PART I

Introduction
Reassessing the balance of power

This book reassesses the important but also highly controversial role that the balance of power plays in the contemporary theory and practice of international relations. Attempts to understand international relations in terms of the balance of power can be traced back for more than five hundred years and no other theoretical concept can boast this length of provenance. But not only is the balance of power one of the most enduring concepts in the field, it also persists, by some considerable distance, as the most widely cited theory in contemporary literature. Jervis (1997: 131) concludes, moreover, that it is not only the best known, but also, arguably, the most effective theory available to account for the fundamental character of international relations. This is because, according to its advocates, the balance of power provides the ingredients needed to explain the resilience of the modern international system of states. It is no surprise, therefore, that ever since the end of the Second World War a succession of key theorists in iconic texts have attempted to demonstrate that the balance of power provides the foundations on which any overall understanding of international relations must start to build. This book focuses on four texts written during the era since the end of the Second World War that have all made significant albeit contentious theoretical contributions to the field. The texts are Hans J. Morgenthau’s Politics Among Nations (1948), Hedley Bull’s The Anarchical Society (1977), Kenneth N. Waltz’s Theory of International Politics (1979) and John J. Mearsheimer’s The Tragedy of Great Power Politics (2001).

1 I use upper case to identify International Relations as an academic field and lower case to identify international relations as the subject matter of this field.

2 For example, according to Bennett and Stam (2004), between 1991 and 2001 citations of the chief contributions to the balance of power literature dwarfed those concerning all the other major propositions in conflict studies, including those related to democratic peace.
The sheer longevity of the balance of power idea is unchallengeable. If the essence of the balance of power theory is encapsulated by the idea of counterbalancing hegemony, then it is possible to trace the theory back to the work of contemporary historians and political theorists who described and analyzed the relations that existed among the Italian city states in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Nelson, 1943; Vagts, 1948; Haslam, 2002). Ever since that time it has remained a widely held assumption that when a great power shows signs of attempting to dominate the international system, then other great powers will ally in order to preserve their own security by establishing an unequivocal counterweight to the aspiring hegemon. Since all great powers are seen to be aware that this is the probable response to any hegemonic venture, there is little incentive to try to establish hegemony within the system. In this event, the balance of power theory can be viewed as a self-fulfilling prophecy. But it is clearly a prophecy that has sometimes been disconfirmed by events. Over the last two hundred years, there have obviously been leaders like Napoleon and Hitler who have attempted to establish a Eurasian hegemony, although in line with the balance of power theory, they were eventually confronted and defeated by an overwhelming anti-hegemonic coalition.

The balance of power, however, is not only associated with the idea of anti-hegemonic alliances. It is also linked to the idea that states have habitually attempted to maintain their security and promote their interests by joining forces with other states. If one group of states ally in an attempt to promote their common interests, then the balance of power thesis presupposes that other states, observing this development, and fearing that they might be the potential victims of this alliance, will combine and form a counter-alliance. In this case, instead of an overwhelming alliance forming against an aspiring hegemon, there will be two sets of competing alliances that establish a balance of power.

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3 Hume famously argued that the idea, although not the phrase, goes back to the ancient Greeks and Haslam (2002: 89–90) agrees with him. By contrast, Butterfield (1966: 133) insists that the balance of power ‘did not exist in the ancient world’ and that ‘more than most of our basic political formulas, this one seems to come from the modern world’s reflections on its own experience’. Wight (1977: 66) makes the same point. As becomes clear later, Hume and Haslam are relying on a different conception of the balance of power to Butterfield and Wight.
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Although most theories in the contemporary study of international relations can trace their provenance some way back into the past, there is no other theory that has the extended pedigree of the balance of power. However, the theorists examined in this book, who came to the fore after the end of the Second World War, were well aware that they were confronting a very different environment to the one that had confronted European theorists and practitioners from the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. At the start of this period, Europe was situated on the edge of Eurasia, at the end of trading routes that extended across the hemisphere to societies that were richer and more powerful than any that existed in Europe. Yet by the twentieth century, there were few if any areas of the world where the Europeans had not had some impact. As we move into the twenty-first century, moreover, there is a substantial and growing debate about whether or not this impact was more malign than benign. But either way, by the end of the Second World War the future of Europe no longer lay solely in European hands. The centre of global power had shifted to the United States and it was thinking about international politics within this polity that began to count in the future.

Three key factors almost immediately began to differentiate the American experience from the European experience and all three had crucial consequences for a balance of power perspective on international politics. The first was that the United States had the power to shape a new world order and, indeed, they wanted to establish an order that was very different from the order that had prevailed in Europe. The thinking is very evident in a statement made in 1943 by Francis Sayre, an influential State Department official, concerning the prospects for a post-war peace settlement. He argued that ‘if we are to build for lasting peace, we must abandon the nineteenth-century conception that the road to peace lies through a nicely poised balance of power. Again and again world experience has told us that no peace dependent upon a balance of power lasts’ (cited in Graham, 1948: 271). The second difference was that the United States had to contend with the Soviet Union, another state that also had pretensions to establish a new global order but an order that was radically opposed to the one that

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4 Haslam (2002) provides a comprehensive survey of how thinking about the balance of power evolved across this period. See also Sheehan (1996) and Wright (1975).
the United States had in mind. The third difference was that the United States had developed a weapons system that was immediately seen to have the potential for global destruction and it was quickly apparent that the Soviet Union had the technological capability to follow suit.

Establishing a balance of power framework to accommodate these radical changes was not straightforward for the Americans. They had, after all, operated from a very different international perspective from the Europeans for more than a century. In the eighteenth century, North America was still very much influenced by European ideas and there was an extensive debate before the United States gained independence about how this development would affect the European balance of power, and there was a concern that the Europeans might attempt to partition the new state as they had done with Poland (Hutson, 1980: 13–14). Nevertheless, the idea of a balance of power continued to influence thinking in the post-revolutionary era (Lang, 1985), but during the course of the nineteenth century the Americans began to insist that thinking about the balance of power must not be allowed to affect the consolidation of the United States. In 1840, for example, when the United States was in the process of annexing Texas, Guizot, the French Prime Minister, announced to the Chamber of Deputies that North America was a divided continent and that it was in France’s interest ‘that the independent states should retain their independence – that the balance of the Great Powers among which America is divided should continue, and that no one should become preponderant’. President Polk responded with asperity that the balance of power was an undesirable European practice and that it ‘cannot be permitted to have any application on the North American continent’ (cited in Sellers, 1966: 342).

By the start of the twentieth century, American hostility to the balance of power began to have a direct impact on Europe. When the United States entered the First World War, President Wilson wanted to ensure that a new system of security was introduced at the end of the

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5 Merk (1966, Ch. 3) argues that Guizot did not use the French equivalent of a balance of power in America (équilibre américain) and that Polk’s hostile reference to the balance of power was another attempt by an American President to warn Europeans not to intervene in North America.
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war and that the balance of power would then become 'the great game, now for ever discredited' (cited in Claude, 1962: 82). He favoured a system of collective security established under the auspices of the League of Nations. But the system failed and with the onset of the Cold War US policy-makers quickly began to think in terms of a global balance of power and so, unsurprisingly, the concept became a central focus of attention in the study of international relations. It is the attempt to theorize the balance of power in the era after the Second World War that provides the focal point for this book.

For several decades after the Second World War it was generally accepted that the first attempts to establish International Relations as an independent field of study were made in the wake of the First World War by idealists who, appalled by the horrors of that war, wished to transform international relations by promoting ideas and institutions that would help to eliminate the kind of balance of power politics that had dominated Europe in previous centuries. According to this conventional account, therefore, it was only during the course of the 1930s, and more especially when the policy of appeasement was reassessed during and after the Second World War, that a new breed of realists succeeded in hijacking this agenda, sidelining the idealists, and locating the balance of power at the centre of thinking about international relations, thereby ensuring that the concept would play a crucial role in the future development of the nascent discipline.7

In line with this argument, Guzzini (1998) suggests that the European émigré, Hans J. Morgenthau, came forward after 1945 with the express intention of acquainting US leaders with the maxims of nineteenth-century diplomatic practice. These self-identified realists assumed that the US diplomatic tradition was innocent of the frequently brutal ways of power politics and also lacked a sufficiently sophisticated understanding of the complexities of international politics. One of Guzzini's assumptions is that the new breed of realists recognized that to achieve their goal of making European diplomatic

6 Claude (1962) provides an excellent discussion of debates surrounding the balance of power.
7 This account has been swept aside by Schmidt (1998) who traces the US study of international relations back to the nineteenth century and an elaborate debate about the nature of anarchy and the nature of the state that persisted throughout the twentieth century.
practice, and in particular the balance of power, palatable to American decision-makers they would have to translate the practical and political maxims associated with European diplomacy into scientific truths. In the process they effectively brought into existence and simultaneously defined the boundaries of an independent discipline of International Relations.

Guzzini then draws on this initial insight to provide a complex historiographical account of how International Relations has developed since the Second World War and, more specifically, how realists have responded during this period to the changes that have occurred both in International Relations theory as well as the real world. In essence, Guzzini argues that with the onset of the cold war, realist thinking coincided with American foreign policy practice, and, as a consequence, realists occupied a hegemonic position within the discipline. He then argues that realism lost its hegemonic status within International Relations as the result of the formation of alternative schools of thought and a changing international reality. Guzzini focuses, in particular, on the way that realists have shifted their methodological stance in an attempt to maintain the scientific credibility of their well-worn diplomatic maxims, but he insists that this has not enabled them to recover their lost hegemony.

Nevertheless, Guzzini, wearing his constructivist hat, acknowledges that realism still needs to be taken seriously because he accepts that there are circumstances when policy-makers do operate from a realist perspective. On such occasions, he argues, realist theory might appear to be valid, but the validity is coincidental and, in truth, the realists have a spurious understanding of the situation because their theoretical framework does not allow them to identify, much less understand the significance of this coincidence. By the same token, he argues that the balance of power also requires investigation, but only because there are occasions when diplomats deploy the concept (Guzzini, 1998: 231). The close analysis of the four texts in Chapters 4 to 7 challenges much of this analysis, in particular, the idea that realist theory neatly mapped on to US practice and that their thinking simply transported ideas from European diplomatic practice to provide an erroneous understanding of the contemporary international arena. The analysis suggests, in particular, that Morgenthau has a much more sophisticated understanding of the role of ideas in balance of power thinking than is often acknowledged.
Even the most casual survey of the literature on the balance of power quickly confirms, however, that while the concept is long established and deeply entrenched so too is the criticism directed at the concept. In 1836, for example, Richard Cobden, the nineteenth-century advocate of free trade, acknowledged the importance attached to the balance of power when he surveyed a range of attempts by theorists and practitioners from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to define the concept. But he reached the conclusion that the inconsistencies surrounding the term demonstrated that the phrase represents ‘mere words, conveying to the mind not ideas, but sounds like those equally barren syllables which our ancestors put together for the purpose of puzzling themselves about words, in the shape of Prester John, or the philosopher’s stone!’ (cited in Wright, 1975: 110). From Cobden’s perspective, then, just as Prester John and the philosopher’s stone represent familiar myths from the medieval era, so the balance of power needs to be seen as a myth of the European Enlightenment.

Cobden, moreover, was certainly not the first person to voice such a fundamental critique of the balance of power. Frederick the Great acknowledged in his Confessions that although ‘balance is a word that has subdued the whole world’ it has to be accepted that ‘in truth this same balance is no more than a bare word, an empty sound’ (cited in Holbraad, 1970: 154), suggesting that Cobden could have had ‘other purposes’ in mind when he identified the balance of power as a meaningless concept (see footnote 8).

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8 Haslam (2002: 89) argues, however, that criticism of the concept only started about 250 years ago and that this suggests that for the previous 250 years ‘the consensus was under a sustained misapprehension, or that circumstances so changed by the time criticism arose that the notion had become suddenly redundant, or that conditions unknown and unconnected with the merits of the concept prompted criticism with other purposes in mind’.

9 Prester John (or ‘Priest John’) was the mythical ruler of an idyllic Christian kingdom, located initially in the twelfth century in Asia and then by the fourteenth century in Africa, that was under siege by infidels. Over the centuries, more than 100 letters allegedly from Prester John requesting assistance circulated around Europe and precipitated a series of expeditions to locate the kingdom. The philosopher’s stone was believed by alchemists to be a common but unrecognized substance containing a property that would transmute base metal into gold.

10 Elsewhere, however, Cobden argues that the balance of power successfully ‘preserves the integrity of the Austrian Empire’ (cited in Holbraad, 1970: 154), suggesting that Cobden could have had ‘other purposes’ in mind when he identified the balance of power as a meaningless concept (see footnote 8).
in Schuman, 1948: 80). Reassessing the role played by the balance of power in the eighteenth century, Anderson concluded that it must be viewed as a meaningless concept that served to ‘inhibit thought’ (Anderson, 1970: 184). Holsti (2004: 26) extends the criticism into the twenty-first century when he insists that there are ‘so many theories and renditions of the concept that it ends up essentially meaningless’.

There are few if any theoretical concepts in the social sciences where such polarized reactions are so entrenched and so enduring. The polarization is even more surprising if it is acknowledged that the balance of power is an expression that regularly occurs throughout political and popular discourse as well as across the social sciences, without precipitating any comparable controversy. There are ubiquitous references to the balance of power throughout the media and popular culture where the concept is conventionally appealed to as a way of characterizing developments not only in the international arena but in almost every conceivable social and political setting from the nuclear family to a sports team. On a Google search I came up with 75 million references to the balance of power on one occasion and 186 million on another. No doubt my approach to searching is primitive in the extreme (Sherman, 2005), nevertheless, a quick perusal indicates that the balance of power is, on the one hand, an expression that is firmly embedded in the way that international relations is discussed in popular culture and, on the other, a term that clearly resonates in a huge number of different settings.

So, for example, Google identifies a BBC report from its Pentagon correspondent who observes that the United States is calculating how to respond to the emergence of China as a strategic power. The correspondent notes that ‘By steps big and small, China is changing the balance of power in the world’ (Brookes, 2005). There is a clear presumption that the correspondent sees this as an uncontroversial sentence and that its meaning is unambiguous and unproblematic. But the balance of power is not a term that is restricted to the analysis of international relations. Sports writers, it appears, also habitually refer to the balance of power. Insert cricket and balance of power into Google and you can get well over a million hits.

References to the balance of power extend into every sphere of social and political life. In 2002, for example, the Department of Health in Britain published a report with the title *Shifting the Balance of Power* which discusses how patients and staff are to be located ‘absolutely
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at the heart’ of the National Health System. The point of the report is that as patient power increases, so the power of doctors and senior management will diminish. By referring to the balance of power in the title, however, it is evident that the authors of the report assume that they are employing a meaningful and uncontroversial concept that will elicit a positive response from its audience.

It is indisputable that the balance of power is a concept that is routinely drawn upon in attempts to characterize ongoing social and political relations. But whereas references to the balance of power in general discourse presuppose that the concept is relatively commonplace and uncontroversial, within the study of international relations the concept is regarded as crucial by some theorists as well as highly contentious by others. There is, therefore, a striking contrast to be drawn between the position occupied by the balance of power in the study of international relations and the role that the concept plays in all other contexts.

A key aim of this book is to illuminate the central, complex and yet contentious role that the balance of power plays in the theory and practice of international relations. An important aspect of the complexity associated with the balance of power, however, is often not acknowledged or even registered in the contemporary field because of the dominance of American realists who ostensibly adhere to a strictly materialist approach to theory-building. From their perspective, the balance of power is a product of the insecurity experienced by states operating in an anarchic international system. Although there are significant areas of disagreement among these realists, it is generally accepted that the great powers monitor the material power possessed by all the other states in the international system and endeavour to manipulate the resulting distribution of power in their own favour as a means of enhancing their chances of survival. I associate this approach with an adversarial view of the balance of power.

By contrast, although this alternative line of thinking is not widely acknowledged, English school theorists (and as I show in Chapter 4, classical realists such as Morgenthau) also link the balance of power with an adversarial view of the balance of power.

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12 As a consequence, the balance of power is closely related to the idea of a security dilemma. For a comprehensive overview of competing approaches to the security dilemma, see Booth and Wheeler (2007).