Brooks and Wohlforth Reply:

Robert Art’s response to our article is arguably the boldest and most forthright attempt to do what so many scholars have tried to do over the past decade: to revise balance of power theory to make it relevant to the great power politics of today’s unipolar world. Even in his hands, however, the effort fails—a result that substantially reinforces our argument that scholars seeking to explain contemporary great-power politics should resist the temptation to revise a theory so thoroughly enmeshed in the experience of past systems. Our reply highlights three points: everyone involved in the debate agrees on aspects of current international behavior that all call into question the relevance of balance of power theory; Art’s treatment of the cases of the European Union (EU) and China actually reinforces this assessment; and Art’s revision of “balancing” to make it relevant would render balance of power theory an inherently unfalsifiable catch-all description of international relations writ large.

AGREED: WHY THESE ARE HARD TIMES FOR BALANCE OF POWER THEORY

All of the participants in the debate on balancing in International Security—including Art—concur on three important issues. First, we all agree on what constituted balancing in the bipolar and multipolar systems of the past. Balancing was what France did when it allied with its ideological opponent Russia to contain Germany in the late nineteenth century, and in so doing risked being dragged into war with Germany over St. Petersburg’s imperial aims in the Balkans. It was what France and Britain refused to do in the 1930s when they sought to avoid the fearsome costs of domestic rearmament and alliance with Stalin’s Soviet Union. It was what the United States did after 1945, when President Harry Truman reluctantly bore the heavy political and economic burdens of keeping U.S. troops in Europe against the hopes and expectations of his war-weary people. It was what France did when it gave up hope of neutrality and independent great-power status by allying with its bitter foe Germany and the United States to balance Soviet power. It was what Japan did when it bound itself to the United States and accepted U.S. forces on its territory, thereby placing itself high on the target list of the Soviet Union’s strategic rocket forces. And it was what leaders in Moscow did when they devoted more than 25 percent of the Soviet Union’s economy to building up the capabilities to balance the United States, a heavy burden that contributed to their country’s decline and dissolution.

Second, we all agree that nothing remotely resembling this kind of costly and consequential behavior is happening now or is imminent. Art’s response makes this clear. In neither of the two cases that he regards as “hard balancing” does he see now or expect to see soon any costly effort to counterbalance U.S. power. If all goes well for Brussels, Art expects, in a decade or so the world will see a more independent EU that does not need to rely as much on the United States for its core security. Of course, the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) faces many obstacles, as European analysts recognize; and even the emergence of a less dependent EU, important as that is, would not be comparable to the major counterbalancing efforts of the past. It is likely only because the status quo is heavy European dependence on the United States that the ESDP is touted as such a major foreign policy departure.

Art also shares the consensus view among China analysts that Beijing is not now, nor is it soon going to be, prepared to make a costly effort to counterbalance U.S. power. China’s increased defense outlays are significant, but at 4 percent of gross domestic product, they represent roughly the same level of effort as that of the United States, with its massive lead in overall military power and much larger and more advanced economy.³ That level of commitment reflects the reality, Art agrees, that China is not seeking to “whittle the U.S. military advantage down to a manageable size.” Nor is it likely to try any time soon, because, as Art notes, this would “undercut its ‘peaceful rise’ strategy and harm [its] economic growth” (p. 180).

Third, all participants in this debate agree that standard balance of power theory cannot account for the kinds of policies that China, the EU, and other major players are following. Because they recognize that balance of power theory cannot explain contemporary major power politics, analysts such as Robert Pape and T.V. Paul propose amending the theory to encompass “soft balancing.”⁴ Our article tested this amended balancing proposition. We showed that for the soft-balancing argument to have the predictive and explanatory punch its proponents advertise, it must be minimally consistent with the foundational theoretical works on balance of power theory. That is, soft balancing is the dependent variable (the predicted behavior) of a theory whose key independent variable is concentrated power (or hegemony), and whose core assumption is security maximization (that states act to reduce threats to their long-term survival as sovereign units).⁵ We also held that, like any proposition in social science, soft balancing had to be falsifiable. To determine whether soft balancing was really in play, we noted that the relevant state actions had to be significant—to the point of requiring gov-

³. In 2003, the United States spent 3.7 percent of its gross domestic product on defense while China spent 3.9 percent. International Institute for Strategic Studies, The Military Balance, 2004–05 (London: IISS, 2004). It should be noted that the IISS estimate of Chinese defense spending is based on a purchasing-power-parity formula that dramatically increases its estimated spending over official figures.


ernments to face trade-offs between balancing and other objectives. We did not impose these standards to make a fetish of theoretical consistency, but because it is the only way to address the real question at issue: whether there are reasons grounded in scholarship and empirical research to expect a counterbalancing constraint on the United States.

We found no evidence for soft balancing. Put differently, the attempt to connect the basic propositions of balance of power theory to the subtler policies of today’s major powers via the soft-balancing amendment failed empirically. Analysts may continue to expect counterbalancing to occur, but there is no factual basis for doing so. Our finding is unsettling to many who advocate restraint in U.S. foreign policy, but Art’s response again demonstrates the analytical costs of challenging it by broadening and thereby loosening balance of power theory. Art reviews the cases of China and the EU and does not outline any evidence that they accord with the expectations of existing balance of power theory. What he proposes instead is to revise the theory to encompass the evidence concerning those cases. The debate, therefore, is not really about the evidence regarding the cases themselves but rather the wisdom of redefining “balancing” to encompass them.

DO THE ESDP AND CHINA CASES FIT BALANCE OF POWER THEORY?
Although much of Art’s response questions aspects of our treatment of the ESDP and China, it serves only to reinforce our main finding. To be sure, we do part company with Art on important aspects of both cases. Because our analysis is sensitive to governments’ willingness to accept trade-offs between acquiring power and other objectives, we find that the evidence does not support Art’s bullishness on the ESDP’s prospects. To date, we still have no concrete indicator of European governments’ willingness to sacrifice other objectives—welfare, prosperity, even state sovereignty (the ESDP remains entirely intergovernmental, not supranational)—in the interests of developing a genuine counterweight to U.S. power. The case for balancing remains a matter of faith that someday, somehow, the EU will become an autonomous power. Tellingly, Art’s discussion of the ESDP is focused on possible futures, not current accomplishments.

We also are more sensitive than Art to the many reasons for increases in Chinese defense outlays. Art argues that “China’s drive to upgrade its military capability is directed in the short term principally, although not exclusively, against the United States because no country, except the United States, can challenge China over Taiwan” (p. 179). That is true only technically. Although it is not generally recognized as a country, Taiwan can challenge China on Taiwan. Art neglects that a substantial proportion of China’s efforts are directed at that island’s bargaining strategies and its autonomous military capabilities, which have also been augmented in recent years in ways that help

7. Since our article was published, a number of significant analyses have been produced that coincide with our overall assessment of the ESDP. See, for example, Center for Strategic and International Studies, European Defense Integration: Bridging the Gap between Strategy and Capabilities (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 2005).
to maintain Taiwan’s long-standing defensive advantages. Moreover, China has had a number of other pressing needs to increase military spending that have nothing to do with U.S. military power, such as rising inflation against a backdrop of low pay in the military.

Overall, however, we and Art agree: these two cases are not consistent with existing balance of power theory. He shares our assessment—which is that of all Europe experts—that the ESDP is not a response to a security threat posed by concentrated U.S. power, and, moreover, that it is partly a reaction to current and anticipated withdrawal of U.S. power from the security affairs of the region. He agrees with us that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is not a counterbalancing alliance, and that China’s defense increases are not aimed at counterbalancing the United States in general. He shares our view—which is the consensus among China experts—that China realized the need in the mid-1990s to choose a peaceful rise strategy because, as Avery Goldstein stresses, “it recognizes just how weak it is relative to the U.S. and its allies.” We agree, furthermore, that China’s increased defense outlays are aimed not at creating a comprehensive check on U.S. power but more specifically at improving Beijing’s bargaining leverage over what it regards as the breakaway province of Taiwan. As Art puts it, “China’s military modernization is specifically designed both to deter Taiwan from declaring independence and to improve China’s performance should it find itself in a shooting war with the United States over Taiwan” (p. 179).

THE COSTS OF BROADENING “BALANCING”
The fundamental question Art raises is whether to expand the definition of balancing to encompass actions the EU takes to reduce its security dependence on the United States.
and actions China takes to recover Taiwan. At first, this conceptual broadening seems tempting, given that these are important developments in security affairs, but it comes at an unacceptable price: stripping balance of power theory of every attribute that commands attention from scholars and policymakers.

First, there is a debate about the balance of power because it is a scholarly theory that supposedly generates falsifiable predictions and explanations of state behavior. Art defines balancing as “behavior designed to create a better range of outcomes for a state vis-à-vis another state or coalition of states by adding to the power assets at its disposal, in an attempt to offset or diminish the advantages enjoyed by that other state or coalition” (pp. 183–184 [emphasis in original]). The United States is, of course, building up its capabilities to “create a better range of outcomes,” so it is balancing, too, by Art’s definition. Who isn’t? Art does not show—nor is it clear how he could show—how his broadened conception of balance of power theory could ever be wrong. By his definition, any state’s acquisition of any level of capabilities of any kind (including non-military) that enhances in any way its bargaining position vis-à-vis any other state in any policy area (including those unrelated to security affairs) constitutes balancing.

According to Art, by playing a “key role” in the ESDP, the United Kingdom is balancing the United States. This doubtless would come as a surprise to British Prime Minister Tony Blair in light of his strenuous efforts to ensure that European defense coordination is compatible with NATO and the withering domestic criticism he has endured for being President George W. Bush’s “poodle.” If Japan builds up its naval capabilities and offers to help control piracy in the Pacific in return for the United States’ importing more Japanese cars, it would also be balancing by Art’s definition. Indeed, if Canada builds ice-breakers and promises to clear more ice in the Arctic to promote shipping in return for the United States’ importing more Canadian lumber, this too is balancing according to Art. Moreover, Art’s formulation cannot distinguish actions that prevent hegemony from those that advance it; if the United States were to build up its capabilities to conquer and subdue the EU and China, it would be balancing, according to Art. It is difficult to see the analytical utility of a definition of balancing that cannot exclude such cases. International politics is competitive. States not surprisingly would prefer to have greater rather than fewer capabilities, and when they disagree, they try to influence each other. In Art’s formulation, only if states were to stop seeking additional capabilities and cease bargaining would balance of power theory ever be wrong.

Second, there is a debate about the balance of power because it is arguably the oldest and most influential theoretical proposition in international relations—one that addresses a recognizable and a recognizably important subset of state behavior. Art makes no effort to ground his definition within the centuries of theoretical writings on the balance of power, arguing simply that analysts should adopt a broader conception of balancing to make the theory relevant today. The result is a definition of balancing so expansive as to lose its long-standing theoretical meaning.

Third, there is a debate about the balance of power because the specific forecast it makes today—that unless the United States practices self-restraint, it will face costly counterbalancing—has such portentous policy implications. Unambiguous evidence that counterbalancing was imminent would be a powerful warning to policymakers. Ironically, Art’s effort to make balance of power theory relevant actually undermines its
applicability to the current debate on U.S. foreign policy. If we were to follow his suggestion and transform balancing into a routine feature of international politics, it is hard to see why U.S. policymakers should be especially responsive to scholarly assessments that it is occurring. By decoupling the theory from the issue of hegemony, moreover, Art’s formulation severs the connection between balancing and any argument about U.S. self-restraint. After all, a U.S. withdrawal from world politics could well create incentives for many states to acquire more capabilities for bargaining, meaning that U.S. restraint might easily generate more rather than less of the “balancing” behavior that Art writes about.

CONCLUSION
At issue in this debate is whether it is useful to amend balance of power theory, not whether the United States faces constraints on its power (it does) or whether other states are taking actions that further complicate U.S. foreign policymaking (they are). Our article showed that the soft-balancing amendment is empirically unfounded. Robert Art’s analogous effort to stretch the definition of “hard balancing” to encompass recent great-power policies is counterproductive principally because it is inherently unfalsifiable. In the end, there is no escaping that unipolarity is poor terrain for balance of power theory. For any theory to be of any use, it must be capable of being proved wrong at least sometimes. For balance of power theory, now is such a time.

—Stephen G. Brooks
—William C. Wohlforth
Hanover, New Hampshire

Lieber and Alexander Reply:

We welcome the opportunity to respond to Robert Art’s letter to the editors in regard to our article “Waiting for Balancing: Why the World Is Not Pushing Back.”1 Our article makes three arguments. First, we counter the claim that the United States’ grand strategy following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, particularly the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, was so threatening to other major powers that they began to balance against U.S. power.2 The evidence shows that the United States’ nearest rivals...