
T.V. Paul’s visit to the Mershon Center allowed a preview of work that is forthcoming in a special issue of International Security, and is part of a larger book project, Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century (co-edited with James J. Wirtz and Michel Fortmann). The work seeks to answer a couple of questions fundamental to the study of international security: is the balance of power historically unique? Is balancing possible in contemporary period given the imbalance of material capabilities (i.e., US preponderance). If so, how?

Paul said that balance of power politics is possible in contemporary world politics, but that balancing may take different forms, like soft balancing than in past periods, where hard balancing was the norm, due both to the drastic material imbalance enjoyed by the United States, and to characteristics unique to US unipolarity.

Paul said that to explore this shift, it is necessary to analyze US unipolarity. He said that theories that explain the lack of balancing behavior vis-à-vis the United States are inadequate – liberal theorists surmise that economic interdependence and globalization prohibit balancing; structural realists who attribute it to arms buildups and alliance formation. Both are inadequate for Paul because, those attributing the lack of balancing to economic interdependence and globalization incorrectly privilege economics concerns over security concerns; security concerns, he maintained, are paramount, trumping economic concerns. Paul added that structural realist arguments, which suggest that balances tend to recur in the face of an imbalance of material capabilities, do not adequately explain the lack of balancing because they are indeterminate with respect to the timing of balancing behavior while concomitantly assuming that hard balancing occurs automatically given unbalanced power. Paul believed that balancing is not automatic, but manual.

Since he thought balancing to be manual rather than automatic process, he wanted to know what primary characteristics of US unipolarity were causing the lack of hard balancing by secondary great powers. He maintained that the lack of balancing by secondary great power is a result of three things: other states not fearing the loss of their sovereign authority to the United States; the United States not interfering in secessionist movements (such as those in China, Russia, and India); and their perception of the United States as a status quo power. These are important, Paul noted, because they do not produce the two necessary conditions for hard balancing: the perception that there is a rising revisionist power, and that there are allies available with which to form a countervailing coalition. Because these conditions do not exist, there has been no evidence of hard balancing.

Rather, Paul claimed what we are witnessing is a period of soft balancing: institutional strategies and diplomatic summits meant to constrain and de-legitimize the policies of a preponderant United States. Soft balancing, he noted, is more likely than hard balancing when the unipolar power, provides a significant number of public goods, possesses
preponderant military capabilities, and is perceived to be a constrained hegemon, a sis the current situation with the United States.

Paul noted that the United States faced considerable opposition from China and Russia regarding the decision to intervene in Kosovo in 1999, as they used their institutional power within the United Nations to de-legitimate US actions. More recently, Paul said, the United States, was constrained in its actions in the Iraq war by actions taken in the United Nations by France, Germany, and Russia (i.e., threatening to veto security council resolutions), and by the climate of popular world opinion which de-legitimated US unilateralist policies. In short, Paul contended that soft balancing bound the United States with institutions and norms, thereby constraining the possible policies available to it.

Paul concluded that, given the characteristics of US unipolarity, states are forced to rely on new strategies – institutional strategies and diplomatic summits – to balance the preponderant power of the United States. However, he cautioned that if the policies of the United States in the war on terror come to be perceived as revisionist, hard balancing would be a more likely outcome in the future.