During the late 1630s, Charles I concentrated his energies on the construction of a new royal palace at Whitehall. Designed in the classical style by John Webb, the new Whitehall was to be the fulfillment of the king’s lifelong dream to replace the sprawling and obsolete palace that he had inherited from the Tudors with one that would match the splendor and majesty of the Louvre or the Escorial. Charles I desired nothing else than that his surroundings should reflect the magnificence of his rule: “Here, at last, would be a seat of government appropriate to the system of ‘Personal Rule’ I had established since dispensing with Parliament in 1629. At least until 1639, it was from here that Charles could expect to govern his realms, resplendent amid Webb’s Baroque courtyards and colonnades, during the next decade and beyond.”

In making such ambitious plans, Charles I displayed supreme confidence that his regime would not only survive but thrive well into the future. Unfortunately for the king, his reign did not last out the 1630s. If the conventional historical wisdom that “the collapse of Charles I’s regime during the 1630s appeared ‘inevitable’” is correct, then Charles obviously suffered from self-delusion—an unreality all too characteristic of remote and isolated rulers.

International politics, too, has seen many instances of this type of folly, where 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. This behavior, which I call “underbalancing,” runs directly contrary to the core prediction of structural realist theory.

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2. Ibid. This is not John Adamson’s view, however.
theory, namely, that threatened states will balance against dangerous accumulations of power by forming alliances or building arms or both. Indeed, even the most cursory glance at the historical record reveals many important cases of underbalancing. Consider, for instance, that none of the great powers except Britain consistently balanced against Napoleonic France, and none emulated its nation-in-arms innovation. Later in the century, Britain watched passively in splendid isolation as the North defeated the South in the American Civil War and as Prussia defeated Austria in 1866, and then France in 1871, establishing German hegemony over Europe. Bismarck then defied balance of power logic by cleverly creating an extensive “hub-and-spoke” alliance system that effectively isolated France and avoided a counterbalancing coalition against Germany. The Franco-Russian alliance of 1893 emerged only after Bismarck’s successor, Leo von Caprivi, refused to renew the 1887 Reinsurance Treaty with Russia for domestic political reasons and despite the czar’s pleadings to do otherwise. Thus, more than twenty years after the creation of the new German state, a balancing coalition had finally been forged by the dubious decision of the new German chancellor combined with the kaiser’s soaring ambitions and truculent diplomacy.

Likewise, during the 1930s, none of the great powers (i.e., Britain, France, the United States, the Soviet Union, Italy, and Japan) balanced with any sense of urgency against Nazi Germany. Instead, they bandwagoned, buck-passed, appeased, or adopted ineffective half measures in response to the growing German threat. A similar reluctance to check unbalanced power characterizes most interstate relations since 1945. With the exception of the U.S.-Soviet bipolar rivalry, a survey of state behavior during the Cold War yields few instances of balancing behavior. As K.J. Holsti asserts: “Alliances, such a common feature of the European diplomatic landscape since the seventeenth century, are notable by their absence in most areas of the Third World. So are balances of power.” Holsti further notes: “The search for continental hegemony is rare in the Third World, but was a common feature of European diplomacy under the Habsburgs, Louis XIV, Napoleon, Wilhelmine Germany, Hitler, and Soviet Union and, arguably, the United States.”

In a continuation of this pattern, no peer competitor has yet emerged more than a decade after the end of U.S.-Soviet bipolarity to balance against the United States. Contrary to realist pre-

dictions, unipolarity has not provoked global alarm to restore a balance of power.  

If most states inside and outside of the Eurocentric domain from which balance of power theory was derived and largely tested can resist its logic, then the theory is certainly not akin to a law of nature, as it has been portrayed; at the very least, it is underspecified. The question then becomes: what are the necessary conditions for the proper operation of the balance of power? What factors confound the logic and predictions of the theory? The main problem is realism’s assumption of states as coherent actors. The closer the policymaking process and actual state-society relations approximate a unitary actor, the more accurate realism’s predictions. Conversely, when states are divided at the elite and societal levels, they are less likely to behave in accordance with balance of power predictions. The core of the argument turns on the political and policy risks associated with balancing behavior. Specifically, leaders of incoherent states are less willing and able to undertake high political and policy risks to balance than are leaders of coherent states. Given its focus on elite risk-taking propensity, the logic of my argument does not apply when balancing is perceived as relatively costless for elites and society.

The article unfolds as follows. First, I discuss the reasons why there have been few studies of domestic politics and balance of power. Second, I situate my domestic politics explanation of underbalancing within the relevant literatures and the realist paradigm. Third, I offer precise definitions of balancing and underbalancing and explain how the two concepts should be viewed within the larger context of balance of power theory. The fourth section presents a neoclassical realist theory that predicts how states with various domestic situations will respond to threats. Fifth, I offer reasons why social divisions produce elite fragmentation, which in turn contributes to underbalancing and policy paralysis. This analysis is followed by an examination of interwar Britain and France, which serve as crucial cases against which to test the theory.


5. Yet, incoherent states may be more likely than coherent ones to wage offensive and diversionary wars. These wars are motivated not by external security or balance of power logic but rather by greedy expansion on the cheap. As Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder argue, poorly institutionalized democratizing states, which they call “incoherent” democracies, are especially war prone because competing elites employ nationalist rhetoric to mobilize mass support and then get locked in to the belligerent foreign policies that are unleashed by this process. See Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War,” International Security, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Summer 1995), pp. 5–38; and Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratic Transitions, Institutional Strength, and War,” International Organization, Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 297–337.
conclude with a discussion of why the international relations literature has been biased in favor of theories about overreactions to threats and, consequently, has overlooked the equally dangerous behavior of underresponding to them.

**Balance of Power as a Structural Law of Nature**

Despite the frequency of underbalancing, there are surprisingly few studies on this type of behavior and just as few on the role of domestic politics in balance of power theory. The reason for this theoretical lacunae is that balance of power has been traditionally treated as a law of nature, wherein the whole universe is pictured "as a gigantic mechanism, a machine or a clockwork, created and kept in motion by the divine watchmaker." The origins of balance of power theory are important in explaining why structure and natural laws, rather than domestic politics, have dominated its discourse.

The idea of a balance of power in international politics arose during the Renaissance as a metaphorical concept borrowed from other fields, such as ethics, the arts, philosophy, law, medicine, economics, and the sciences, where balancing and its relation to equipoise and counterweight had already gained broad popular acceptance. Wherever it was applied, balancing was conceived as a law of nature underlying concepts viewed as generally appealing, desirable, and socially beneficial (e.g., order, peace, justice, fairness, moderation, symmetry, harmony, and beauty). As Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed about the states of Europe: "The balance existing between the power of these diverse members of the European society is more the work of nature than of art. It maintains itself without effort, in such a manner that if it sinks on one side, it reestablishes itself very soon on the other."

This Renaissance view of balancing behavior as a response driven by a law

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of nature still infuses most discussions of how the theory operates. Thus, Hans Morgenthau wrote: “The aspiration for power on the part of several nations, each trying either to maintain or overthrow the status quo, leads of necessity to a configuration that is called the balance of power and to policies that aim at preserving it.” More recently, Kenneth Waltz has declared: “As nature abhors a vacuum, so international politics abhors unbalanced power.” Likewise, Christopher Layne has averred: “Great powers balance against each other because structural constraints impel them to do so.” Realists invoke the same “law of nature” metaphor to explain opportunistic expansion. In this vein, Arnold Wolfers has said of structural incentives for gains: “Since nations, like nature, are said to abhor a vacuum, one could predict that the powerful nation would feel compelled to fill the vacuum with its own power.” Using similar logic, John Mearsheimer has claimed that “status quo powers are rarely found in world politics, because the international system creates powerful incentives for states to look for opportunities to gain power at the expense of rivals, and to take advantage of those situations when the benefits outweigh the costs.”

From the policymaker’s perspective, however, balancing superior power and filling power vacuums hardly appear as laws of nature. Instead, these behaviors, which carry considerable potential political costs and uncertain policy risks, emerge through the medium of the political process; as such, they are the product of competition and consensus building among elites with differing ideas about the political-military world and divergent views on the nation’s goals and challenges and the means that will best serve those purposes. As Nicholas Spykman observed many years ago, “Political equilibrium is neither a gift of the gods nor an inherently stable condition. It results from the active intervention of man, from the operation of political forces. States cannot afford to wait passively for the happy time when a miraculously achieved balance of

power will bring peace and security. If they wish to survive, they must be will-
ing to go to war to preserve a balance against the growing hegemonic power of
the period.”

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. War mobilization and ªghting are
distinctly collective undertakings. As such, political elites carefully weigh the
likely domestic costs of balancing behavior against the alternative means avail-
able to them (e.g., inaction, appeasement, buck-passing, bandwagoning, etc.)
and the expected external beneªts of a restored balance of power. Structural
imperatives rarely, if ever, compel leaders to adopt one policy over another;
decisionmakers are not sleepwalkers buffeted about by inexorable forces be-
yond their control. This is not to say, however, that they are oblivious to struc-
tural incentives. Rather, states respond (or not) to threats and opportunities in
ways determined by both internal and external considerations of policy elites,
who must reach consensus within an often decentralized and competitive
political process.

The Role of Domestic Politics in Realist Theory

The theme of this article ªts squarely within the new wave of neoclassical real-
ist research, which emerged in the early 1990s and posits that systemic pres-
sures are filtered through intervening domestic variables to produce foreign
policy behaviors. Works by Thomas Christensen, Aaron Friedberg, Randall
Schweller, Jack Snyder, William Wohlforth, and Fareed Zakaria all show that
states assess and adapt to changes in their external environment partly as a re-
sult of their peculiar domestic structures and political situations. More spe-
ciªcally, complex domestic political processes act as transmission belts that
channel, mediate, and (re)direct policy outputs in response to external forces
(primarily changes in relative power). Hence, states often react differently to
similar systemic pressures and opportunities, and their responses may be less
motivated by systemic-level factors than domestic ones.16

15. Nicholas John Spykman, America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of
16. For a review and analysis of the various works by these neoclassical realists, see Gideon Rose,
“Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy,” World Politics, Vol. 51, No. 1 (October 1998),
pp. 144–172; and Randall L. Schweller, “The Progressiveness of Neoclassical Realism,” in Colin
Elman and Miriam Fendius Elman, eds., Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the
Curiously, neoclassical realists have yet to examine the subject of underbalancing in response to external threat(s). Instead, they have offered explanations for normal expansion (Zakaria), reckless overexpansion (Snyder), adaptation to relative decline (Friedberg), why leaders inflate external threats to sell costly internal mobilization campaigns (Christensen), how perceptions of the balance of power affect state behavior (Wohlforth), and alignment decisions based on state motivations (Schweller).  

There have been several challenges to the conventional realist wisdom that balancing is more prevalent than bandwagoning, a form of underbalancing behavior. Paul Schroeder’s broad historical survey of international politics shows that states have bandwagoned with or hidden from threats far more often than they have balanced against them. Similarly, I have claimed that bandwagoning behavior is prevalent among revisionist states, whose behavior modern realists have ignored, because their alliance choices are driven more by the search for profit than security. More recently, Robert Powell treats states as rational unitary actors within a simple strategic setting composed of commitment issues, informational problems, and the technology of coercion and finds that “balancing is relatively rare in the model. Balances of power sometimes form, but there is no general tendency toward this outcome. Nor do states generally balance against threats... States frequently wait, bandwagon, or, much less often, balance.” Yet Powell notes that a rational-unitary-actor assumption “does not mean that domestic politics is unimportant.” None of these studies have offered a domestic politics explanation for bandwagoning or a theory of...
the broader phenomenon of underbalancing behavior, which includes buck-passing, distancing, hiding, waiting, appeasement, bandwagoning, and ineffective half measures.

Another strand of realist literature focuses on buck-passing, a form of underreaction to threats by which states attempt to free ride on the balancing efforts of others. There are two basic structural-systemic explanations for buck-passing. Christensen and Snyder claim that great powers under multipolarity will pass the balancing buck when they perceive a defensive advantage; on the other hand, Mearsheimer argues that buck-passing occurs primarily in balanced multipolar systems, especially among great powers that are geographically insulated from the aggressor. I argue, instead, that whether states balance against threats is not primarily determined by systemic factors but rather, like all national security decisions, by the domestic political process.

WHAT IS MEANT BY BALANCING BEHAVIOR?

Although arguably the most frequently used term in the field of international relations, balancing remains an ambiguous concept. Balancing means the creation or aggregation of military power through internal mobilization or the forging of alliances to prevent or deter the territorial occupation or political and military domination of the state by a foreign power or coalition. Balancing exists only when the stakes concern some form of political subjugation or, more directly, the seizure of territory, either one’s homeland or vital interests abroad (e.g., sea-lanes, allies, colonies, etc.). Thus, balancing requires that states target their military hardware at each other in preparation for a potential war. If two states are merely building arms for the purpose of independent action against third parties, they are not balancing. Indeed, state A may be building up its military power and even targeting another state B and still not be balancing against B, that is, trying to match B’s overall capabilities to prevent B from invading A or its vital interests. Instead, the purpose of A’s actions may be coercive diplomacy: to gain bargaining leverage with B. Finally, the timing


of a state’s response to threat determines whether it is balancing or not. Balancing does not mean simply fighting back rather than surrendering after an attack. As I have written elsewhere, balancing involves a situation in which “a state is not directly menaced by a predatory state but decides to balance against it anyway to protect its long-term security interests”; or, as Jack Levy puts it, “it would not be balancing if war is forced on the potential balancer by a direct military attack by the aggressor.”

Balancing and underbalancing can be broken down into four distinct categories. The first is simply appropriate balancing, which occurs when the target is a truly dangerous aggressor that cannot or should not be appeased and the state’s military capabilities are indispensable to counterbalance the rising state’s power. The second is overbalancing (or inappropriate balancing), which unnecessarily triggers a costly and dangerous arms spiral because the target is misperceived as an aggressor but is, instead, a defensively minded state seeking only to enhance its security. The third category is nonbalancing, which may take the form of buck-passing, bandwagoning, appeasement, engagement, distancing, or hiding. These policies (which may also be underbalancing behaviors when adopted under the circumstances specified below) are prudent and rational when the state is thereby able to avoid the costs of war either by satisfying the legitimate grievances of the revisionist state, or by allowing others to do so, or by letting others defeat the aggressor while safely remaining on the sidelines. In addition, if the state also seeks revision, then it may wisely choose to bandwagon with the potential aggressor in the hope of profiting from its success in overturning the established order. In still other cases, one state is so overwhelmingly powerful that a harmony of interests exists between the hegemon (or unipole) and the rest of the great powers—those that one day could either become peer competitors or join together to balance against the predominant power. The other states do not balance against the hegemon because they are too weak (individually and collectively) and, more important, because they perceive their well-being as inextricably tied up with the well-being of the hegemon. Here, potential “balancers” bandwagon with the he-

25. See Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit.”
gemon not because they seek to overthrow the established order (the motive for revisionist bandwagoning) but because they perceive themselves to be benefiting from the status quo and, therefore, seek to preserve it.26

The fourth category is underbalancing, which 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. In this case, the underbalancing state brings about a war that could have been avoided or makes the war more costly than it otherwise would have been. This article concerns underbalancing. What I offer, therefore, is essentially a “theory of mistakes,” so to speak, provided that one were to consider the policy choice solely in terms of the international strategic setting. In other words, underbalancing is the opposite mistake of overbalancing. When the state underbalances, it either misperceives the intentions of the rising power as more benign than they in fact are or, if it correctly perceives the threat, does not adopt prudent policies to protect itself for reasons of domestic politics.

A Neoclassical Realist Explanation

Variation in the way states respond to similar changes in their external environment turns on the preferences of relevant political and social actors and the unique structural characteristics of society and government that constitute constraints and opportunities for these actors, all of which leads to one or another political outcome. An explanation for why some states and not others underreact to structural-systemic incentives, therefore, cannot ignore the strategies of either those who are more or less interested in preserving the state or those who, placing other values higher, are unwilling to defend the state and may even seek to overthrow or otherwise destroy it.

Because the probability that a state will balance is a function of the preferences of political elites and social groups, underreactions to dangerous shifts in relative power may arise for one of two reasons: actors’ preferences, which may be more influenced by domestic than international concerns, do not create incentives to adopt a balancing policy (even when these same power shifts would cause most other actors to adopt a prudent balancing strategy), or the

potential domestic political risks and costs of balancing are too high. The first reason concerns the “willingness” of actors to balance; the second, the “ability” of actors to balance given the political and material hurdles that must be overcome to do so.

This kind of analytic framework—one whose architecture is built on elite calculations of cost and risk—emphasizes the point that statecraft is not simply a function of the particular geostrategic risks and opportunities presented by a given systemic environment, that is, of objective material factors at the structural-systemic level of analysis. Statecraft is also a consequence of (1) elites’ preferences and perceptions of the external environment, (2) which elites’ preferences and perceptions “matter” in the policymaking process, (3) the domestic political risks associated with certain foreign policy choices, and (4) the variable risk-taking propensities of national elites. Once these unit-level factors have been established, they can then be treated as inputs (state strategies and preferences) at the structural-systemic level to explain how unit- and structural-level causes interact to produce systemic outcomes.

To be sure, there are many factors that might increase the domestic political risks of balancing behavior and raise obstacles to resource extraction. Nevertheless, I posit four unit-level variables that are comprehensive enough to explain variation across space and time in state responses to threats: elite consensus, government or regime vulnerability, social cohesion, and elite cohesion. Elite consensus and cohesion primarily affect the state’s willingness to balance, whereas government/regime vulnerability and social cohesion influence the state’s ability to extract resources for this task. The combination of these four variables determines the degree of state coherence.

Unlike standard balance of power theory as articulated by Waltz and other structural realists, in which states respond in a timely and systematic way to dangerous changes in relative power, the theory proposed here presents a more elaborate causal chain of how policy adjustments to changes in relative power occurs:

Changes in relative power → elite consensus about the nature of the threat and the degree of elite cohesion → mobilization hurdles as a function of regime vulnerability and social cohesion → continuity or change in foreign policy (i.e., balancing, bandwagoning, appeasement, half measures, etc.)

27. I am grateful to Alan Lamborn for pointing this out.
For incoherent states, the causal scheme that produces underbalancing may be the same as the one above, but the most logical sequence is:

Rise of an external threat → social fragmentation → government or regime vulnerability → elite fragmentation → elite disagreement about how to respond to the threat or elite consensus not to balance → underbalancing

A discussion of each of the variables serves to clarify how these causal chains work and why.

**ELITE CONSENSUS**

Elite consensus/disagreement is the most proximate cause of a state’s response or nonresponse to external threats. To say this is to acknowledge that states do not make policy; governments through their leaders do. Thus, elite consensus is the dependent variable: when there is a consensus among policymaking elites to balance, the state will do so. The only questions are (1) against whom will it balance, and (2) will mobilization hurdles created by social fragmentation and regime vulnerability limit the state’s ability to meet the threat? In contrast, when a consensus to balance is absent, the state will pursue some other policy—one that may or may not be coherent, one that may arise through careful deliberation and political bargaining or simply by default.

At its core, elite consensus concerns the degree of shared perception about some facts in the world as being problems (vs. not) of a particular nature (vs. some other nature) requiring certain remedies (vs. others). It is a concept that takes into account the intuitively understood but too often ignored idea that the process of problem construction (or representation) is a subjective one that is only partly determined by objective facts. Specifically, elite consensus is a measure of the similarity of elites’ preferences over outcomes and their beliefs about the preferences and anticipated actions of others. It is also a function of the strategic setting, which includes the perceived actions available to the actors and the information structure of the environment, that is, what the

actors can know for certain and what they must infer from others’ behavior. Obviously, the more ambiguous the information available to the actors about their environment, the less one would expect there to be elite consensus about policy preferences and strategies. Under such circumstances, pronounced policy splits will likely emerge within the regime (and society) that place intense political constraints on decisive and costly government actions. Conversely, the less ambiguous the strategic environment, the more likely that elite consensus will emerge around bold policy initiatives.

The key questions with respect to elite consensus and balancing behavior are: (1) do policy elites agree that there is an external threat? (2) do they agree about the nature and extent of the threat? (3) do they agree about which policy remedy will be most effective and appropriate to deal with a threat and protect the state’s strategic interests? and (4) do they agree on the domestic political risks and costs associated with the range of policy options to balance a threat? Variation in elite consensus on these central issues is a function of the “mix of international and domestic incentives attached to different options, actors’ risk-taking preferences, their time horizons, and how they discount costs and benefits.”

Balancing behavior requires the existence of a strong consensus among elites that an external threat exists and must be checked by either arms or allies or both. As the proximate causal variable in the model, elite consensus is the most necessary of necessary causes of balancing behavior. Thus, when there is no elite consensus, the prediction is either underbalancing or some other non-balancing policy option. Developing such a consensus is difficult, however, because balancing, unlike expansion, is not a behavior motivated by the search for gains and profit. It is instead a strategy that entails significant costs in human and material resources that could be directed toward domestic programs and investment rather than national defense. In addition, when alliances are formed, the state must sacrifice some measure of its autonomy in foreign and military policy to its allies. In the absence of a clear majority of elites in favor of a balancing strategy, therefore, an alternative policy, and not necessarily a coherent one, will prevail. This is because a weak grand strategy can be supported for many different reasons (e.g., pacifism, isolationism, pro-enemy

31. For adjustment failures that take the form of either overly cooperative or overly competitive behaviors in response to rapidly changing strategic environments, see Charles A. Kupchan, The Vulnerability of Empire (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).
sympathies, collective security, a belief in conciliation, etc.). Consequently, appeasement and other forms of underbalancing will tend to triumph in the absence of a determined and broad political consensus to balance simply because these policies represent the path of least domestic resistance and can appeal to a broad range of interests along the political spectrum. Thus, underreacting to threats, unlike an effective balancing strategy, does not require overwhelming, united, and coherent support from elites and masses; it is a default strategy.

As the foregoing suggests, democracies will be particularly slow to balance against threats. This is because (1) nonbalancing behavior is (or should be) the status quo policy prior to the emergence of a dangerous threat, and (2) there are typically many “veto players” in a democratic policymaking process, that is, “individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change in the status quo.” As George Tsebelis explains, “Significant departures from the status quo are impossible when the winset is small—that is, when veto players are many—when they have significant ideological distances among them, and when they are internally cohesive.” It follows, therefore, that, for democracies to move away from the nonbalancing status quo to a costly balancing strategy, it often takes a dramatic event to expand the “winset” for policy change. Thus, as Condoleezza Rice recently testified before the September 11 Commission:

Historically, democratic societies have been slow to react to gathering threats, tending instead to wait to confront threats until they are too dangerous to ignore or until it is too late. Despite the sinking of the Lusitania in 1915 and continued German harassment of American shipping, the United States did not enter the First World War until two years later. Despite Nazi Germany’s repeated violations of the Versailles Treaty and its string of provocations throughout the mid-1930s, the Western democracies did not take action until 1939. The U.S. government did not act against the growing threat from Imperial Japan until the threat became all too evident at Pearl Harbor. And, tragically, for all the language of war spoken before September 11, this country simply was not on a war footing.35

34. Ibid., p. 2.
35. National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, testimony before the Independent National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, April 8, 2004. Rice might have added that the Korean War was the dramatic event that triggered the United States to ratchet up its defense spending at the outset of the Cold War. See Robert Jervis, “The Impact of the Korean War on the Cold War,” Journal of Conflict Resolution, Vol. 34, No. 4 (December 1980), pp. 563–592.
In summary, balancing behavior requires elite consensus that the state confronts a serious threat that must be checked by internal or external means; it is a necessary condition for balancing behavior. All other scenarios regarding elite consensus will result in either underbalancing or the adoption of other nonbalancing strategies. States are not expected to balance against threats when there is (1) significant elite disagreement in terms of threat perception; (2) elite consensus that a threat exists but disagreement over the appropriate remedy (e.g., whether to appease or stand firm); or (3) elite consensus to adopt other policy options such as appeasement, bandwagoning, buck-passing, or bilateral or multilateral binding strategies.

GOVERNMENT/REGIME VULNERABILITY
In its most basic sense, the concept of government or regime vulnerability “asks what is the likelihood that the current leadership will be removed from political office.” Specifically, do the governing elites face a serious challenge from the military, opposing political parties, or other powerful political groups in society? Are such groups threatening to prematurely remove the current leaders from office? Have they done so in the recent past?

In a related but more general sense, the concept of government or regime vulnerability seeks to capture the relationship between rulers and ruled at any given moment. Hence, the following questions related to elite-mass linkages are also relevant: (1) is the government’s authority based primarily on coercion or is it self-legitimating in the eyes of the public? (2) is the government meeting

36. It is not a sufficient condition for balancing, however. Even in countries where there is a moderate high level of elite consensus that (1) a particular state poses the most dangerous threat to the state’s survival and (2) its military power must be checked by building arms and forming alliances, the policy may still be thwarted because of a disjuncture between elites’ policy preferences and those of the society. A good example is the Hoare-Laval debacle in response to Italy’s attack on Ethiopia in 1935. The problem was that British and French elites wanted to build and bolster their alliance with Italy against Germany, but their more liberal societies demanded punitive League of Nations actions in response to Italy’s unprovoked attack against a weak African country. In the end, the Anglo-French publics got their way, as the League of Nations imposed sanctions on Italy. French and British participation in these collective security measures quickly drove the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, into Adolf Hitler’s orbit and, in the process, dashed a key element (i.e., maintaining the Italian check against German expansion in Austria and the Balkans) in the grand strategies of Britain and France.

37. Joe D. Hagan, “Regimes, Political Oppositions, and the Comparative Analysis of Foreign Policy,” in Charles F. Hermann, Charles W. Kegley Jr., and James N. Rosenau, eds., New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy (Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987), p. 346. I define “regime” in the conventional way as the permanent institutions within the state, whereas “government” refers to the group of people occupying the important positions in the regime.
the expectations of the people? (3) does it enjoy broad support from the masses? and (4) can it minimize domestic interference in its policy decisions?

These questions go to the heart of a government’s effectiveness and political authority and the trade-off between external security and internal stability. Leaders, especially vulnerable ones, cannot simply choose security policies based on their likelihood of neutralizing the external threat or satisfying national ambitions for greater power and influence. They must also consider the domestic costs attached to the policy options. Vulnerable leaders will typically be more constrained than popular ones, and they will be less effective in mobilizing resources from society. As James Morrow observes: “Leaders and domestic groups often disagree about the appropriate response to a threat. Leaders choose policies for their ability to counter a threat and to provide domestic support. Without the latter, security policies will fail to do the former.”

In other words, the strength of elite-mass linkages plays a major role in determining the range and viability of policy choices available to decision-makers. Weak governments have less policy capacity than do legitimate ones; that is, they are less able to detect and assess threats; to control, mobilize, and allocate national resources; to articulate and choose policies; and to implement those policies. On this point, Edward Azar and Chung-in Moon write:

Weak legitimacy exhausts domestic capabilities and turns the overall policy capacity rigid and ineffectual. As a regime attempts to ensure its survival through the use of force or by co-optation and appeasement of the opposition, it begins rapidly to deplete the nation’s capabilities and scarce resources. . . . Among the serious side-effects of the erosion of domestic policy capacity are: a sharp decrease in the people’s loyalty and conformity to, and compliance with, government policies and decisions; a decrease in the government’s ability to mobilize material and human resources in the event of [a] national security crisis; diminution in the accountability or the virtual termination of the steering function of the government; and a serious reduction in the co-ordination and implementation of policies.

Moreover, vulnerable rulers will be especially wary of fomenting hyper-nationalism and mobilizing a mass army because they fear, for good reasons, that weapons put in the hands of a newly energized, nationalist public are just

as likely, if not more so, to be fired at them as they are to be used against the external threat. Illegitimate rulers will also be less able than legitimate ones to persuade the mass public of the existence of national security threats and of the need to make sacrifices to resist them. All of these factors lead one to expect that vulnerable regimes will be more likely to search for allies than to build arms to counter external threats, because the former is a quick and relatively low-cost method to counterbalance a dangerous threat.

SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion and its opposite, social fragmentation, describe the relative strength of ties that bind individuals and groups to the core of a given society. Social cohesion does not mean political unanimity or the absence of deep political disagreements within society. All societies exhibit normal conflicts arising from various sources and cleavages, including divergent class interests, economic inequalities, competing political goals, ethnic animosities, and so-called normative conflicts (e.g., differences over the definition of national identity, the relationship between religion and the state, culture wars, etc.).

The key to social cohesion is that all members of society accept the same rules of the game; that is, they support the society’s institutions as legitimate and appropriate mechanisms to settle disputes among them no matter how profound their disagreements or grievances (i.e., loyal opposition). Dangerous political divisions exist when groups within society do not confer legitimacy on the institutions that structure it and, even more so, when a significant segment of the population intends to overthrow the state (i.e., disloyal opposition).

In its widest sense, the concept of social cohesion encompasses more than mere institutional legitimacy; it is about a psychological feeling of solidarity


within a society. When all members of society “feel interconnected and integrated into the vast series of networks that make up society, good social cohesion is likely. As soon as one group feels excluded from the society in which that group is nonetheless formally present, social division is likely.”

A common theme in international relations is that the emergence of a serious external threat causes an increase in social cohesion. This is the logic that drives theories of diversionary wars, also known as “scapegoat wars,” and the notion that wartime leaders enjoy a “rally around the flag effect.” These theories assume that, in the presence of an outside threat, divided or dissatisfied citizens will put aside their conflicts with one another or their frustration with the ruling regime and unite to repel the invader or, when invasion is not the issue, defeat the external threat to their core values or other national interests. Thus, Ernst Haas and Allen Whiting assert: “In times of extreme domestic tension among elites, a policy of uniting a badly divided nation against some real or alleged outside threat frequently seems useful to a ruling group.”

All other things being equal, the emergence of an outside threat should increase social cohesion. How much of an increase in national unity depends, inter alia, on the perceived strategic objectives of the aggressor and the likelihood that the pooled efforts of the nation will lead to victory. The more widespread the belief among the target’s population that the invader will establish a brutally repressive occupation, for instance, the more likely there will be high levels of civilian resistance and social cohesion in response to the threat. Furthermore, the higher the probability of success in war, the more likely the tar-


get’s population will cohere and voluntarily mobilize to put down the threat. Nevertheless, history records many instances of external threats causing the opposite effect, namely, increased in-group conflict and disintegration. What might account for this variation? The theories of Georg Simmel and Lewis Coser on the effects of external conflict on in-group cohesion provide answers to this question.

According to Simmel, the primary function of social conflict is to establish and maintain the identity and boundary lines of societies and groups. He further suggests that external conflict strengthens internal group cohesion and increases its centralization: “The group in a state of peace can permit antagonistic members within it to live with one another in an undecided situation because each of them can go his own way and can avoid collisions. A state of conflict, however, pulls the members so tightly together and subjects them to such uniform impulse that they either must get completely along with, or completely repel, one another. This is the reason why war with the outside is sometimes the last chance for a state ridden with inner antagonisms to overcome these antagonisms, or else to break up definitely.”

Likewise, Coser asserts: “Internal cohesion is likely to be increased in the group which engages in outside conflict.” The presence or creation of a hostile out-group, by supplying a target of aggression, enhances in-group integration or cohesion (and sometimes both) by reinforcing common values, interests (the most basic of which is each member’s interest in self-preservation and the survival of the group on which that depends), and anything else that serves to bind the group together. In this way, intergroup conflict imposes a degree of harmony upon otherwise conflicting elements within the group.

Because members need only perceive or be made to perceive an external threat to pull themselves together, Simmel suggests that the search for enemies, even their fabrication when none exist, is a rational strategy to maintain or enhance group cohesion. This logic leads Simmel to observe: “A group’s complete victory over its enemies is thus not always fortunate. . . . Victory lowers the energy which guarantees the unity of the group; and the dissolving forces, which are always at work, gain hold.” This insight nicely supports the age-old proposition in international politics that, once the common enemy is defeated, the alliance breaks apart.

46. Simmel, Conflict, pp. 87–88.
Unlike Simmel, however, Coser emphasizes that the group-binding functions of conflict are conditioned by the precrisis degree of group cohesion and the uniformity of threat perception across groups within society: “The relation between outer conflict and inner cohesion does not hold true where internal cohesion before the outbreak of conflict is so low that the group members have ceased to regard preservation of the group as worthwhile, or actually see the outside threat to concern ‘them’ rather than ‘us.’ In such cases disintegration of the group, rather than an increase in cohesion, will be the result of outside conflict.”

Coser also argues that external threats will produce increased group cohesion only when they are seen as a menace to the entire group. Thus, according to Coser, the degree of precrisis group cohesion and the general perception among group members regarding the scope of the threat are key intervening variables that determine whether a threatened group will unite or disintegrate. There are many intuitive reasons why this should be so. Wars to repel determined invaders, even when successful, typically require large sacrifices in blood and treasure from the population. If one defends only what one holds dear and is willing to suffer high costs and take great risks only for things that one values, then groups that perceive themselves to be excluded from society prior to the crisis will not sense that they have much to lose by siding with the

49. Coser, *The Functions of Social Conflict*, p. 93. Similarly, Coser writes: “The degree of group consensus prior to the outbreak of the conflict seems to be the most important factor affecting cohesion. If a group is lacking in basic consensus, outside threat leads not to increased cohesion, but to general apathy, and the group is consequently threatened with disintegration.” Ibid., pp. 92–93. See also Levy, “The Diversionary Theory of War,” p. 272. Unfortunately, as Arthur Stein points out, the “outgroup-conflict-increases-internal-cohesion” idea “has been called a ‘ubiquitous principle’ and ‘Coser’s strongest theme’. . . . None of Coser’s qualifications and necessary conditions are mentioned, nor is the counter-hypothesis elucidated. As [R.W. Mack] points out, ‘Coser’s *The Functions of Social Conflict* runs the risk of being accorded that peculiar form of academic obeisance in which a work is cited by everyone and heeded by no one.’” Stein, “Conflict and Cohesion,” p. 145.

50. For exceptional studies that correctly employ Coser’s hypothesis, see Arthur A. Stein, *The Nation at War* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Christensen, *Useful Adversaries*; and Michael C. Desch, *Civilian Control of the Military: The Changing Security Environment* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999). For a critique of the “external-conflict-produces-internal-cohesion” logic that informs the scapegoat theory of war, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), chap. 5. It is undeniable that embattled leaders have often believed that an external threat would increase internal cohesion, and so they created threats where none existed in the hope of gaining domestic unity and support for their regime. Yet, as Stein wisely points out, this misguided and risky strategy usually backfires: “Political leaders who count on foreign adventures to unify their country and cement their positions should think again. Manufacturing crises may enable leaders to expand the powers of the state but, in one manifestation or another, cohesion will surely decrease. Only if there is a perceived threat will cohesion increase.” Stein, *The Nation at War*, p. 87.
aggressor. Indeed, disenfranchised groups (e.g., disloyal and semiloyal opposition) may even perceive that they have much to gain from collaboration with the enemy. A couple of propositions arise from this line of thought. First, the deeper the divisions within society prior to the threat, the more likely a part of the community will either actively collaborate with the enemy or remain passive rather than resist the aggressor. Second, the deeper the social divisions within the state, the greater the resistance to military mobilization against the threat.

Problems of loyalty and social cohesion typically arise within “oversized” states—those that define themselves on an ethnic rather than a civic basis (i.e., they choose the option of nation building over state building), but whose territorial boundaries do not correspond closely to an ethnically defined nation. Oversized states are, by definition, ethnically stratified societies, wherein certain minority groups are highly discriminated against by the state and consequently view themselves as captive populations. Because the national identity does not apply to all of the citizens of the multinational state, it does not furnish a sufficient foundation for state loyalty. Instead, social fragmentation and in-group rigidity weaken the political authority of the state, often to the point where it will be unable or unwilling to balance against external threats. In extreme cases, ethnonationalist groups may advocate that the state relinquish its sovereign independence in favor of bandwagoning with a larger coethnic neighbor.51 When subjugated minority groups oppose the state in principle and assume the role of disloyal opposition, the state and the general public confront a Trojan horse dilemma: will ethnic soldiers with kin in an enemy country turn their guns against their fellow soldiers and citizens or fight for their country?52

The precrisis degree of social cohesion within the threatened state may also explain its choice of arms or allies to deal with the threat—that is, whether the target will be more likely to respond with an internal or external balancing strategy. Internal balancing entails greater and more immediate sacrifices from the general population than the alternative of external balancing, by which the state gives up a measure of foreign policy autonomy to shift a part or all of the

burden of balancing the external threat on to another state. Thus, it follows that the more social divisions within a state, the more likely it will be forced to rely on external means (alliances) as opposed to internal means (the mobilization of arms and troops) to balance against the threat. Conversely, the greater the degree of social cohesion in the precrisis period, the more likely the state will be able to resist an attack on its own, or, at the very least, the more likely internal balancing will be a viable option for the state.

In summary, Coser claims that the relationship between outer conflict and inner cohesion holds only when there is some minimal consensus that the group is a “going concern,” whose preservation as an entity is worthwhile, when the outside threat is seen as a danger to the group as a whole, not just a part of it, and when there is a reasonable chance that, if the group unites, the enemy can be defeated. Thus, Coser’s logic yields two general predictions: (1) states with high levels of political and social integration will be most likely to balance against external threats and to experience an increase in the public’s support and compliance with the regime; and, conversely, (2) fragmented states will underreact to dangerous threats (i.e., responding with inefficient balancing, bandwagoning, buck-passing, distancing, incoherent half measures, or ineffective policies defined by the lowest common denominator) because the threat will not be perceived as a universal one by the masses, and leaders will view the political risks of an arms buildup and internal mobilization campaign as intolerably high. Moreover, severely fragmented states in the precrisis period can be expected to further disintegrate and even crack under external pressure (i.e., surrender to the enemy or undergo a regime change, civil war, or revolution).

ELITE COHESION
Elite cohesion concerns the degree to which a central government’s political leadership is fragmented by persistent internal divisions. Elite polarization may arise over ideological, cultural, or religious divisions; bureaucratic interests; party factions; regional and sectoral interests; or ethnic group and class loyalties. The concept of elite cohesion is a continuous variable. At one extreme, political elites are divided into two armed camps, with hypernationalists on one side and disloyal collaborators with the enemy on the other. It is a situation devoid of politics, for there is no room for bargaining among the political factions to reach compromise settlements. At the other extreme, all polit-

political elites and groups belong to a dominant party “and they uniformly profess its ideology, religious belief, or ethnonationalist creed—an ‘ideocratic’ configuration that is primarily coerced.”54 In practice, the structure of political elites within most states falls somewhere between these two ideal types.

There are five relevant questions regarding elite cohesion and balancing behavior. First, is there a struggle among elites for domestic political power? Second, if so, are there opportunistic elites within the threatened state who are willing to collaborate with the enemy to advance their own personal power or to gain office? Third, if there are multiple threats, do elites agree on their rankings of external threats from most to least dangerous to the state’s survival and vital interests? Fourth, are there deep disagreements among elites regarding the question: with whom should the state align? Fifth, are elites divided over the issue of whether to devote scarce resources to defend interests in the periphery or the core?

When elites are fragmented, it is highly unlikely that the state will be able to construct a coherent and effective balancing strategy. Some elites will want to balance against one threat, whereas others will want to balance against another; some will want to invest resources to defend interests in the core, yet others will want to protect interests in the periphery. Moreover, the political costs and policy risks of balancing increase when elites are fragmented. On the one hand, any firm decision will be publicly criticized by opposition elites as too costly and misguided. On the other hand, bargaining efforts to appease opposition groups and thereby gain policy consensus will typically result in incoherent half measures, in which some parts of the state’s balancing strategy contradict other parts of it, such that the risk of policy failure increases dramatically. Hence, effective balancing behavior is most likely when elites agree on the target of balancing (i.e., which state presents the greatest threat) and where best to devote scarce military resources.55

**Elite Fragmentation and Overexpansion versus Underbalancing**

The argument presented here—that elite fragmentation contributes to underbalancing—appears to contradict Jack Snyder’s claim that elite fragmentation

55. Among democracies, there should be a strong relationship between the degree of social cohesion and that of elite cohesion; the latter mirroring the former.
leads to overexpansionist grand strategies. In his view, governments that represent a narrow set of societal interests have incentives to cater to the military (by spending more on defense) and provoke rally effects (by overinflating international threats). When elites are disunited, therefore, the result is not paralysis but rather expansionist logrolls.56

Two points are essential here. First, overexpansion and overbalancing are different types of behaviors, and so it is logical that elite fragmentation can cause both overexpansion and underbalancing. Expansion is motivated by greed and profit; it is a power-maximizing, predatory policy to revise the existing order. Balancing behavior, in contrast, is motivated by the desire to keep what one has; it is a security-maximizing policy to avoid losses and maintain the status quo.57 Expansion is a relatively easy sell because it promises to increase the size of the pie and make everyone better off. Balancing is a costly policy that will, at best, maintain the existing pie and, more likely, dramatically shrink it for most citizens, because it requires ratcheting up taxation and switching from butter to guns. Thus, unless the target is unambiguously known to be an insatiable predator, many elites and the public will see balancing as a self-defeating policy that risks unnecessary arms racing and possibly a bloody war.

Second, Snyder’s theory is underspecified and pertains only to constitutional oligarchies, not emerging democracies. A primary determinant for whether elite fragmentation leads to overexpansion or underbalancing is the pattern of democratic transition, that is: (1) whether the transition from a non-democratic regime (either totalitarian or authoritarian) is to a constitutional (or liberal) oligarchy or to a restricted or full democracy; and (2) whether the transition to democracy drastically changes the underlying constellation of contending political and social forces.

Overexpansion through elite logrolling can occur only when a majority of elite groups favor expansion in different geographic areas. These are exceptional cases, however. Typically, a bargaining process among competing elite groups will generate blocking coalitions, resulting in policy inertia or the adoption of unfocused half measures or both.58 In general, such policies offer elites the benefit of low domestic costs (e.g., no increased taxes) but carry the risk of policy failure (namely, underreacting to threats and opportunities).

In the transition from an authoritarian or a totalitarian regime to a liberal or

56. See Snyder, Myths of Empire, pp. 6–7.
58. See Tsebelis, Veto Players.
constitutional oligarchy, the dominant classes and the old ruling elites still control the state apparatus, but they must now compete for mass allies against newly mobilized groups. In this highly politicized atmosphere of mass politics, elites will be tempted, in varying degrees, to mobilize the masses through nationalist propaganda designed to whip up support for predatory expansion. These jingoistic appeals to militarism and nationalism, when combined with a weak central authority, an entrenched military, unstable coalitions, and logrolling-type bargaining among elites, unleash an impassioned hyper-nationalism among the mass public, which then becomes an uncontrollable force for recklessly expansionist foreign policies with a high risk of war.

This is the theory put forth by Edward Mansfield and Jack Snyder to explain their statistical finding that democratizing states are more likely to fight wars than are states that have not undergone a regime change. The problem with their discussion of historical cases, however, is that it focuses on Palmerston’s Britain, Napoleon III’s Second Empire, Wilhelmine Germany, Imperial Japan, and present-day Serbia and Croatia. These are not democratizing states but rather liberal or constitutional oligarchies. As Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Stephens, and John Stephens point out: “If participation is limited to a few (as in mid-nineteenth-century Britain), the regime may be liberal because issues are openly discussed or because state action is limited by solid individual rights, but it remains an oligarchic regime; one cannot speak of democracy. If the state apparatus is not made responsible [to the elected parliament] (as in the Germany of Bismarck and Wilhelm II), the most inclusive system of suffrage and the best protection of civil rights are not sufficient to create a ‘rule of the people’ in any meaningful sense.”

Logrolling among elites within liberal oligarchies typically engenders overly expansionist policies because the participants at the bargaining table are exclusively or overwhelmingly members of the old ruling classes (e.g., the landed elite, the military, the bureaucracies, imperial interest groups, and other conservative elites from the dominant classes). This should come as no surprise because liberal oligarchies are, by definition, regimes in which the state apparatus is not responsible to the parliament. Hence, the interests and views of the subordinate classes have little effect on the decisionmaking process, regardless of whether the regime allows mass participation.

59. Mansfield and Snyder, “Democratization and the Danger of War.”
61. For example, logrolling in Wilhelmine Germany, an exemplary case in Mansfield and Snyder’s theoretical discussion of how democratization leads to war, was done by old economic and politi-
Returning to the cases of Wilhelmine Germany, Second Empire France, Imperial Japan, and Victorian England, the key question is: who was and was not invited to the bargaining table? Political agents of the subordinate classes were conspicuously absent in Germany and France because the liberal movement could not overcome preindustrial cleavages within the middle classes; as such, liberal hegemony and the inclusion of the working classes within a competitive political process had yet to be established in these countries. In Imperial Japan, a council of military elder statesmen decided who would govern. As for Britain, it cannot even be called a democratizing state until the Second Reform Act passed in 1867, giving the vote to one in three males. Indeed, only after World War I did all male citizens twenty-one years or older and females thirty and over who met residency requirements have the right to vote. In all these cases, the power brokers were the same economic and political elites that had represented the dominant classes prior to the move toward democracy. Still in power but threatened by social change and mass participation, the old elites tried with varying success to create a nationalist frenzy for expansion.

Whether the masses actually bought into the elite-driven myths of empire is debatable. History shows that subordinate classes, especially the working classes, are not so easily duped. That liberal oligarchies have indeed overexpanded is not evidence that the masses actually supported any of the brands of rash imperialism that were being peddled by the ruling elites. After all, liberal oligarchies, by definition, can do any fool thing they choose to without the public’s support (which is not to say that they would be wise to do so or have typically acted as if they were completely unconstrained by their publics). Nor is the argument supported, much less proven, by the observation that, once war came, the masses volunteered to fight. Presented a fait accompli to either fight or surrender, most citizens will naturally rally around the flag and fight; this is not proof, however, that the median voter was brainwashed by elite propaganda or that he or she mindlessly supported reckless expansion.

For all these reasons, the claim that democratizing states are the most war prone is misleading. What Mansfield and Snyder show, instead, is that liberal oligarchies, not emerging democracies, exhibit the peculiar domestic politics that are most conducive to overexpansion. Their cases are of states that had adopted some of the formal trappings of democracy; the new democratic insti-

cal elites representing the established interests of the Junkers, Industrialists, Navy League, and Pan-German groups. The economic and class interests of the newly enfranchised masses from the working and middle classes were nowhere to be found.
tutions, however, did not rest on the power of formerly excluded classes but rather on the dominant influence of agrarian elites, the military, the government bureaucracy, or a hegemonic party. What, then, are the characteristic domestic dynamics and external behaviors of democratizing states?

If the dominant elites remain heavily represented after the initial installation of a restricted or full democracy, the new democratic elites and their allies among the previously excluded classes will be especially wary of strengthening the military (e.g., France during the period 1877 to 1898). In these situations, there will be high levels of elite dissensus, elite fragmentation, and government or even regime instability.

Assuming that the primary goal of most elites is to gain or maintain political office, intense interparty competition will generate universal appeals to subordinate classes based on material improvements; that is, butter over guns will be the most politically expedient choice for both old and new elites. It can be further expected that an energized, if not militant, labor movement will find natural allies among new elites in the liberal party. This labor-liberal union will work against defense spending, urging the state, instead, to take more responsibility for guaranteeing full employment, a more equitable distribution of goods and services, more equal opportunity, and greater security against the hazards of illness and old age. In cases, such as Latin America, where the middle class needed the working class to succeed in the transition to democracy, there is an even more powerful bias against military spending and expansionist foreign policies.  

When the middle class is highly fragmented or hyperfractionalized, however, democratization unleashes unmanageable societal and political polarization. The inability of the middle class to consolidate itself subverts any hope of a liberal stabilization by means of Lib-Labism—the mobilization of labor through an alliance with the liberal establishment. Indeed, the presence or absence of Lib-Labism is what distinguishes liberal and aliberal democratization processes. In democratizing aliberal societies, it is because labor was shut out of the political process prior to reform that trade unions were forced to cre-

62. In those rare cases where the power of the once-dominant classes has been so marginalized that the old rulers no longer pose a serious threat to the new regime, pro-democratic elites may be able to support the military without fear of a breakdown in the democratizing process. Balance of power theory should make fairly accurate predictions about the behavior of these states in response to external threats (e.g., France, 1899–1913).

ate coherent organizations with centralized leadership; and it was this organizational strength that enabled trade unions to penetrate the lives and consciousness of the working classes. In contrast, where a consolidated middle class had already established the hegemony of liberalism and Lib-Labism, the working classes remained politically weak and disorganized. Thus, when democratization finally eliminated the traditional barriers to working-class power in aliberal societies, the new balance of class power derailed the liberal democratic experiment. A powerful labor movement and disunited middle class prohibited the building of alliances across the middle and working classes and led, instead, to a corporatist solution, either social democracy or fascism.

This pattern is well illustrated in interwar Europe. According to Gregory Luebbert’s structuralist theory of regime change, only the relatively mature liberal democracies (Britain, France, and Switzerland) were capable of surviving not just the Great War but also the subsequent interwar crises.64 The triumph of markets over politics, the co-optation of labor, and right-center dominance enabled liberal democracies to muddle through these crises despite extremely fragmented elites and polarized societies. In contrast, the democratizing regimes of their aliberal neighbors were too fragile to withstand these shocks, and they were replaced by either the hegemony of the working class (social democracy) or its total destruction under brutally centralized regimes that put a premium on the extractive capacity of the state (fascism). Social democracy emerged where urban socialism attracted the support of the family peasantry (Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden), which solidified the political dominance of the working class and the subordination of markets to politics; these states demonstrably underbalanced. Where this process did not occur (Germany, Italy, and Spain), fascism arose, crushing the labor movement and harnessing the working class to the state; these countries overexpanded.

In sum, when there is a highly fragmented middle class within a competitive political process that includes labor, elite fragmentation will push in the direction of underbalancing behavior and policy paralysis.65 Thus, although regime survival in liberal democracies during the interwar period remained strong, their capacity to forge coherent and effective balancing strategies in response to dangerous external threats proved dangerously weak. This point is elaborated upon in the case studies of interwar Britain and France.

64. Ibid.
65. Moreover, as discussed above, elite fragmentation will lead to underbalancing in cases of democratizing states where the old elites retain enough power to derail the transition.
Case Studies: The Underbalancing of Interwar Britain and France

This section presents two case studies: British and French grand strategies prior to World War II. These cases may be seen as “crucial” ones for the theory because they “have come to define, or at least to exemplify, a concept or theoretical outcome,” namely, underbalancing behavior. For two reasons, however, they are not “easy” or “extreme” cases for the theory. First, the values of two of the independent/intervening variables—regime vulnerability and social cohesion—are relatively low when compared with “most likely” cases, such as late Qing China, late Tokugawa Japan, Moghul India, and Austria-Hungary. Second, they are “most likely” or “easy” cases for realist balance of power theory in that they involve two great powers directly threatened by another unmistakably aggressive great power—one that they had just fought against in a bloody life-and-death struggle a mere twenty years prior. If Hitlerite Germany is not a threat to be balanced against, what would qualify as one? Thus, by considering only great powers under conditions of clear threats to their survival, the cases challenge balance of power in its own bailiwick, so to speak.

Britain: A Domestic Climate for Appeasement

Interwar British defense policies provide an exemplary case of poor strategic adjustment in the form of overly cooperative behavior in response to an increasingly threatening external environment. Indeed, as Andrew Roberts notes, between “1920 and 1938, British defense spending was consistently less than 5 per cent of national income per annum—less than at any time before or since; and this at a time when Britain’s imperial commitments had almost reached their maximum historic extent.” To borrow Arnold Wolfers’s metaphor, the house was unmistakably on fire, and yet the British did not rush to exit as if compelled by an irresistible force. Britain’s policy of appeasement (accompanied by its commitment to “peaceful change,” “limited liability,” diplomacy, disarmament, and unilateral arms limitation under the aegis of the Ten Years’ Rule of 1919) prior to World War II is all the more puzzling because it was so distinctly different from the balance of power doctrine Britain had

67. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing this out.
adhered to prior to 1914. Why did interwar British elites so consciously reject balance of power as a mode of behavior when, objectively speaking, Anglo-German antagonism was much more marked in the 1930s than before World War I?

The key to understanding British foreign policy during the interwar period is to recognize the trade-off between internal and external stability. More precisely, British elites refused to put at risk their ability to stabilize the domestic political system in exchange for enhanced external security. Accordingly, British policy toward the outside world was circumscribed by the imperative—overwhelmingly supported by policy elites of all parties, captains of industry, and public opinion—that foreign and security policies must not interfere with the primary goal of safeguarding the viability and efficiency of Britain’s sociopolitical system; this required Britain’s complete freedom of action to develop internally as its elites saw fit.

In practice, this meant a rejection of the “old” balance of power strategy, which would have put British domestic policy at the mercy of alliance politics. Specifically, British elites were not prepared to give France (or Belgium or Soviet Russia) a say in British domestic disputes by including the French (or any other ally) in joint military staff talks or coordinated rearmament measures. Determined to maintain its isolation from the continent and its non-aligned strategy, the British government formulated a two-track, appeasement-cum-rearmament strategy. Limited rearmament, which focused solely on strengthening the Royal Air Force and air defenses against a bomber attack from Germany, would support the primary strategy of appeasement, which centered on disarmament talks and negotiations (mostly bilateral) for peaceful change. As Gustav Schmidt argues, “British policy in the fields of security, armaments and foreign affairs in the 1930s may be seen... as motivated by a fear of destabilization of the domestic status quo, which led... to a greater willingness to accept changes in the international status quo... [It] was linked to the expectation that the relative autonomy of decision-making in all questions relevant to the development of British society and politics had to be upheld.”

war. Thus, Stanley Baldwin maintained in 1936: “In the postwar years we had to choose between...a policy of disarmament, social reform and latterly financial rehabilitation and...a heavy expenditure on armaments. Under a powerful impulse for development every government of every party elected for the former.”

The primacy of sociopolitical stabilization over rearmament and external security persisted despite mounting evidence of the “German peril” and even after the annulment of the Ten Years’ Rule—a document prepared by the Finance Committee of the British cabinet in August 1919 and made self-perpetuating in 1928. The Ten Years’ Rule “stipulated that British defense forces should formulate their armament programs based on the assumption that Britain would not be engaged in a major war for the next decade”; it was annulled in 1932.

Indeed, the Defense Requirements Committee’s 1935 guideline, which pronounced the DRC’s assumption that the urgent and immediate need for Britain to achieve greater security took precedence over financial considerations, was never implemented. British policy did not adjust in response to a dramatically changed strategic environment because elites were paralyzed by the threat of social unrest and fears that the domestic political system could not stand the strains of rearmament. Once again, Schmidt explains: “‘Security policy’ was still subject to the directive that Britain could rather afford to take risks over the defence issue than run the risk of dividing the country along class lines. This maxim put into practice the crucial lesson drawn from political experience since the turn of the century; namely, that trade unions had learnt how to exert pressure through industrial action in key industries (mining, railways, shipping). Governments in any case preferred ‘willing co-operation’ to ‘industrial conscription’ but hesitated in enforcing accelerated rearmament because they feared granting concessions to labour in related-issue areas.” Throughout the 1930s, trade unions remained profoundly suspicious of national rearmament because of the danger of industrial conscription. Thus, as Schmitt further notes: “Against this backdrop, the rearmament campaign, justified on foreign policy grounds, seemed risky even when

72. Michael L. Roi, Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934–1937 (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997), p. 5. As Gustav Schmitt notes about the annulment in 1934: “By consenting to the chief of staff’s demand for the abrogation of the Ten Years’ Rule only on condition that, firstly, hopes of disarmament negotiations in Geneva would not thereby be torpedoed and that, secondly, the economic crisis would be taken into consideration, the cabinet reinforced the tenet that avoidance of domestic political risks must take precedence over security risks abroad.” Schmitt, The Politics and Economics of Appeasement, p. 229.
individual, influential union leaders ([Ernest] Bevin and [Walter McLennan] Citrine) made it known that, in their opinion, ‘collective security’ demanded considerable efforts for rearmament in Britain, regardless of which government was in power.”

Labor’s preference for social legislation was the primary obstacle to military spending, but not the only one. The economic dislocations caused by World War I and the Great Depression gave rise to popular demands among the middle class for expenditures on social programs, making military spending extremely unpopular among the general public and, therefore, politically unfeasible. Arguably the most famous example of the popularity of pacifism in Britain occurred in February 1933, when the celebrated Oxford Union, after heated debate, sustained the motion by a vote of 275 to 153: “That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country.”

Driven by these domestic constraints on British security policy, total expenditures for all three services accounted for roughly 10 percent of the national budget in 1933—a paltry sum when compared with the 30 percent figure prior to World War I.

The British case may be conveniently, if somewhat arbitrarily, divided into two periods: January 1933–February 1936 and March 1936–March 1939. Throughout both periods, British domestic politics were fragmented among the three major parties (Labour, Conservative, and Liberal) and competing elite factions within those parties. The level of British fragmentation was not uncharacteristic of democratic systems in “normal” times. Prior to Nazi Germany’s remilitarization of the Rhineland on March 7, 1936, however, British elite fragmentation was accompanied by an overwhelming consensus among elites and the public for appeasement. Isolationists on the Right, pacifists on the Left, and pro-League enthusiasts at the Center all supported, for various and not entirely compatible reasons, conciliation of the revisionist dictators through the machinery of collective security as against a more proactive balancing policy of rearmament and defensive alliances (see Table 1).

Conservatives, who dominated the government, supported limited rearmament, focusing on bombers and air defense, to ensure British security—defensive measures that would not be useful as contributions to European and French security. Their preferred grand strategy was one of Fortress Britain as against Britain’s traditional “balancer” role vis-à-vis the continent. In contrast,

left-wing parties supported a more internationalist, multilateral grand strategy centered on the “rule of law” and collective security. Yet, they consistently denied the government the necessary means for Britain to play a leading role in a system of collective security based on “peace through strength.”

These aspects of the British case underscore two points: (1) elite consensus regarding policy preferences is not necessarily accompanied by a similar consensus on grand strategy or elite cohesion, and (2) elite consensus is not a sufficient condition for appropriate balancing behavior. Consensus among elites and the masses may form in support of an alternative policy to balancing (e.g., appeasement and conciliation of the threat). In this case, an overly cooperative strategy with respect to Germany arose because it was a common denominator among elites—one that promised the least domestic political costs but high policy risks of failure.

After the Rhineland crisis, policy consensus for appeasement among British elites was replaced by an intense but unevenly matched political struggle. A new consensus arose among elites regarding the external environment: Germany was seen as the primary threat to British security and, in response, a more proactive policy had to be undertaken. British elites, however, divided into two camps: (1) those who supported the government’s policy of appease-
ment, but who now favored active over passive appeasement and limited rear-
mament for British defense,\textsuperscript{75} and (2) those who favored Winston Churchill’s
Grand Alliance proposal for an offensive-defensive alliance among France,
Britain, and the Soviet Union, supported by staff arrangements and the moral
backing of the League of Nations (see Table 2).

Churchill’s supporters, referred to elsewhere as the “anti-appeasers,”\textsuperscript{76}
believed that German aggression could be deterred only by an Anglo-Soviet mil-
tary alliance. Thus, Robert Boothby, Churchill’s close friend, confided to Lloyd
George in late 1938: “There is no doubt whatever that [Foreign Minister
Joachim von] Ribbentrop told Hitler that the British government was much
more concerned about class interests than national interests; and that unless
and until direct political and military contacts were established between
the British and the Russians, he could rest assured that the British government
did not mean business.”\textsuperscript{77} Although they were badly outnumbered, the “anti-
appeasers,” whose members included Leopold Amery, Clement Atlee,
Boothby, Churchill, Hugh Dalton, Anthony Eden, Lloyd George, Harold
Spears, might have been predicted to carry the day because they were far more
talented and eloquent politicians than Neville Chamberlain’s supporters. They
did not triumph over the appeasers, however, partly because they were hope-
lessly fragmented politically and could not—or, more accurately, would
not—form a united front in opposition to Chamberlain, whose supporters in-
cluded the mass of Conservatives, old isolationists on the Right, Liberal and
Labour pacifists, and a few Nazi sympathizers. Churchill’s problem was that
his supporters from the extreme right wing of the Tories refused to become po-
litically intimate with Labour. Likewise, Labour’s leadership worried about
upsetting its own supporters by mingling with Tories. Moreover, within the

\textsuperscript{75} William R. Rock defines the difference between these two forms of appeasement in the following
terms: “[Passive appeasement] involves the impromptu and piecemeal sanctioning of an
adversary’s advance—by means of armament amassing treaty violation, or the development of
economic and ideological spheres of interest—to a more powerful position in an area where the
appeasing power has vital interests. . . . [Active appeasement] begins with a sympathetic hearing
for the concrete grievances and demands laid down by a potentially or actively aggressive adver-
sary, perhaps even with an invitation to formulate and state grievances or demands more clearly,
and proceeds through negotiation towards the satisfaction of the demands.” Rock, \textit{British Appease-

\textsuperscript{76} Neville Thompson, \textit{The Anti-appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s} (Ox-
ford: Oxford University Press, 1971); and Louise Grace Shaw, \textit{The British Political Elite and the Soviet

\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in Shaw, \textit{The British Political Elite and the Soviet Union}, p. 82.
Conservative Party, Eden “had no intention of voluntarily subordinating himself to Churchill... and, without him, the prospect of a substantial Conservative secession disappeared.”

Thus, appeasement and “the spirit of Munich,” in which Adolf Hitler was portrayed as a mere pan-German who could be satisfied by negotiated settlements that put Germans living in other countries back in Germany, shaped British grand strategy up until Hitler’s seizure of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939. In the years 1937–39, the treasury, Chamberlain, and his colleagues (Sir John Simon and Sir Thomas Inskip) continued to hope beyond reason that an international settlement could be reached. Defying the warnings of the British Foreign Office and military, they succeeded in delaying broad and prudent rearmament in favor of the so-called Inskip Doctrine, which advocated staying the “appeasement” course through limited rearmament coupled with more active efforts at peaceful preventive diplomacy.79

Yet, the question arises: if Churchill and opposition parties shifted their position to favor balancing, what prevented the governing party from doing so? The answer is that Chamberlain and the right wing of the Conservative Party had compelling political and social reasons to remain committed to appease-

ment. A peaceful solution to Europe’s problems would strengthen Chamberlain’s position with the party at large, checking rivals such as Eden and further isolating Churchill. In addition, with the election year of 1940 drawing nearer, the avoidance of war would not only sustain but enhance the Conservative Party’s appeal in the country at large. More important still, Chamberlain and the governing party feared that another war of attrition, like that of 1914–18, would result in a dramatic shift in the domestic social order toward the working class. As Paul Kennedy points out: “Already the Labour Party spokesmen and trade unions were making it clear that, if war came, the price for their full-hearted support would be the ‘conscription of wealth’ as well as manpower, and the nationalization of certain key industries. Churchill, Eden and their friends might have been willing to pay this price; but there was little sign that Chamberlain, or many industrialists, or most of the Conservative Party, were. As Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, put it to an acquaintance in September 1938, ‘... whether we win or lose [a war], it will be the end of everything we stand for.’”

FRANCE: A DOMESTIC CLIMATE FOR HALF MEASURES AND MUNDDLING THROUGH
Like Britain, France during the interwar period represents a prototypical case of underreaction to an extremely dangerous external environment. In a mere twenty-two years, France went from hegemonic grandeur to humiliating defeat. The primary cause of French decline was that, while Germany rearmed, France was wholly distracted by internal troubles. French society 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. As David Thompson noted about French democracy during the Third Republic: “If the function of democratic government is to be a mirror or a photographic negative—reflecting or reproducing accurately the conflicts of social and political forces—the Republic worked well enough. If the function of democratic government is something more positive than this . . . it worked less well.”

The French government exhibited extreme regime instability, witnessing an astounding thirty-five changes in prime ministers between 1918 and 1940, and

twenty-four changes of ministry between 1930 and 1940. With the exception of the Communists, France also lacked strong, disciplined parties, though there was no shortage of them. As the Socialist leader Leon Blum once lamented prior to becoming France’s prime minister on June 4, 1936, “Ah, if only there were political parties in France and if these parties had an organization and doctrine.” The result was a political system dominated by personalities with only loose and shifting party allegiances.

In addition to France’s vulnerable and unstable ruling regimes and highly fragmented society, French elites made different and contradictory assessments about the degree of threat in the external environment. One faction, dubbed the “optimists” by the historian René Girault, saw Hitler as a buffoon with a penchant for swaggering but who would, nonetheless, act rationally as long as the British and French insisted on normal negotiations. A second faction, dubbed the “realists,” maintained that Hitler had expansive ambitions that would be tamed only by the threat of war from an overwhelmingly powerful countercoalition of states aligned against Germany. A third faction, the “pessimists,” agreed with the realists that the optimists were underestimating the extent of Hitler’s revisionist goals and his willingness to risk war to achieve them. But they, unlike the realists, supported Hitler’s expansionist aims in Central and Eastern Europe at the expense of Poland, Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet Union, believing that these gains would satisfy Hitler and thereby preserve a separate peace in the West.

In the absence of any elite consensus on the nature of the external threat, it is not surprising that French leaders could not agree on a policy to confront it. Given Germany’s overwhelming population and industrial advantages, France would not be able to defeat Germany on its own after the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936, which brought to a close the era of Versailles. Yet, elites were hopelessly divided along ideological lines over the question of with whom France should ally. The Communists demanded that France be ready to fight in an alliance with the Soviet Union against Germany. Socialists and most others in the noncommunist Left, however, insisted that war should be out of the question and held firm in their belief that there were peacefully

negotiable solutions to all foreign policy problems. Attributing the outbreak of World War I to tight alliances and balance of power politics, they supported the League of Nations and collective security as the only legitimate instrument to maintain international order and prevent another disastrous war. The Center in France supported traditional military alliances with Italy, Poland, and the Little Entente against Germany, but it would not honor its commitments to these allies without British support. The British, however, consistently claimed that they had no interests in Eastern Europe and were perfectly happy to see the entire area fall under German, rather than Soviet, control. This led to a perverse chain reaction, whereby Poland, for instance, would not balance against Germany without French support, and the French would not support Poland without British support.  

Meanwhile, the Right, whose slogans were “better Hitler than Blum” and “better Hitler than Stalin,” wanted to balance with Germany against the Soviet Union and its “communist conspiracy of International Jewry,” which they saw as the most dangerous threat to French values and way of life. Finally, “radicals and others in the center divided three ways. Some sided with the pacifist socialists. Some sided with the right. Some, however, said that France had to uphold the alliance treaties and, if necessary, go to war.” Paralyzed by elite fragmentation, France proved politically incapable of choosing sides and forging a reliable and internally consistent alliance system. Thus, when war came, France, having sold out its allies in the East and clinging to a reluctant ally in Britain, found itself fighting essentially alone against Germany.

In summary, shaped by the inherent weaknesses of French society and the fragility and fragmentation of its political system, the French response to the German challenge was an incoherent series of half measures and indecisive muddling through. French grand strategy, if it can be called that, rested on a combination of contradictory policies that included elements of balancing, buck-passing, bandwagoning, and appeasement—a grand strategy best described by the foolhardy maxim that “half a Maginot line is better than none.” And so, by 1938, France still had no great power allies and was devoting a paltry 8.2 percent of national income to military expenditures. Incredibly, “from

87. According to the Correlates of War data set, France’s percentage share of military expenditures
1935 through 1938, the Italians spent more on their armed forces in actual dollars than did the French.”

The dismal failure of the French high command and the ministry of armaments to train and equip the French army has been well documented elsewhere and need not be repeated here. What was arguably more responsible for the French defeat but has been less emphasized in the literature was the lack of patriotism and fighting spirit among the French population. As an astute observer—one who had regular and confidential meetings with the leading French statesmen and military elites prior to and during the war—wrote in 1942:

Something more serious than a shortage of indispensable arms afflicted the French Army. Something was amiss. At a juncture most critical for the fate of France the army was no longer the source of inspiration and strength it had always been to the nation. This time it did not rejuvenate patriotism. “If only the civilians hold firm.” That is what [the political cartoonist Jean-Louis] Forain quoted Verdun’s defenders as saying in the last war. The phrase would have been meaningless in 1939 and 1940. The Army was the epitome of a nation cut to its depth by political and social quarrels. Of course there had been reconciliation as the war drew nearer and nearer. But the passionate element in individuals often seemed to be kept in reserve for tasks other than fighting the enemy.

In the end, as a U.S. diplomat keenly remarked, French interwar policy was not that of a “statesman but the policy of an undertaker.” This insight is con-

89. For a brief but extraordinarily detailed account of the inadequacies of French military preparations prior to 1940, see Pertinax, The Grave Diggers of France: Gamelin, Doladier, Reynaud, Pétain, and Laval (New York: Howard Fertig, 1968 [1942]), pp. 20–33. For more recent accounts, see Murray and Millet, Military Innovation in the Interwar Period; and May, Strange Victory. For the most charitable account of French military preparations, see R.H.S. Stolfi, “Equipment for Victory in France in 1940,” History, Vol. 52, No. 183 (February 1970), pp. 1–20.
sistent with the arguments presented in this article: confronted by a serious threat, incoherent states that suffer from deep social and political divisions have a greater propensity to adopt “undertaker” grand strategies than to act in accordance with balance of power theory.

Conclusion

Despite the historical frequency of underbalancing, little has been written on the subject. Indeed, Geoffrey Blainey’s memorable observation that for “every thousand pages published on the causes of wars there is less than one page directly on the causes of peace” could have been made with equal veracity about overreactions to threats as opposed to underreactions to them. Library shelves are filled with books on the causes and dangers of exaggerating threats, ranging from studies of domestic politics to bureaucratic politics, to political psychology, to organization theory. By comparison, there have been few studies at any level of analysis or from any theoretical perspective that directly explain why states have with some, if not equal, regularity underestimated dangers to their survival.

There may be some cognitive or normative bias at work here. Consider, for instance, that there is a commonly used word, paranoia, for the unwarranted fear that people are, in some way, “out to get you” or are planning to do one harm. I suspect that just as many people are afflicted with the opposite psychosis: the delusion that everyone loves you when, in fact, they do not even like you. Yet, we do not have a familiar word for this phenomenon. Indeed, I am unaware of any word that describes this pathology (hubris and overconfidence come close, but they plainly define something other than what I have described).

That noted, international relations theory does have a frequently used phrase for the pathology of states’ underestimation of threats to their survival, the so-called Munich analogy. The term is used, however, in a disparaging way by theorists to ridicule those who employ it. The central claim is that the naïveté associated with Munich and the outbreak of World War II has become an overused and inappropriate analogy because few leaders are as evil and unappeasable as Adolf Hitler. Thus, the analogy either mistakenly causes leaders

to adopt hawkish and overly competitive policies or is deliberately used by leaders to justify such policies and mislead the public.

A more compelling explanation for the paucity of studies on underreactions to threats, however, is the tendency of theories to reflect contemporary issues as well as the desire of theorists and journals to provide society with policy-relevant theories that may help resolve or manage urgent security problems. Thus, born in the atomic age with its new balance of terror and an ongoing Cold War, the field of security studies has naturally produced theories of and prescriptions for national security that have had little to say about—and are, in fact, heavily biased against warnings of—the dangers of underreacting to or underestimating threats. After all, the nuclear revolution was not about overkill but, as Thomas Schelling pointed out, speed of kill and mutual kill.93 Given the apocalyptic consequences of miscalculation, accidents, or inadvertent nuclear war, small wonder that theorists were more concerned about overreacting to threats than underresponding to them. At a time when all of humankind could be wiped out in less than twenty-five minutes, theorists may be excused for stressing the benefits of caution under conditions of uncertainty and erring on the side of inferring from ambiguous actions overly benign assessments of the opponent’s intentions. The overwhelming fear was that a crisis “might unleash forces of an essentially military nature that overwhelm the political process and bring on a war that nobody wants. Many important conclusions about the risk of nuclear war, and thus about the political meaning of nuclear forces, rest on this fundamental idea.”94

Now that the Cold War is over, we can begin to redress these biases in the literature. In that spirit, I have offered a domestic politics model to explain why threatened states often fail to adjust in a prudent and coherent way to dangerous changes in their strategic environment. The model fits nicely with recent realist studies on imperial under- and overstretch. Specifically, it is consistent with Fareed Zakaria’s analysis of U.S. foreign policy from 1865 to 1889, when, he claims, the United States had the national power and opportunity to expand but failed to do so because it lacked sufficient state power (i.e., the state was weak relative to society).95 Zakaria claims that the United States did

not take advantage of opportunities in its environment to expand because it lacked the institutional state strength to harness resources from society that were needed to do so. I am making a similar argument with respect to balancing rather than expansion: incoherent, fragmented states are unwilling and unable to balance against potentially dangerous threats because elites view the domestic risks as too high, and they are unable to mobilize the required resources from a divided society.

The arguments presented here also suggest that elite fragmentation and disagreement within a competitive political process, which Jack Snyder cites as an explanation for overexpansionist policies, are more likely to produce underbalancing than overbalancing behavior among threatened incoherent states.96 This is because a balancing strategy carries certain political costs and risks with few, if any, compensating short-term political gains, and because the strategic environment is always somewhat uncertain. Consequently, logrolling among fragmented elites within threatened states is more likely to generate overly cautious responses to threats than overreactions to them. This dynamic captures the underreaction of democratic states to the rise of Nazi Germany during the interwar period.97 In addition to elite fragmentation, I have suggested some basic domestic-level variables that regularly intervene to thwart balance of power predictions.

The main problem with balance of power theory is that it assumes “constant mobilization capacity,” that is, that all states have a similar ability to extract resources from their society, such that aggregate national resources may be equated with actual state power and global influence.98 This simplifying as-

96. Snyder, Myths of Empire.
97. Relatedly, Deborah W. Larson offers an institutional argument to explain why small states in Eastern and Central Europe cracked under Hitler’s pressure rather than balancing against it. See Larson, “Bandwagoning Images in American Foreign Policy: Myth or Reality?” in Jervis and Snyder, Dominance and Bandwagoning, chap. 4. For historical details of the various cases, see Joseph Rothschild, East Central Europe between the Wars (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1974).
sumption ignores the trade-off between internal and external stability. Consequently, incoherent states, whether great powers or small ones, often cannot balance against threats as the theory predicts because they are constrained by domestic political considerations.