

Review - Unanswered Threats

Written by R. McKay Stangler

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Review - Unanswered Threats

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/03/27/review-unanswered-threats-2/>

R. MCKAY STANGLER, MAR 27 2012

Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power
by Randall L. Schweller.
Princeton University Press (2006)

Disruptions in the balance of power between states traditionally come from aggression or expansion by one state within a system. Such disruptive states are generally easy to see with the benefit of hindsight: military buildups, aggressive posturing, and increasingly bellicose language generally mark these states. Competing states, according to realist theory, will increase their power accordingly to balance out the disruptive state. But what of the competing states which do the opposite, declining to respond to these growing threats even as the threat's presence becomes clear to most parties? What accounts for this "underbalancing"?

Randall Schweller, professor of political science at Ohio State University, claims in *Unanswered Threats*, his valuable new book, that a combination of domestic political constraints serves to blind the underbalancing power to the threat posed by the disruptive state. Schweller's book is in many ways a neoclassical realist critique of structural realism, and he does not often attempt to disguise his impatience with the reductionist tendencies of the latter. He

Review - Unanswered Threats

Written by R. McKay Stangler

believes a sole focus on power is an unnecessarily limiting exercise, one that also fails to account for many factors from the social, intrastate world that exert huge influence upon interstate affairs.

Introduction

The conundrum Schweller is attempting to solve here is indeed vexing to international relations scholars: why do some states fail to recognize, respond to, and counteract rising states that pose a danger to them? He calls this a “folly,” arguing that in many cases threatened countries “have failed to recognize a clear and present danger or, more typically, have simply not reacted to it or, more typically still, have responded in paltry and imprudent ways” (1). The scholarly dilemma here is that this very clear and observable fact “runs directly contrary to the core prediction of structural realist theory, namely, that threatened states will balance against dangerous accumulations of power by forming alliances and/or building arms” (1). There are obvious examples of this failure to follow the realist diagnosis—Britain in the 1930s is the most notorious—but scholarly examination of this peculiar reaction has not been prolific. Schweller finds several possible explanations for this: the normative bias of paranoia, fear of “Munich analogy” accusations, and, most importantly, the very human tendency in scholarly literature to “help resolve or manage urgent security problems” (3). This “theoretical lacunae,” which he ascribes to the quick-kill possibilities of the Cold War, leads theorists to overlook ambiguous developments in favor of obvious escalation. With this book, Schweller aims to “redress these biases” and show the error of stressing “structure and natural laws, rather than domestic politics” in balance of power theory (4). In doing so, he critiques realism in language ranging from passive to almost unintentionally comical (e.g., “Which is in no way to suggest that realists are fascists” [116]). In both modes of critique, he lambastes structural realism for not properly valuing domestic politics.

It is just such domestic politics scenarios where Schweller locates the central cause of underbalancing. His goal in this book, though, is larger than simply demonstrating that intrastate affairs have thus far been vastly undervalued. Instead, Schweller aspires to weaken the notion of power balance as natural law. Scholars such as Kenneth Waltz, Hans Morgenthau, and John Mearsheimer have argued that power between states naturally balances as states act and react to each other. But Schweller suggests that this is a tautological creation, and that the Rousseau-derived image of balance weakens scholarship by downplaying the role of domestic politics. He writes that in “an era of mass politics, the decision to check unbalanced power by means of arms and allies—and to go to war if these deterrent measures fail—is very much a political act made by political actors” (5). This claim runs counter to what realists like Waltz would argue; namely, that structural concerns have far more influence than the comparatively petty debates of domestic politics. Schweller aims to prove that the latter’s importance is valuable and has been understated. In a direct shot across the bow of realism, Schweller writes that “Structural imperatives rarely, if ever, compel leaders to adopt one policy over another; decisionmakers are not sleepwalkers buffeted about by inexorable forces beyond their control” (5). This book appears to be part of a growing backlash against realism, which perhaps strayed too far in granting influence to structural factors. Books like this one aim to reclaim the centrality not just of internal deliberation, but of very mundane matters like disagreements, pride, and electoral competition, and the role they play in the balance of power.

This is not to say, though, that structures and systems no longer play a role. Indeed, Schweller himself notes that state responses are “determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites, who must reach consensus within an often decentralized and competitive political process,” and that “systemic pressures are filtered through intervening domestic variables to produce foreign policy behavior” (5-6). He places his work among similar efforts by Tomas Christensen, Aaron Friedberg, Jack Snyder, William Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria, all of whom are part of the “new wave of neoclassical realist research” (6). The reader is tempted to think this “neoclassical realist” school has a modicum of constructivist influence; Schweller frequently speaks of the importance of actor perception, normative forces, and endogenous persuasion.

Schweller’s task here is to examine underbalancing, but this is not the only anomalous reaction within balance of power developments. States may also overbalance—misperceive a non-threatening actor as aggressive—or simply “nonbalance,” in which bucks may be passed, diplomacy may be engaged, or distance may be created.

Review - Unanswered Threats

Written by R. McKay Stangler

Underbalancing, however, is an especially peculiar course of action: it “occurs when the state does not balance or does so inefficiently in response to a dangerous and unappeasable aggressor, and the state’s efforts are essential to deter or defeat it” (10). Why would states willingly or knowingly undertake such an ill-advised course of action? There are four central elements of domestic politics within Schweller’s argument. First, “elite consensus (disagreement) about the nature and extent of the threat”; second, “elite cohesion (fragmentation) [or] the degree to which a central government’s political leadership is fragmented by persistent internal divisions”; third, “social cohesion (fragmentation),” in which “states with high levels of political and social integration will be most likely to balance against external threats,” while “fragmented states will underreact”; fourth, “regime or government vulnerability,” as “weak regimes or unstable governments, by definition, lack legitimacy and policy capacity” (11-12). These four factors of domestic politics have, he argues, been routinely unexamined in balance-of-power theory, which “gets it wrong in most instances [because] states rarely conform to realism’s assumption of units as coherent actors” (11). Because realism takes a necessarily reductionist view of international relations, it posits that when “the policymaking process and actual state-society relations approximate a unitary actor,” accurate predictions can be made. Conversely, “when states are divided at the elite and societal levels, they are less likely to behave in accordance with balance-of-power predictions” (11). Increasing complexity within and around states means that Schweller’s analysis, not realism’s, is likely to be more relevant in the future. Thus, in arguing for the importance of domestic constraints within social norms and human action, Schweller is advocating the neoclassical approach as much as he is critiquing the structural realist one.

Central Arguments

The first chapter of the book limns the scenario in which rising states prompt some form of balancing from established states. First, Schweller argues, the overarching framework within which power shifts occur is of great importance. The “pace and context” of shifts will affect how both rising powers, declining powers, and established powers react to changes in the balance of power. Unsurprisingly, sudden shifts in balance produce more dramatic effects than gradual shifts, which have implications for how states balance, overbalance, or underbalance. Second, the nature of the rising power matters. Schweller creates a four-cell matrix to categorize such nature: limited-aims revisionist, revolutionary, risk-acceptant, and risk-averse. A risk-acceptant, limited-aims revisionist rising power (e.g., Khrushchev’s USSR) is the most manageable, while a risk-averse revolutionary state (e.g., Maoist China) would be most dangerous. The latter case produces significantly more conflict than the former, and represents states that cannot be engaged as easily. Schweller likewise produces a matrix for engagement strategies based upon the state’s categorization, ranging from engagement to aggressive balancing. Third, “accurate recognition of the rising power’s true nature on the part of the established states is a crucial step” (44). This is the most difficult step, as Schweller acknowledges. Because of the international system’s inherent uncertainty and the human inclination to interpret events according to cognitive biases, this step is “often botched with disastrous consequences in real time” (44). The danger here is two-pronged: underestimating a rising power with revolutionary aims will allow it to make more gains, while overestimating a limited-aims revisionist might turn that state into a revolutionary one by virtue of the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Chapter two presents Schweller’s theory of underbalancing: why states and their leaders behave the way they do when presented with rising powers. He targets the structural realist perspective right away, claiming that “because the probability that a state will balance is a function of the preferences of political elites and social groups... statecraft is not simply a function of the particular geostrategic risks and opportunities presented by a given systemic environment” (46). The emphasis on individual actors is contrary to structural realism, and approaches the English School’s focus on actors within states. Schweller divides domestic politics into two central categories, each with two informing factors: “Elite consensus and cohesion primarily affect the state’s *willingness* to balance, while government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion affect the state’s *ability* to extract resources for this task” (47). His discussion of these factors diverges even further from the “objective material factors at the structural-systemic level of analysis,” as a factor like elite consensus “concerns the degree of shared perception about some facts in the world being problems (versus not) of a particular nature (versus some other nature) requiring certain remedies (versus others)” (47). Such an emphasis on “shared perceptions” would largely be hostile to the views of Waltz and others, which encourage a focus on unitary state action. These perceptions can affect domestic politics in a number of ways: democracies being slower to balance because of multiple “veto players,” vulnerable leaders fearing a

Review - Unanswered Threats

Written by R. McKay Stangler

mobilized military forces, the “psychological feeling of solidarity within a society,” and problems of loyalty to ethnic groups over nationalist concerns, for example (48-53). Elite cohesion is an especially crucial issue for Schweller, as divisions within the political elite can weaken the legitimacy of balancing. Reading his five characteristics of problems in elite cohesion is, alas, a bit like reading about the current American debate regarding Israel and Iran: he warns of struggles for domestic political power, opportunism in order to gain office, rankings of external threats, disagreements over alignment, and allocation of resources to the periphery. Schweller arranges the cohesion/legitimacy factors into causal schemes that he uses to predict balance of power moves; he uses the examples of Wilhelmine Germany and the German invasion of the USSR, among others, to illustrate these causal schemes. The second instance allows him to again make the case for cognitive biases’ importance, claiming Stalin as one of the “leaders who strongly want to avoid war [and who] tend to process information in ways that make war appear far less likely” (65).

The third chapter allows Schweller to apply his theory to past international relations dilemmas. His “great-power” examples are interwar France and Britain, and France from 1877-1913. His theory largely holds up in these examples, and the history corroborates his focus on domestic politics as a constraining factor. In Britain, for instance, “elites refused to put at risk their ability to stabilize the domestic political system in exchange for enhanced external security... this meant a rejection of the “old” balance-of-power strategy, which would have put British domestic policy at the mercy of alliance politics” (70). This starkly contradicts structural realism, which would prize external security and power vacuums over internal deliberations and, especially, internal cognitive biases. Tangible resource allocation also played a large role; Britain had been so ravaged by the World War I that a policy of national rehabilitation took precedence over spending on balancing the increasingly obvious “German peril.” Perhaps most interesting in this discussion is the weight Schweller assigns to blatant political self-interest, a factor well outside the realm of structural concerns. He notes that Chamberlain had a vested interest in a peaceful solution to the rising German threat—namely, political success—and that opposing Churchill and the “anti-appeasers” was not just a diplomatic determination but also an electoral calculation. (This claim presents a discomfiting parallel for the cynical American reader: we routinely expect our leaders to place electoral concerns well ahead of most other things, but surely it strikes us as odd to read of leaders doing the same when confronted with *Nazism*.) His other example, of France during both the interwar and pre-World War I eras, presents similar circumstances. France was “extremely fragmented by deep and wide ideological and class divisions, and these conflicts were played out in a weak political system that encouraged indecisive and muddled leadership” (76). (Again, the American reader gets the unsettling sense of *déjà vu*.) These divisions represented deep social fragmentation as well as elite fragmentation, and France subsequently did not seriously address the growing German threat.

Schweller’s fourth chapter applies his theory to a small-power case: the War of the Triple Alliance. In this case, Paraguay was a “coherent” state, “one that precisely comported with standard realist assumptions about the state as a unitary actor that seeks power and security to survive in an uncertain and dangerous environment” (85). Paraguay had “extraordinary cohesiveness,” but Schweller argues that its leader, Francisco Solano Lopez, fell into hypernationalism that subsequently blinded him to the growing cohesion of Argentina and Brazil. Schweller argues that Paraguay represented a textbook example of a cohesive state, and makes the case for the importance of political institutions in forming such a state. By contrast, Brazil and Argentina were disunited and fragmented. They underbalanced against Paraguay in the fashion of Schweller’s third causal scheme, in which social fragmentation and regime vulnerability combine in the face of possible state disintegration. That Brazil and Argentina won the war against Paraguay is somewhat incredible; Schweller’s answer to this puzzle is that Lopez “made the critical mistake of perceiving Argentina as the same divided state of 1852-1861,” as well as more rudimentary military factors such as undervaluing geographic disadvantages (101). The fourth chapter, light on the constraints of domestic politics and with a causal scheme that feels imperfectly applied to the War of the Triple Alliance, is Schweller’s weakest.

The final chapter explores the timidity of states in an “age of mass politics,” and argues that the fascist state is the best example of an “exemplary mobilizing state” (105). It’s the rare scholar who sees positive sides of fascism, and the chapter has an odd feel to it. In some ways, this section feels designed to both critique the structural realist view (it is “a cynical and largely pessimistic political philosophy... [and] a hollow political doctrine” [114]) and find further examples of intangible qualities helping dictate domestic politics, and thus balance-of-power issues. For instance, Schweller quotes Morgenthau arguing that “national character and, above all, national morale” are essential to state

Review - Unanswered Threats

Written by R. McKay Stangler

cohesion; Schweller argues that a “national will to amass power” is perhaps the most important concern in the process of balancing (106). This is an attractive but amorphous concept, and it feels forced into the author’s causal mechanisms. Interestingly, though, Schweller provides useful information about how to cultivate such a national will: he quotes Walter Lippmann admitting the power of “inciting the people to paroxysms of hatred and to utopian dreams” (110). If “national will” can be cultivated in such a way, then fascism is indeed an ideal subject—but does that form of national will serve as an appropriate marker for success in balancing? Clearly Schweller is not advocating fascism, but holding it up as an example of “anti-timidity” seems a curious choice.

Conclusion

This is not the only flaw in this book. Despite addressing it several times, Schweller never quite overcomes the obvious objection to his argument: isn’t it easy to diagnose underbalancing with the benefit of hindsight? He admits as much at times (“The crux of the problem is that without the benefit of hindsight, it is often a very tricky business to infer intentions from behavior” [30]), but maintains that his framework will offer a real-time analysis tool. His dismissal of hindsight is never quite fully persuasive. He also often contradicts himself in odd ways. In chapter one he says that in retrospect, Churchill’s assessment of Hitler was more accurate than Chamberlain’s, but that the latter’s judgment, because of cognitive biases, was not “the product of misperception, irrationality, or plain naiveté.” Just a paragraph later, though, he accuses Chamberlain of great “hubris in believing that [he], in fact, knew Hitler’s intentions” (31). But if presuming to know someone’s intentions doesn’t count as “misperception, irrationality, or plain naiveté,” then what does? Other claims seem wholly irreconcilable. For example, Schweller notes that cognitive biases mean elites “interpret incoming information according to what they *want* to see, not on what they *should* see [but that] this way of perceiving is rational” (41-42). Yet on the same page Schweller claims that “The irrationality of Germany’s anxiety over a British preventive naval attack cannot be overstated” (42). Can both of these claims be true? Can socially interpreted facts be counted as rational at the time but later be denounced as irrational?

Still, these are minor objections. Schweller’s book is a useful critique of structural realist flaws and a thoughtful consideration of a puzzling behavior in international relations. Those seeking a useful explanation of unusual balancing behavior should appreciate the lessons and analytical tools he offers.

—

R. McKay Stangler *is a doctoral student at the University of Kansas.*