the United States. Most concretely, many countries refused either to endorse the invasion of Iraq, vote with the United States in the U.N. Security Council, or offer military bases. France, Germany, Russia, and China cooperated in resisting Washington's designs. The creation of an alternative global "pole" to the United States is openly invoked in diplomatic maneuvering between France, Germany, and Russia. The United States has suffered other diplomatic setbacks, including in the makeup of U.N. committees. In light of such events, Chicago's Pape concludes that "the era of soft balancing has begun," and Walt says "we are witnessing . . . the progressive self-isolation" of the United States.

If this is true, hawks should be worried that overreaching is endangering American interests. But how persuasive is this evidence? It certainly doesn't meet the standards set by international relations theorists in the past. In their own major research, for example, Walt and Mearsheimer judge that balancing behavior has occurred when countries (in Mearsheimer's words) "invest heavily in defense," transforming latent power into military capabilities; or seek explicit military alliances; or "send clear signals to the aggressor" that they are willing to take costly actions to maintain the existing balance of power. These are commonly accepted standards for measuring balancing behavior in the study of international relations. And for good reason: These muscular actions can easily be distinguished from the diplomatic friction that routinely occurs between almost all countries, even allies.

The problem with the recent criticisms is that the combination of unfavorable polls and diplomatic maneuvering falls well short of these standards. A number of critics appear to recognize this, since they describe what they now see as "soft" balancing, or "sur-reptitious" balancing, or "neo-" or "proto-" or "pre-

balancing behavior, instead of balancing plain and simple, or what you might call balancing without adjectives. But it is not clear that “soft balancing” is distinguishable from garden variety diplomatic friction.

We can easily look back at periods in which everyone agrees the United States was *not* being balanced against, and find events that were every bit as serious as those of the past 18 months. Examples abound. In the late 1950s, a West European-only bloc was formed, an American vice president confronted “Yankee, Go Home” riots in Latin America, and France created an independent nuclear capability. In the 1960s, a cluster of mostly developing countries organized the Non-Aligned Movement that defined itself against both superpowers. France pulled out of NATO’s military structure. Huge demonstrations worldwide protested the U.S. war in Vietnam and its Cold War policies in general. In the 1970s, OPEC wielded its oil weapon both to punish U.S. policies in the Middle East and to transfer substantial wealth from the West. Large protests and harsh criticism from intellectuals were mounted against Reagan-

era policies toward Central America, theater nuclear weapons, and missile defense. Most governments coordinated to block Reagan’s efforts at reforming the U.N., isolating the Sandinistas, and sinking the Law of the Sea treaty. In fact, the dynamics of the Reagan years are very reminiscent of today’s rhetoric. In the 1990s, E.U. members had repeated trade clashes with the United States and announced an independent, unified military force.

Few analysts conclude that these earlier events represented balancing against the United States. Yet they either parallel or exceed in seriousness the events that critics (sometimes the same analysts) now identify as balancing behavior. In many cases the events cited to criticize the Bush administration are simply extrapolations of earlier trends. These include:

- the formation of the European Union (initially launched in 1952), and Europe’s common currency (agreed to in 1993)
- waves of extensive anti-Americanism (pervasive in Latin America in the 1950s and ’60s, and Europe and elsewhere in the late 1960s and early ’70s)

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- China's rapid military buildup (begun at least in the early 1990s)
- Russia, France, and China's policy of blocking serious U.N.-sanctioned use of force against Saddam (demonstrable since the mid-1990s)
- the Russia-China "strategic partnership" (declared in 1996)
- the "European troika" meetings and agreements between Germany, France, and Russia (begun in 1998)
- creation of an independent, unified European military force (first negotiated in 1952 and agreed to in 1998).

Obviously the same events can mean different things in different contexts. But unless it is made clear why these events did not constitute balancing before but do now, they are simply not persuasive evidence of American overreach.

If we really want to test whether America's post-9/11 foreign policy is provoking even incipient balancing behavior, we have to look for events that *can* be clearly distinguished from routine diplomatic friction. What does balancing plain and simple look like? International relations theorists generally have relied on two main types of evidence: "internal balancing"—higher defense budgets, troop call-ups—and "external balancing," or alliance building.

Internal balancing against a country as powerful as the United States wouldn't come cheap or easy. Trends in military spending—steeper and more durable drops in Europe and Russia since the end of the Cold War than in the United States—have resulted in a widening American lead in military technology and power projection capabilities. Even Europe's sophisticated militaries lack independent command, intelligence, surveillance, and logistical capabilities. Russia, China, and others are even less able to match the United States militarily. But in the aggregate, these disparities are the result of budgetary choices, not rigid constraints. Samuel Huntington calls the current world system "a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers." Those several major powers have latent capabilities that could be mobilized and aggregated to check the United States.

Consider the latent potential of Western Europe alone. The E.U. members jointly have more troops under arms than the United States (about 1.8 to 1.4 million). They have the organizational and technical skills to excel at command, control, and surveillance. They have the know-how to develop a wide range of high-tech weapons. And they have the money to pay for them, with a total GDP of almost \$8 trillion to the U.S.'s \$10 trillion. This is before we consider Japan's wealth and technology, China's man-

power, and Russia's extensive arms production capacities.

These potentialities could also be exploited through alliances—external balancing. Forming alliances imposes costs; the more partners needed, the higher those costs can be, and some countries prefer to free ride. But here, too, the costs are by no means unprecedented. The tightly interwoven E.U. members can coordinate at lower cost than almost any alliance in history. The addition to them of Russia and China would create an alliance with huge capabilities and global presence.

The question is whether we can see evidence of such internal and external balancing. The answer is no.

There is a long history of countries making dogged attempts to catch up, sometimes at great cost, when they feel threatened by more advanced rivals. Such buildups can be slow to start and gather momentum. But it is when they are underway that we know internal balancing is occurring. This contrasts starkly with today's record of mobilization. China and many countries in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa are increasing military spending. But for the most part, they have been doing so for years or decades. Most other countries are also maintaining their pre-Bush trajectories in military spending, and those trajectories are flat.

This is especially visible in Europe. If diplomatic opposition over Iraq and rising suspicion and unfavorable images of the United States are valid indicators of incipient balancing behavior, then Europe is a prime place to look for follow-through. After all, Germany and France were among the most prominent opponents of the war, with France serving as the most active balancing "entrepreneur," lobbying other countries to deny Washington their cooperation. Yet there is little evidence that a build-up, as a hedge against future American actions, is even in its earliest stages.

Military spending by E.U. members, as in the United States, fell sharply after the Cold War. Unlike in the United States, it has not risen since in most cases. Most E.U. members spend militarily at rates one-half or one-third the U.S. rate, and are holding steady. Some recent spending up-ticks are tiny and almost entirely designed to address terrorism. One possible symbolic exception is flopping. Last April, four E.U. members actively opposed to the Iraq war—France, Germany, Belgium, and Luxembourg—said they would increase both military spending and coordination. But since then, the Schröder government has *trimmed* Germany's already modest spending and its participation in joint European weapons programs. Germany is now poised to spend on the military at a rate of less than 1.4 percent of GDP and almost certainly declining, compared to 3.4 percent by the United States.

Only France meets the dual criteria of a would-be balancer that has moved to beef up its defense spending since the lead-up to the Iraq war—from a low of 1.9 percent of GDP in 2001-2 to a projected 2.5 percent. But without matching performance by Germany and others, France's effort is isolated. And if French assertiveness alone were used as evidence of American overreach, then every U.S. administration since 1945 would have to be judged guilty.

The recent launch of a unified E.U. military force only reinforces the impression of a broad European non-response to the Bush strategy. This force of 60,000 is designed for light, rapid deployment to zones like the Balkans and is totally unsuited to continental defense. It is designed to balance against the Milosevics of this world, not the Americans.

Maybe Europeans can't spend more on their militaries, however much they might want to, because their welfare states are expensive and they agreed to strict budget deficit limits for the euro. If that's the case, they must believe that maintaining generous entitlements and adhering to technical aspects of their common currency are higher priorities than generating defenses against a potential U.S. threat. At worst, Europeans could upgrade by simply reallocating spending away from foreign aid. They aren't doing that either. It is as if, despite the rhetoric, they don't actually believe the United States might threaten them.

This disparity between rhetoric and follow-through is brought into high relief when Europe is compared with America, which *has* genuinely felt threatened since September 11, 2001. The United States has begun a formidable military build-up. This (among other things) has contributed to a deterioration from budget surpluses to deficits. But most Americans appear to accept this as a price worth paying. So far, Europeans show little comparable interest in reshuffling priorities.

A similar pattern can be seen in alliance-building: Unfavorable surveys and diplomatic friction there may be, but they are not being followed up with actual balancing behavior. In the past, threats have commonly led to substantive alliances of coordination and mutual defense. At times, this required countries to set aside old animosities, as Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong could attest. But today, even with an alliance facilitator available—Jacques Chirac's France—there is little visible change in the alliance patterns of the late 1990s. Russia-China relations still "fall well short of formal defense

arrangements" (to cite Stephen Walt). The E.U. has barely more of a common defense policy than before. As international relations theorist Robert Lieber notes, NATO is expanding and thriving instead of withering. There is no evidence that cooperation between major E.U. members and Russia (or China) extends to anything beyond opposition to an invasion already over. In the Muslim world, several states prominently cooperated with that invasion. At least for now, diplomacy is strictly at the level of maneuvering and talk, indistinguishable from the friction common to virtually all periods and countries, even allies.

By all the usual standards, then, Europeans and most others are acting as if they resent some aspects of U.S. policy, are irritated by America's influence, oppose selected actions the administration has taken, and dislike President Bush more than his predecessor, but remain entirely unthreatened by the United States. Of course, it is always possible, as some argue, that balancing behavior against the United States might emerge sluggishly. But if it is unfair to look so soon for hard evidence of balancing, then it is also too soon to conclude that America's post-9/11 foreign policy has overreached. Instead of the verdict's being in, and favoring the administration's critics, the jury is still out. There is no persuasive evidence that

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U.S. policy is provoking the seismic shift in America's reputation that Bush's critics detect. For now, claiming to detect balancing is the analytic equivalent of shooting from the hip.

If the jury is still out, shouldn't we err on the side of caution? Not if doing so means we are so constrained by multilateralism that we deny ourselves the tools we need to protect ourselves effectively. The possible nexus—made far more imaginable by 9/11—between international terrorist groups and rogue states bent on developing weapons of mass destruction means we are in the unhappy position of asking which risks we should run, not whether we should run any at all.

What the uncertain evidence *does* invite us to do is keep an eye on real benchmarks for detecting possible overreach: credible indicators of balancing behavior against us by other countries. Watching what people do and not simply what they say—even to pollsters—remains the best test of what people really think of America. ♦