

Reconceiving the balance of power: a review essay

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Abstract. Richard Little's new book has considerably widened the scope for thinking about the balance of power in International Relations (IR), both by beginning to provide a conceptual history of the idea and by expanding existing balance-of-power models. His concept of the associational balance of power is an important corrective to the prevailing realist understanding of the balance of power. However, Little does not explore more fully the relationship between the balance of power as a myth and a reality. Moreover, the usefulness of distinction between adversarial and association balance of power is not given a direct evaluation against the historical record, nor is his own composite model of the balance of power partly based on the distinction fully developed.

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Richard Little. *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths and Models* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 317 pp.

For a long time the concept and theory of the balance of power has captured the imagination of International Relations (IR) scholars and foreign policy practitioners alike. It is certainly the most fundamental and cherished idea within realism. Richard Little's book is the latest attempt to explore the balance of power in IR theory, and he does this in a very sophisticated and original way. An especially noteworthy and valuable aspect of the book is that, in contrast to a number of recent works which still seek to test balance-of-power theories as found in realism against historical evidence,¹ Little has begun to offer us a refreshing conceptual history of the balance of power by providing a new (albeit incomplete) genealogy of the idea. The book thus represents a truly novel approach to studying the balance of power in IR theory and practice.

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¹ See, for example, T. V. Paul, James J. Wirtz, and Michael Fortmann (eds), *Balance of power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004); Randall L. Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); and Stuart J. Kaufman, Richard Little, and William C. Wohlforth (eds), *The Balance of Power in World History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For a review of these works, see Daniel H. Nexon, 'The Balance of Power in the Balance', *World Politics*, 61:2 (April 2009), pp. 330–59.

Little sets out to develop a theoretical framework that ‘identifies and accounts for the important and remarkably distinctive role that the balance of power plays in IR’ (p. 12). Two central questions seem to have guided the study. First, how can one conceive of the balance of power in IR? Second, why has the balance of power emerged and persisted as a central and complex concept in IR despite the surrounding controversy (p. 13)? He attempts to answer these questions by developing a balance of power framework based on metaphors, myths and models, by analysing four canonical texts,² and by formulating a composite view of the balance of power himself.

The book makes a number of distinctive contributions, yet also suffers from some notable flaws. In addition to providing an interesting genealogy of the balance of power, another important aspect of the book is the distinction Little makes between an adversarial balance of power and an associational balance of power.³ It draws on Hedley Bull’s well-known distinction between international system and international society.⁴ Little has also self-consciously tried to bridge the American realist and English school perspectives on the balance of power from the start. But although he has created much space for a more pluralistic conception of the balance of power, his own composite model offered at the end of book is underdeveloped. A second weakness of book lies in his unconvincing attempt to portray the balance of power as a myth both in European political history and in the four theoretical texts he examines. In fact, the idea of the balance of power as a political myth could have been one of the most important contributions of the book. But in the end one is left unsure about the extent to which the balance of power has been a European myth.

The balance metaphor and the concept of power

Little approaches the first question – how to conceive of the balance of power – by treating it first as a metaphor. The metaphors for adversarial and associational balances of power are ‘a set of scales’ (p. 40) and ‘arch/body’ (p. 67) respectively. It is in Chapter 2 on metaphors and Chapter 3 on the relationship between the balance of power as metaphors, myths and models that Little begins to offer an interesting though somewhat thin and incomplete conceptual history of the balance of power. In doing so he has carried forward earlier works by Vagts, Wright, Sheehan, and others.⁵

² The four texts are: Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973); Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002); Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1979); and John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

³ Specifically, an adversarial balance of power means a situation where ‘great powers monitor the material power possessed by all the other states in the international system and endeavour to manipulate the resulting distribution of power in their own favour as a means of enhancing their chances of survival’ (p. 11). By contrast, an associational balance of power means a situation where great powers recognise that ‘they have a collective responsibility to maintain order in the international society and that as a consequence they are required to establish and maintain the balance of power’ (p. 12).

⁴ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*.

⁵ Alfred Vagts, ‘The Balance of Power: Growth of an Idea’, *World Politics*, 1 (1948), pp. 82–101; M. Wright, *The Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power* (London: 1975); Michael Sheehan, *The Balance of Power: History & Theory* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Treating the balance of power as a metaphor is a novel move. As Little points out, scholars have rarely explored the implication of such a treatment (p. 30). However, his attempt to spell out the implication by drawing on the cognitive linguistic literature on metaphor seems to have introduced complication and confusion into his discussion on power. He argues that the balance metaphor has a transformative impact on the concept of power (p. 48). Specifically, 'it moves us away from an agency-based conception of power and towards a structural conception of power. It tells us less about the power possessed by the participants as agents and more about how the power possessed by the members of the system defines the structure of the social setting' (p. 47).

However, if we distinguish between 'power' and 'the balance of power' as two distinct concepts, then it is easy to see that, while power can be defined in a variety of ways – as an attribute or property,⁶ a relation,⁷ or a structure⁸ – the balance of power is usually regarded as a structural conception in the IR literature. Its many meanings notwithstanding, it generally refers to a particular distribution of power in the international system. And systemic power distribution is a structural concept. It is not clear why we need to rely on the role of metaphor in order to understand the balance of power as a structural notion. While Little's discussion on the balance metaphor is interesting and original, he seems to have reached a familiar conclusion via an unconventional way. And while it is perhaps true that most IR theorists have failed to appreciate the metaphorical significance of the balance of power concept, most IR theorists would surely recognise it as a structural notion.

The balance of power: what myth?

Next Little tries to establish the 'mythopoeic' status of the balance of power. Following a post-positivist perspective, he argues that the reason why positivists have attempted to build balance-of-power models is because 'for the past five centuries the international balance of power has been inextricably linked to a political myth, that has become progressively more deeply rooted, that associates the concept with the stability and survival of a system of independent states' (pp. 60–1). The myth is told in terms of ideological narratives that depict how a political equilibrium will emerge to preserve the independence of individual states and ensure the survival of the European states system. Such narratives 'are deeply imbedded in the way that Europeans have thought about international politics over the past five hundred years' and they provide positivists with 'the basis for testable

⁶ This is traditionally how power is conceived of in IR. Most realists today still favour this conception. See, for example, Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 191–2; Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 13; Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, chap 3.

⁷ The original formulation is Robert Dahl, 'The Concept of Power', *Behavioral Science*, 2:3, pp. 201–15. But also see Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, 'Two Faces of Power', *American Political Science Review*, 56:4 (December 1962), pp. 947–52; Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz, 'Decisions and Nondecisions: An Analytical Framework', *American Political Science Review*, 57:3 (September 1963), pp. 632–42.

⁸ Steven Lukes discusses this kind of power in his *Power: A Radical View*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005).

models that yield determinate outcomes' (p. 61). The balance of power takes on the characteristics of a political myth 'because it not only generates an explanation for what has happened in the past, but it also makes a case for how states should operate in the future' (p. 72).

This is an interesting and appealing argument. But Little needs to clarify a bit more whether he means that the balance of power has been a political myth in European history or whether he only intends to argue that the four theorists he examines have been influenced by a mythical understanding of the balance of power and hence their own balance-of-power models developed as academic projects also contain a considerable mythopoeic dimension. In order to make the myth argument convincing, three steps are needed. First, Little has to provide an account of the rise and perpetuation of the balance of power as such a myth. Where did the myth come from? How has it been used and sustained? Second, to argue that the four theorists have engaged with myth-making, as he does in Chapters 4–7, he has to identify profound ideological narratives in their models. Third, to spell out the full implication of treating the balance of power as a myth, he has to confront the question of whether the balance of power has actually operated in European political history *in practice* and if so, how to treat the relationship between balance of power as a reality and the balance of power as a myth.

In fact, Little does not take the third step. Admittedly, this is beyond the scope of the book. But then this is the problem: a more careful research design is needed to show the mythopoeic element of the balance of power. It seems, however, that there is ample literature to suggest that the balance of power has been utilised as a tool of statecraft not only in European history, but also in the history of American foreign policy.⁹ Indeed, Little's own historical analysis often reveals that the balance of power has played the role of an essential guide to foreign policy, particularly in his discussion of the significance of the balance of power principle in the Utrecht settlement of 1713–1714 (p. 271). The relationship between the balance of power as a reality and a myth is therefore an interesting question to explore.

As for the first step, Little uses Gucciardini's *History of Italy* to account for the origins of the balance of power myth-making, and discusses Churchill's 1946 Iron Curtain speech and Bush's Introduction to the 2002 *National Security Strategy* to explore the mythopoeic role of the balance of power in the contemporary world. These evidence, however, are insufficient and selective. Even from a purely post-positivist perspective, such an account of the balance-of-power myth is unconvincing.

Little's treatment of the second step is somewhat disappointing. At the end of each chapter in which he analyses a theorist's work, he devotes a paragraph or two to pointing out its mythopoeic dimension. But his arguments on their myth-making are not always convincing. To be sure, from a post-positivist perspective, all IR works must contain a mythopoeic dimension since there can be no completely

⁹ See, for example, Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power: A Case History of the Theory and Practice of One of the Great Concepts of European Statecraft* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1955); Sheehan, *The Balance of Power*; John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); and Christopher Layne, *Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

neutral social science work (p. 85). But to argue on the basis of this minimum standard is neither interesting nor fair to the major arguments of the four works.

For example, Little cites Bull's concern with international economic and social injustice and his hope that mankind can endeavour to alleviate these injustices as evidence of the ideological dimension of Bull's model (p. 166). Yet in fact Bull has nowhere said explicitly that the balance of power can or should accomplish such a task. Moreover, Bull has tried very hard to avoid any political connotation of his work and strongly cautioned that 'The search for conclusions that can be presented as "solutions" or "practical advice" is a corrupting element in the contemporary study of world politics, which properly understood is an intellectual activity and not a practical one.'¹⁰

On Waltz, Little says that there are two aspects to his ideological stance. The first is an aversion to war and a recognition that the main justification of the state is to ensure the security of its inhabitants (p. 211). The second is that Waltz invests the balance of power 'with the same moral value that Europeans ascribed to it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – it prevents the monopolization of power' (p. 212). These might be Waltz's view, but whether they can be properly called myth depends on one's definition of 'myth' and the extent to which such 'myth' has affected Waltz's scholarly effort still needs to be determined. Waltz's conception of the balance of power, it seems, is overtly mechanistic and corresponds most clearly to what Inis Claude has called the 'automatic' version of the balance of power.¹¹

It almost appears that what Little means by 'myth' is really a theorist's view about the nature of an international problem and how to deal with it. Such a definition would make all IR writings myths.¹² Curiously, the balance of power as a myth is only given passing mention in the concluding chapter in which Little attempts to develop his own composite balance-of-power model. And the mention actually contradicts Little's earlier views. Now he says that 'the metaphorical and mythical thinking has only provided a springboard which has propelled each theorist along a rather different trajectory' (p. 280). So they are not engaged in myth-making after all? Furthermore, in the final chapter Little in fact applies a historical analysis to show that both adversarial and associational balances of power have in practice played important roles in European history. He uses this fact as one basis of his model. So the balance of power is not myth after all? Finally, given his myth argument, one might ask whether Little is also engaged in a sort of myth-making in developing his own balance-of-power model. It seems that the relationship between the balance of power as a metaphor, a myth and a model has not been brought together and sufficiently explicated in the book's conclusion.

The balance of power in four canonical texts

In Chapters 4–7, Little tries to evaluate the four canonical texts in IR theory in terms of the role of the balance of power in these theories. His analysis is original

¹⁰ Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, p. 308.

¹¹ Inis L. Claude, Jr., *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962), chap. 3.

¹² But perhaps this is what some post-positivists think.

and challenges many existing interpretations, but is not without shortcomings. His assessment of Morgenthau is refreshing. Morgenthau's work is often criticised for its vagueness and inconsistency. Little, by applying his distinction between the adversarial and associational balance of power, offers a very different assessment. He discerns two dynamic processes in Morgenthau's model, roughly corresponding to the adversarial and associational balance of power. Thus, Morgenthau is no longer seen as confused or inconsistent. Moreover, he comes up with the interesting observation that *'Politics Among Nations* can be viewed as a proto-constructivist text that focuses on how international politics has undergone seismic changes as the result of fundamental shifts in the dominant beliefs of the age' (p. 93).

Little also offers some interesting insights on Bull's model. Bull's approach is seen as providing a bridge between the classical realism of Morgenthau and the neo-realism of Waltz (p. 129). Bull and Morgenthau have 'a surprising amount of overlap' in their views about the balance of power because they are both aware of the distinction between adversarial and associational approaches to the balance of power (pp. 129–30). According to Little, although Bull initially stipulates that the institutional structure of the European international society was underpinned by the balance of power, in practice all five institutions (the balance of power, international law, diplomacy, war, and great power management) are mutually interdependent (p. 128). Of great value is Little's extrapolation from Bull a more elaborate model of the balance of power that he argues is hidden in Bull's text (p. 131). But here the discussion becomes quite complicated. On the one hand, he implies that Bull's distinction between a fortuitous and contrived balance of power corresponds to his distinction between an adversarial and an associational balance of power. On the other hand, in the more elaborate model he extrapolates from Bull, the contrived balance of power subsumes both the adversarial and associational balances of power. Presumably this is because the system/society distinction comes into play in both cases. But the sophistication of the analysis seems to have reduced the clarity of the argument.

Little's assessment of Waltz is in many ways favourable when compared with the scathing criticisms levelled at Waltz in the past. It is also provocative and, in my opinion, somewhat misleading in a few places. First, he argues that Waltz's logic reveals the potential for an associational balance of power to emerge (p. 167). Second, he believes that Waltz's model 'points the way to the emergence of a unipolar system and the absence of any sustained discussion of unipolarity represents, as a consequence, a significant weakness of *Theory of International Politics*' (p. 167). Both views are questionable.

First, when Little argues that what Waltz calls 'an increasingly solid bipolar balance' 'reflects the existence of an associational rather than an adversarial balance of power' (p. 208), he overlooks the context of Waltz's remark. Waltz is writing about the US' and the Soviet Union's increasingly regularised responses to each other's actions as the Cold War proceeded. This shows the regularised competition between the two superpowers rather than any recognition on their part that they had a *collective responsibility* to maintain the balance of power, which is what an associational balance of power requires. Although the last chapter of Waltz's book is entitled 'the management of international affairs', its main theme is the difficulties and possibilities of managing international affairs – not something that an associational balance of power should suggest.

Second, Little uses the quote from Waltz that ‘the question to ask is not whether a third or fourth country will enter the circle of great powers in the foreseeable future but rather whether the Soviet Union can keep up’ as evidence that the logic of Waltz’s approach should have encouraged him to explore the implication of unipolarity (pp. 188–9).¹³ Again he overlooks the context. Waltz is examining the durability of the bipolar world. That the Soviet Union might have difficulty keeping up with the US is only a minor point he makes. And it should not obscure his larger point that ‘middle powers who try to compete [with the two superpowers] find themselves constantly falling behind’ and ‘the barriers to entering the superpower club have never been higher and more numerous’.¹⁴

Might Little’s conjecture that Waltz ‘might have been more willing to entertain the possibility of an enduring unipolar world’ (p. 189) nevertheless be correct? But for Waltz to entertain the possibility of unipolarity is also for him to renounce his own balance-of-power model. The theory of *Theory of International Politics* is that balances of power will recurrently form. If Waltz accepted the possibility or even the durability of unipolarity, then his theoretical edifice would have to collapse. It is more likely that, if Waltz were to elaborate on the possibility of the Soviet Union’s exit from the superpower club, he would have argued that other states would emerge to balance the US and thus create a new balance of power. Contrary to what Little believes, it is not surprising to find Waltz think that unipolarity is ‘unnatural’. Unipolarity cannot have a place in Waltz’s theory. In fact, Waltz has consistently maintained this position since the end of the Cold War.¹⁵ His failure to bring unipolarity into focus is true to his theoretical commitment, rather than ‘an anomaly in his thinking’ (p. 268). In both cases, then, Little has seized the minor points Waltz makes which do not have the larger implication Little claims.

In addition, when discussing Waltz’s view on power, Little also seems to have created unnecessary confusion. He says that Waltz wants to establish a structural concept of power (p. 181). What Waltz tries to do in fact is to define the third component of international structure in terms of the distribution of power across states. And he defines a state’s power simply in terms of its capabilities. As he puts it, ‘To use power is to apply one’s capabilities in an attempt to change someone else’s behavior in certain ways.’¹⁶ Waltz’s agential conception of power is much like other realists’ view.¹⁷ Later in the book, Little acknowledges that ‘Waltz and Mearsheimer agree that power needs to be defined in terms of capabilities [...]’ (p. 223).

¹³ As Little says, ‘If the answer to this question had been that the Soviet Union could not keep up, then the implication that followed from Waltz’s analysis was crystal clear: bipolarity would give way to unipolarity. Given this assessment, it was remiss of Waltz not to open up the question of unipolarity.’ (p. 188).

¹⁴ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 181, 183.

¹⁵ Kenneth Waltz, ‘The Emerging Structure of International Politics’, *International Security*, 18:2 (Fall 1994), pp. 44–79; and Waltz, ‘Structural Realism after the Cold War’, *International Security*, 25:1 (Summer 2000), pp. 5–41.

¹⁶ Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 191. He says in a later article that ‘Power in neorealist theory is simply the combined capability of a state.’ See Waltz, ‘Realist Thought and Neorealist Theory’, *Journal of International Affairs*, 44:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 21–37, at p. 36.

¹⁷ Mearsheimer, for example, says that ‘Power [...] represents nothing more than specific assets or material resources that are available to states.’ See Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 57.

In assessing Mearsheimer, Little puts forward a number of valuable observations. He uses the treadmill metaphor to argue that the offensive/defensive distinction is not helpful for understanding the relationship between Mearsheimer and Waltz. He argues that Mearsheimer's theory demonstrates the regional characteristics of the international system. He praises Mearsheimer's approach because it 'not only moves away from a Eurocentric perspective, it also holds the potential to provide a distinctive entry point into the analysis of world history' (p. 216). According to Little, because of the regional focus of Mearsheimer's theory, it offers a much more promising vehicle for studying international systems in the pre-European era of world history (p. 216).

But the overall assessment suffers from two shortcomings. First, Little surprisingly fails to focus on the role of the balance of power in Mearsheimer's theory. Indeed he fails to recognise that the balance of power plays no crucial role in Mearsheimer's theory, because Mearsheimer simply defines it as 'the actual distribution of military assets among the great powers in the system'.¹⁸ It is essential to recognise that offensive realism is not balance-of-power theory. In contrast to Waltz, Mearsheimer claims to develop a theory of foreign policy as well as of international politics. He makes five theoretical assumptions (that the international system is anarchic, that great powers inherently possess some offensive military capability, that states can never be certain about other states intentions, that survival is the primary goal of great powers, and that great powers are rational actors) and argues that when the five assumptions are married together, the theory predicts that even security-seeking states will maximise their relative power. In Mearsheimer's world the balance of power is simply a structural condition that states will try to change in their attempts to establish hegemony. Here as in some other realist theories that emphasise states' expansion, the concept of the balance of power merely means any distribution of power in the international system.¹⁹ In fact, in this chapter Little frequently uses the balance of power concept in this sense too, but his failure to point out this particular use of the concept and its largely auxiliary role in Mearsheimer's theory is a deficiency for a book that seeks to evaluate the balance of power in IR theory.

A minor point is that Little has misinterpreted Mearsheimer's theoretical assumptions. He says that Mearsheimer assumes that states aim to survive by maximising power (pp. 220, 224–5). But in fact Mearsheimer only assumes that states aim to survive, which is one among his five assumptions. Only when the five assumptions are taken together can the theory have the behavioural implication that states will maximise their relative power.²⁰

The balance of power and unipolarity

In the concluding chapter Little develops a composite view of the balance of power. His approach is pluralistic, drawing on realism, English school and

¹⁸ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, p. 2, fn. 3.

¹⁹ Another example is Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²⁰ Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, pp. 31–2.

constructivism, and specifically Morgenthau, Bull, Waltz and Mearsheimer's insights on the balance of power. The composite view integrates three dimensions: system/society divide, polarity, and geography (p. 257), thus developing into a more expansive conception of the balance of power. For this Little deserves praise: not only is it difficult to attempt theoretical synthesis but sometimes scholars' willingness to do so is in doubt.²¹

But how valuable is this composite view? Little acknowledges that it only provides a research framework and not yet a theory (p. 281). He nevertheless implies that the composite view, though underdeveloped, can potentially account for some persistent anomalies in International Relations. For example, given the collapse of the Soviet Union, why has the US not yet pulled out of Europe and Japan? Why has the Eurasian great powers not tried to balance the US in the post-Cold War era? He suggests that the anomalies arise out of a purely systemic – that is, realist – perspective on the balance of power. If one adds the societal – that is, English school – dimension, then the anomalies disappear, because a US withdraw 'would reflect a lack of solidarity with other members of the western international society and potentially encourage them to think in terms of an adversarial balance of power' (p. 279). Little is in fact implying that an associational balance of power can somehow explain the anomaly of unipolarity in realist balance-of-power theory (pp. 282–3).

This is certainly a plausible argument, though Little fails to engage more fully with recent realist attempts to account for the stability of unipolarity.²² He also does not pay sufficient attention to varied responses (including forms of 'soft balancing') of states like China and Russia in reaction to American unipolarity in the post-Cold War period. More importantly, however, his argument raises a general problem with the concept of the associational balance of power.

Little argues that an associational balance of power among the Western powers has prevented the adversarial balance of power from forming among them. But here the associational balance of power no longer refers to a political equilibrium or a more or less even distribution of power. It apparently refers to post-Cold War unipolarity centred on the US. Indeed, although at times Little uses the associational balance of power to indicate the recognition on the part of the European great powers of their collective responsibility to maintain 'a political equilibrium' (p. 86), the term frequently refers to *any* distribution of power agreed upon by the major powers in an international system (pp. 68, 73, 272, 274). But if associational balance of power can mean the inter-subjective consent on unipolarity or any other distribution of power among the major powers, then the concept will encounter the classic problem associated with the old balance of power concept, namely, it is not clear what kind of power distribution it refers to. In Little's usage, it seems to refer to any intersubjectively agreed upon distribution of power. This may not be a troubling issue to Little since he is fully aware of the protean character of the balance of power concept and since he has first treated the balance of power as a metaphor. But perhaps here he can be more explicit and

²¹ For an argument on the importance of 'analytical eclecticism' that combines different theoretical approaches in IR, see Peter J. Katzenstein and Nobuo Okawara, 'Japan, Asian-Pacific Security, and the Case for Analytical Eclecticism', *International Security*, 26:3 (Winter 2001/2002), pp. 153–85.

²² An important such attempt is William C. Wohlforth, 'The Stability of a Unipolar World', *International Security*, 24:1 (Summer 1999), pp. 5–41.

spell out the implications of such a conception. The concept also appears to have moved quite close in meaning to great power management in English School theory, albeit compounded with a constructivist ideational perspective. Indeed, in the last paragraph of the book (p. 287) Little seems to be using the two terms interchangeably.

A related point is that, with the associational balance of power so conceived, it seems that Little's explanation of unipolarity relies primarily on a constructivist ideational explanation, rather than on any distinctive balance-of-power mechanism. One might wonder whether this has served to metamorphose the research question. Little needs to clarify whether the concept of associational balance of power still retains the classical English School understanding of the balance of power (which to me conveys a sense of a 'political equilibrium' as its outcome) or whether it has simply become an inter-subjective agreement on any international distribution of power, which sounds more constructivist than English School. Otherwise, his claim that the associational balance of power can explain unipolarity would not only be underdeveloped but also confusing.

One final point may be made on the book's research design. There seems to be a hidden tension between Little's post-positivist attempt to portray the balance of power as a metaphor and a myth and his somewhat positivist attempt to develop his own model of the balance of power to account for world politics. As a result, although the book contains many refreshing interpretations and original insights, somehow some of the most interesting arguments have not been developed very far. His myth argument is one example of this. Another example is the very valuable distinction between adversarial and associational balance of power. But Little only discusses the distinction in the light of others' works rather than trying to develop a framework or theory on the basis of this distinction and then evaluate it with historical evidence. How exactly has the balance of power worked in the practice of International Relations? Since Little's focus is more on the role of the balance of power in contemporary IR theoretical texts, he does not provide a direct answer to this question. But it seems that, in the light of his wide-ranging discussion, much work still needs to be done on this basic and central question in European statecraft. In the end of course he develops a composite model of the balance of power, but it is underdeveloped in the sense that how the three dimensions he identifies (system/society divide, polarity, and geography) are supposed to work together in a causal network is unspecified.

Conclusion

In sum, Little has considerably widened the scope for thinking about the balance of power in IR, both by beginning to provide a conceptual history of the idea and by expanding existing balance-of-power models. The book also offers a succinct and refreshing textual exegesis of the four canonical texts in IR theory. His concept of the associational balance of power is an important corrective to the prevailing realist understanding of the balance of power. It reminds us that the balance of power is not just an unintended natural process, as some realists would have it, but can be based on the norms of international society.

However, while Little's interesting but incomplete genealogy of the balance of power idea has generated important new research angles, it also raises questions as he does not explore more fully the relationship between the balance of power as a myth and a reality. Moreover, the usefulness of distinction between adversarial and association balance of power is not given a direct evaluation against the historical record, nor is his own composite model partly based on the distinction fully developed. This suggests that much work still needs to be done if one is to follow his approach. Little is most successful in discussing the similarities and differences among the four theorists' models of the balance of power. In delivering a sophisticated textual exegesis, he also succeeds in analysing the complicated role of the balance of power in contemporary IR theory.