

Chapter 5

The Balance of Power and International Order

In this chapter I propose to deal with the following questions:

- (i) What is the balance of power?
- (ii) How does the balance of power contribute to international order?
- (iii) What is the relevance of the balance of power to the maintenance of international order at present?

The Balance of Power

We mean here by 'the balance of power' what Vattel meant: 'a state of affairs such that no one power is in a position where it is preponderant and can lay down the law to others.'¹ It is normally military power that we have in mind when we use the term, but it can refer to other kinds of power in world politics as well. The state of affairs of which Vattel speaks can be realised in a number of different ways.

First, we have to distinguish a simple balance of power from a complex one, that is to say a balance made up of two powers from one consisting of three or more. The simple balance of power is exemplified by the clash of France and Habsburg Spain/Austria in

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and by the clash of the United States and the Soviet Union in the Cold War. The complex balance of power is illustrated by the situation of Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, when France and Austria, now detached from Spain, were joined as great powers by England, Russia and Prussia. It is also illustrated by world politics at the present juncture, when the United States and the Soviet Union have been joined by China as a great power, with Japan as a potential fourth great power and a combination of Western European powers as a potential fifth. However, no historical balance of power has ever been perfectly simple or perfectly complex. Situations of a simple balance of power have always been complicated by the existence of some other powers, whose ability to influence the course of events may be slight but is always greater than zero.² Situations of a complex balance of power are capable of being simplified by diplomatic combinations, as for example, the six-power balance of the pre-First World War period was resolved into the simple division of the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente.

Whereas a simple balance of power necessarily requires equality or parity in power, a complex balance of power does not. In a situation of three or more competing powers the development of gross inequalities in power among them does not necessarily put the strongest in a position of preponderance, because the others have the possibility of combining against it.

In a simple balance of power the only means available to the power that is falling behind is to augment its own intrinsic strength (say, in the eighteenth century its territory and population; in the nineteenth century its industry and military organisation; in the twentieth century its military technology). Because in a complex balance of power there exists the additional resource of exploiting the existence of other powers, either by absorbing or partitioning them, or by allying with them, it has usually been held that complex balances of power are more stable than simple ones.³

Second, we must distinguish the general balance of power, that is the absence of a preponderant power in the international system as a whole, from a local or particular balance of power, in one area or segment of the system. In some areas of the world at present, such as the Middle East or the Indian subcontinent or South-east Asia, there may be said to be a local balance of power; in others,

such as Eastern Europe or the Caribbean, there is a local preponderance of power. Both sorts of situation are consistent with the fact that in the international system as a whole there is a general balance of power.

The distinction between the general balance and local balances should not be confused with that between the dominant balance and subordinate balances. At the present time the Soviet-American balance of power (sometimes called the 'central balance') is the dominant balance in the world, and the local balances of the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and South-east Asia are subordinate to it, in the sense that it affects them much more than they affect it. The powers that make up the dominant balance in some cases directly participate in a subordinate balance, as the Soviet Union and the United States are now elements in the Middle East balance. Burke uses this distinction between dominant and subordinate balances when he speaks of the relationship of Britain, France and Spain in the late eighteenth century as 'the great middle balance' of Europe, which qualified the operation of 'the balance of the north', 'the balance of Germany' and 'the balance of Italy'.⁴ The dominant balance, however, is still only a particular balance, and is not to be identified with the general balance or equilibrium of the system as a whole.

Third, one should distinguish a balance of power which exists subjectively from one that exists objectively. It is one thing to say that it is generally believed that a state of affairs exists in which no one state is preponderant in military strength; it is another to say that no one state is in fact preponderant. It is sometimes generally believed that a rough balance of military strength exists between two parties when this does not reflect the 'true' position as revealed by subsequent events; in Europe in the winter of 1939-40, for example, it was widely held that a military balance existed between the Allies and Germany, but a few weeks' fighting in the spring showed that this was not the case. A balance of power in Vattel's sense requires that there should be general belief in it; it is not sufficient for the balance to exist objectively but not subjectively. If (to take the case of a simple balance of power) one state is in fact in no position to secure an easy victory over another, but is generally believed to be in this position, then it can (in Vattel's terms) 'lay down the law' to the other. The problem of main-

taining a balance of power is not merely one of ensuring that a military balance exists, it is also a problem of ensuring that there exists belief in it. The main significance of a victory in the field of battle may be not what it does to affect the outcome of future battles, but what it does to affect beliefs about their outcomes. In this sense the German victory in Western Europe in 1940 did not show that the balance of power that had previously been thought to exist did not 'really' exist; it created a new situation in which what had been a balance of power was replaced by German preponderance.

But if the subjective element of belief in it is necessary for the existence of a balance of power, it is not sufficient. If a power is in fact in a position to gain an easy victory over its neighbour, even though it is generally thought to be balanced by it, this means that the beliefs on which the balance of power rests can quickly be shown to be false, and a new subjective situation brought about. A balance of power that rests not on the actual will and capacity of one state to withstand the assaults of another, but merely on bluff and appearances, is likely to be fragile and impermanent.

Fourth, we must distinguish between a balance of power which is fortuitous and one which is contrived. A fortuitous balance of power is one that arises without any conscious effort on the part of either of the parties to bring it into being. A contrived balance is one that owes its existence at least partly to the conscious policies of one or both sides.

The distinction between a balance that is fortuitous and one that is contrived should not be confused with that between policies of contriving a balance that are 'freely chosen' and those that are 'determined'. Many writers who have conceived of the balance of power as something that is consciously brought about have been insistent that states threatened by a potential dominant power have the option of failing to counterbalance it. For example, writers like Burke, Gentz and Heeren, who lived under the shadow of the possible collapse of the European balance of power due to the expansion of Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, and who urged policies of resistance to France, had a strong sense of the possibility that the rest of Europe would fail to provide a counterpoise, just as the ancient world had failed to provide a counterpoise to Rome.⁵ These writers may be contrasted with

those – like Rousseau and Arnold Toynbee – who view balances of power as the consequence of some historical law of challenge and response, which ensures that whenever a threat to the balance arises, some countervailing tendency will be brought into being to check it.⁶ But while the former group of thinkers emphasises the possibility that a challenge to the balance of power will fail to produce a response, and the latter asserts a historical tendency for a response to arise, both view the balance of power as something that is contrived rather than fortuitous.

A purely fortuitous balance of power we may imagine to be simply a moment of deadlock in a struggle to the death between two contending powers, each of which aims only at absolute aggrandisement. The element of contrivance presupposes that at least one of the parties, instead of pursuing the goal of absolute expansion of its power, seeks to limit it in relation to the power of the other. It forms an estimate of the military strength of the opponent, and takes this into account in determining the level of its own military strength – whether it seeks a level higher, equal or lower than that of the opponent. This is the normal position of any state that is acting 'rationally' (that is, that is acting in a way that is internally consistent and consistent with given goals) within the system of power politics. The concept of a contrived balance of power, however, embraces a spectrum of possibilities.

The most elementary form of contrived balance of power is a two-power balance in which one of the parties pursues a policy of preventing the other from attaining military preponderance. A more advanced form is a three-power balance in which one power seeks to prevent any of the others from attaining preponderance, not merely by augmenting its own military strength, but also by siding with whatever is the weaker of the other two powers: the policy known as 'holding the balance'. This form of balance-of-power policy was familiar in the ancient world, as David Hume argues, relying mainly on Polybius's celebrated account of the policy of Hiero of Syracuse, who sided with Carthage against Rome.⁷

It is a further step from this to the policy of preserving a balance of power throughout the international system as a whole. This is a policy which presupposes an ability to perceive the plurality of interacting powers as comprising a single system or field of forces.

It presupposes also a continuous and universal system of diplomacy, providing the power concerned with intelligence about the moves of all the states in the system, and with means of acting upon them. The policy of preserving a balance throughout the international system as a whole appears to have originated only in fifteenth-century Italy, and to have developed along with the spread of resident embassies. It became firmly implanted in European thought only in the seventeenth century, along with the notion that European politics formed a single system.⁸

It is a further step again to the conception of the balance of power as a state of affairs brought about not merely by conscious policies of particular states that oppose preponderance throughout all the reaches of the system, but as a conscious goal of the system as a whole. Such a conception implies the possibility of collaboration among states in promoting the common objective of preserving the balance, as exemplified by the successive grand alliances of modern times against potentially dominant powers. It implies also that each state should not only act to frustrate the threatened preponderance of others, but should recognise the responsibility not to upset the balance itself: it implies self-restraint as well as the restraint of others. The idea that preservation of the balance of power throughout the international system as a whole should be the common goal of all states in the system was one that emerged in Europe in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, especially as part of the coalitions against Louis XIV, and which came to fruition in the preamble to the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713.

Functions of the Balance of Power

Preservation of a balance of power may be said to have fulfilled three historic functions in the modern states system:

- (i) The existence of a general balance of power throughout the international system as a whole has served to prevent the system from being transformed by conquest into a universal empire;
- (ii) The existence of local balances of power has served to protect the independence of states in particular areas from absorption or domination by a locally preponderant power;
- (iii) Both general and local balances of power, where they have existed, have provided the conditions in which other institutions

on which international order depends (diplomacy, war, international law, great power management) have been able to operate.

The idea that balances of power have fulfilled positive functions in relation to international order, and hence that contrivance of them is a valuable or legitimate object of statesmanship, has been subject to a great deal of criticism in this century. At the present time criticism focuses upon the alleged obscurity or meaninglessness of the concept, the untested or untestable nature of the historical generalisations upon which it rests, and the reliance of the theory upon the notion that all international behaviour consists of the pursuit of power. Earlier in the century, especially during and after the First World War critics of the doctrine of the balance of power asserted not that it was unintelligible or untestable, but that pursuit of the balance of power had effects upon international order which were not positive, but negative. In particular, they asserted that the attempt to preserve a balance of power was a source of war, that it was carried out in the interests of the great powers at the expense of the interests of the small, and that it led to disregard of international law. I shall deal with these latter criticisms first.

Attempts to contrive a balance of power have not always resulted in the preservation of peace. The chief function of the balance of power, however, is not to preserve peace, but to preserve the system of states itself. Preservation of the balance of power requires war, when this is the only means whereby the power of a potentially dominant state can be checked. It can be argued, however, that the preservation of peace is a subordinate objective of the contrivance of balances of power. Balances of power which are stable (that is, which have built-in features making for their persistence) may help remove the motive to resort to preventive war.

The principle of preservation of the balance of power has undoubtedly tended to operate in favour of the great powers and at the expense of the small. Frequently, the balance of power among the great powers has been preserved through partition and absorption of the small: the extraordinary decline in the number of European states between 1648 and 1914 illustrates the attempt of large states to absorb small ones while at the same time following