

## **Dr. Christoph Rohde: Introduction: The balance-of-power (BOP) in international relations theory**

When we talk about the balance-of-power concept (BOP) we find the consensual scientific judgement in mainstream IR theory: this is an old-fashioned concept that does not explain the behaviour of states (any more – did it ever explain anything?). The concept seems to be so elusive and contradictory that it cannot be proven or disproven. That means in scientific terms: it is a faith or an ideology, but not a theory that explains political outcomes, behaviours or static power constellations.

The BOP, it is claimed in the current IR mainstream, can at best be used as a socially constructed idea that in the past guided the behaviour of immoral statesmen. BOP as a kind of chess, as a “sport of kings” (Russell 1990), as a cynical great power play. But why did so many decision-makers justify (and still do so) their foreign policy behaviour in terms of BOP? This question will be discussed in this seminar.

The BOP is intellectually closely related to the idea of *raison d'état* (Staatsräson), an idea that belongs to the intellectual heritage of a Machiavelli, Hobbes or Friedrich Meinecke.

Statesmen assumed the existence of objective power relationships in the international system out of which they could derive their ideal strategy to promote the individual national interest of their own state. This means they had to strategically anticipate the decisions of their enemies concerning armaments, alliance policies, preventive military actions and so on. Statesmen thought in a systemic way. Their decisions, classical BOP theory assumes, are influenced by external developments more than by internal processes. (Representatives of Neoclassical Realism (NCR) and liberal approaches to IR disagree in this respect to various degrees).

How useful is such a model for the analysis of international affairs in times, in which transnational, subnational and global variables become more and more important?

### **Its intention: parsimoniousness**

The BOP is a model that deliberately excludes different variables that are prerequisites for a holistic analysis in the field of international politics. It focuses on the quantifiable variables of state-to-state relationships. But as these material power equations are difficult to measure, the evaluation of the strength of the decisive actors in the system is a matter of perception and guessing. Does it mean that a materialistic analysis is not of any value? No. But a positivistic research design has to incorporate “soft” or “social” variables. It is Wohlforth (1993) who has done pioneering work by analysing the BOP structures during the cold war. His arguments will be retraced and it will be discussed whether the “Cold War” was indeed a bipolar BOP structure. We will find out which variables do explain aspects of the outcome of the cold war. (The hierarchy of influences on this outcome will always be a matter of the scholar’s worldview).

For political realism, the *group* is the decisive unit that plays in the international system (Gilpin 1984/2001). Inter-group conflicts develop a specific intensity that is the precondition for an anarchical international system. The international system is for classical realists not a system of like units (= states) like Waltz would want to have it. But in realism only these groups play a real political role that have an all-encompassing decision-making competency in the area of security.

## **Its addressees: Statesmen in history, that act according to imperfect information and time constraints**

What makes the BOP so influential is the fact that the statesmen of great powers invoke this idea as relevant for their foreign policy decision-making (Morgenthau 1950). One prominent example is England. Here the invocation of the BOP was always a contested idea in domestic affairs. Let us look at some critics: The BOP was defined by the nineteenth century radical, Richard Cobden, as a 'figment' of the imagination. The dominant figure in mid-nineteenth century diplomacy, Lord Palmerston, however, criticized him for his ignorance, and called it a 'doctrine founded on the nature of man'. He explained that 'it was in the interest of the community of nations that no nation should acquire such a preponderance as to endanger the security of the rest'. (John Charmley: *Splendid Isolation? Britain and the Balance of Power*, 1999). The task of preventing any power striving for a 'preponderance' was one that occupied nearly every British foreign secretary during the period 1914 to 1939. Some would go even farther, and argue with the Edwardian diplomat, Eyre Crowe, that concern for the balance of power has been the predominant theme in British diplomacy since the time of Elizabeth I. It was Winston Churchill who showed that Britain had played the role of the balancer in the European state system for four hundred years (Morgenthau 1973: 203-04). But the same Churchill walks away from the BOP concept after war experiences of the Second World War, caused by the appeasement policy that he did not support. In his famous Iron Curtain Speech of March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1945 he claimed a policy of supremacy: "the old doctrine of a balance of power is unsound. We cannot afford, if we can help it, to work on narrow margins, offering temptations to a trial of strength." After the war Churchill became an implicit representative of the theory of "hegemonic stability". And he was right. The Western dominance in the international system has since then become the prevalent system structure.

## **The nation-state system as prerequisite for the BOP concept**

Historians have traditionally dated the concept of BOP back to the wars between the Italian city states of the fifteenth century. The long period of Franco-Spanish rivalry from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century encouraged the development of the idea of a mechanical balance of power, as power oscillated regularly between these states. But the concept of the balance of power as part of the immutable law of nature experienced a setback in the Age of Enlightenment. If the scientific revolution questioned the whole notion of a static and stable 'nature', then the late eighteenth century partition of Poland by Russia, Austria and Prussia, questioned the whole legitimacy of the system. It was intended to protect the autonomy of the members and now a member of the system had been 'sacrificed'. Napoleon's decade of conquest at the beginning of the nineteenth century confirmed the crisis of the BOP, as he came close to making Continental Europe a French colonial empire.

The statesmen who defeated Napoleon knew that in order to really win the war against him they needed to create and maintain a postwar bop. This was done at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15. The Austrian Chancellor, Prince Metternich, and the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, tried to create a balance of power which would both confine France, and prevent Tsar Alexander I of Russia from exercising too much influence in the affairs of Europe. Because they were deliberately creating a BOP rather than punishing France, the settlement made at Vienna endured for longer than anyone could have supposed. Hans Morgenthau and Hedley Bull as well as Henry Kissinger show that his BOP was built upon a normative structure. It was subsequently not an adversarial BOP, but a kind of cooperative BOP (Link 2001).

But the steady rise of power of two members of the system brought trouble. The demands from Italy and Germany for national autonomy stood against a policy of self-restraint. Napoleon III thought he could combine incompatible elements by controlling Italian and German nationalism and, at the same time, channelling it into Europe shaped according to French interests. This proved to be an illusion. Bismarck's Germany defeated Denmark, Austria and France and redefined the European BOP system.

It was in the name of the BOP that England, confronted with a rising Germany, settled her imperial rivalries with France and Russia in the early twentieth century. This brought an antagonistic BOP into being. The triple entente stood against the German-Austrian coalition. As Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary, told the House of Commons on August 3, 1914, a 'common interest against the unmeasured aggrandisement of any Power,' necessitated a declaration of war. The First World War was a kind of preventive war to restore the BOP that was perceived to be threatened by all major players. The result of this threat perception (Walt 1987) was the mentality of the "cult of the offensive" (van Evera 1999) that led to the irreversible mobilization processes in the Russian and German armies.

We see that a pure materialistic interpretation of the BOP does not make sense. We have to incorporate "social" or "interaction" variables in order to understand the transformation of BOP systems.

### **Limits of understanding**

The state-centric international system is and never was such a stable system that international relations scholars intellectually constructed. There was always a mixture of international, regional, domestic and local conflicts. But through a revolution in communications techniques we have a higher perception of global problems.

Many individuals are moved by the pictures with which they are confronted on a daily basis. NGOs have arisen from local initiatives and have become global transnational actors (Greenpeace, Worldwatch...) More stakeholders have come into the global power play. That means that we have to deal with actors of different qualities, capabilities and decision-making competencies.

A BOP concept therefore has to be clearly defined. Do we speak of a regional BOP system, a global one or domestic processes? Buzan/Weaver (2003) have based their BOP concept on regional security complexes that have internal and external dimensions.

But in order to use the BOP concept in times of a heterogenous world structure, we have to make subsequent modifications:

- We have to use regional models to show the relevance of BOP calculations of players.
- It is necessary to develop a structural model that incorporates different policy fields. We have to define coefficients that express the absolute power and vulnerability functions of individual players.
- Later, we have to correlate these different functions in order to construct ideal types of player strategies in our constellation.

But as these measures can only scratch the surface of the complex power structure, we have to use these potential strategies as models with which we can compare the "real" behavior of the actors.

Furthermore, we have to make judgements as to which elements of the BOP are manipulable and which elements lead to a self-organizing BOP structure.

## **An aggregate theory**

A BOP theory can only be the starting point for further analysis of problems in the field of international relations. But it can deliver a painting that helps to ask diagnostic questions in this field (Morgenthau 1985:11).

Official state documents like national security doctrines and strategic blueprints are one medium through which we learn about the intentions of players in the international system. But these official documents are often ideologically distorted and cannot remain the only source.

As BOP theorists we have to observe the global structure “from above”. Essentially, we try to be as objective as possible. In the first step of the analysis we consciously omit the intentions of the individual members in the system. As a result patterns and anomalies in the behavior of states appear, when we try to start our analysis with a power-oriented approach. Secondly, we attempt an explanation of additional variables in the constellation. What is the causal hierarchy between the relevant variables?

## **A global picture**

The BOP theory can be used in order to construct a consistent but simplified image of global politics.

Building on Winston Churchill’s and Hans Morgenthau’s analysis of world political structures, we can recognize a triangular structure.

The USA is the center of the international system. It is the only state in the system capable of projecting its power globally. Before 9/11 Wohlforth (1999) defined the US as a status quo power that dominates nearly all power relevant issue areas in foreign policy. There could not rise any serious challenger in the medium term, because the ensuing system structure of US dominance reinforces itself:

While the US dominates its own region (Western hemisphere), all potential regional hegemony (Mearsheimer 2001) have no perspective of becoming hegemony in their own regions. That means the power of these potential competitors is bound in that region where they have to spend energy to secure the BOP in their own region. No further power is left for global aspirations.

In Mearsheimer’s terms, the US should therefore behave as an offshore balancer (Layne 1997) that only intervenes in the international realm selectively, but not permanently.

A permanent intervention could indeed weaken the power of the hegemon (Layne 1993).

This is exactly what is happening through the US intervention in Iraq. The US does not dispose of enough ground troops to conquer the world. It can only veto enemy actions with the help of cruise missiles, but it is not capable of changing the will of foreign peoples. There are different policy fields that show that the unipolarity hypothesis cannot be adopted so easily. But these are the interesting questions still to be discussed during our project sessions.

**A List of relevant texts will be added !**