

# 9/11 was an Instance of Transnational Balancing: An Intervention in Statist IR Theory

Alternatives: Global, Local, Political  
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Ersel Aydinli<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

With the end of the Cold War and through the start of the 21st century, conventional IR theories were anticipating an eventual balancing against the United States. Puzzled when this phenomenon did not occur, balancing theorists engaged in a lively discussion, bringing with it the development of proposed alternative forms of balancing and a debate over whether the concept itself had perhaps outlived its relevance. This article reengages with this discussion, suggesting that many of the involved theorists were hampered by theoretical blinders based on statism, and that in fact balancing did occur, but in an unconventional manner and at the hands of an unexpected suspect: al Qaeda, a violent non-state actor, acting in a transnational manner. In this context, this article treats the 9/11 attacks of the violent Jihadist anti-Western movement as an instance of balancing against the hegemon, a successful one in that the Jihadists arguably aimed not at “winning,” but at revealing the superpower’s weaknesses so that others would subsequently join the balancing effort. By failing to view the Jihadists’ efforts as an ideological balancing effort, the United States responded with force rather than ideational counter-balancing. They waged a war instead of emphasizing efforts to separate the radical violent Jihadist perpetrators from the idea they were championing—a struggle in the name of Muslims/the downtrodden East against the United States—and thus allowing the challenger to rise into a position of “dissident” in the Muslim world, and, arguably, paving the path for today’s state revisionist behaviors. The article proposes a framework based on traditionally state-based concepts of intent and impact/capacity to show how non-state actors can in fact balance superpowers and therefore should be incorporated into balancing theories, and presents the actions of the violent Jihadists as an example of transnational, ideational balancing—a phenomenon as real and consequential as state-balancing.

## Keywords

transnational balancing, IR theory, non-state actors, 9/11, state revisionism

## Introduction

According to some analysts, state revisionism, in the broadest sense of efforts to upset the status quo in the international order, has been on the rise in recent years (Schmitt, 2018). Evidence of this has been presented in the growing concerns over a Chinese challenge (Feigenbaum, 2020; Turner & Nymalm, 2019);

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<sup>1</sup> Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey

## Corresponding Author:

Ersel Aydinli, Department of International Relations, Bilkent University, Ankara 06800, Turkey.  
Email: [ersel@bilkent.edu.tr](mailto:ersel@bilkent.edu.tr)

the expansion of India, Pakistan, and North Korea's nuclear arsenals and Iran's suspected quest for nuclear weapons (Behraves, 2018; Robinson & Platte, 2021); Turkey's hyper-internationalism (Kardaş, 2021); and of course, in Russia's annexation of Crimea and current war in Ukraine (Allison, 2017; Sakwa, 2015).

One explanation for such revisionist behaviors, in particular with respect to Russia's actions, is that the United States did not cope well with its Cold War victory over the USSR. Some point to its displaying of self-congratulatory discourse about the triumph, to the chagrin of its rivals (Tsygankov, 2003). Others note the US's efforts to consolidate its preponderance by doubling down on NATO and extending membership to encompass the former Soviet Union, despite offering contradictory assurances to Russia (Shiffrin, 2016; 2020)—a perhaps instinctive expansive response that Mearsheimer (2014a, 2014b, 2022) labels “reckless preponderance.”

It is possible however that some of the state revisionism we are observing may have more to do with what happened *to* the victorious superpower in the post-Cold War period rather than how that superpower behaved toward its former rival. Following the end of the Cold War and the rise of the United States as the sole remaining superpower, Realist theories predicted that statist balancing efforts to equalize the superpower and reduce its ability to exert its military advantage (Pape, 2005), should naturally occur. By the early 2000s however, some (e.g., Ikenberry, 2002; Paul, 2004) were expressing surprise that signs of such behavior were not yet evident.

This article argues that in recent decades there in fact *was* a balancing attempt of the superpower—not the long-awaited (but not observed) balancing at the state level, but an unconventional one from an unusual suspect: the violent Jihadist ideological movement<sup>1</sup> and the asymmetric challenge it presented. The actions of the violent Jihadists, highlighted by al Qaeda's attacks on 9/11, not only succeeded in equalizing the US's power by revealing its vulnerabilities, but in doing so created an environment in which the US's efforts to counteract this unusual balancing attempt, the “global war on terror,” further exposed both domestically and internationally the structural defects of United States power and the U.S.-led security structure.<sup>2</sup> This balancing effort helped create a context that gradually allowed other states to gain more confidence, and increased their perception that the victorious power was not as strong as it appeared to be. One implication of this may have been the emboldening of today's revisionist behaviors.

Moreover, this article argues that not only did such an unconventional balancing against the superpower by a non-state actor take place, but that conventional IR theorists,<sup>3</sup> with their statist biases and fixations, failed to conceptualize it effectively in the years following the 9/11 attack. This oversight had negative repercussions for IR theory in general and, as is argued here, for balancing theories in particular. This article ultimately aims to show that 9/11 was itself an example of a balancing act, and that it may even be considered as having been a successful one—albeit conducted in an unconventional manner and at the hands of an unexpected perpetrator.

The following sections attempt to first substantiate the idea that IR scholarship in the years after 9/11 viewed the event and the actors involved through narrow “terrorism” lenses, neglecting to take into consideration possible broader IR theoretical explanations or implications. As a correction to this, the focus of the article then proposes a broadening of the balancing theory literature in particular to incorporate the actions of non-state actors (NSAs). It lays out the groundwork for reconsidering the concepts of intent and capabilities, two major balancing-related factors that have traditionally been used to limit balancing theories to states, and argues that the actions of the violent Jihadists constituted an act of transnational, ideational balancing.

## **Conventional IR Theories' 9/11 Failure**

This article is far from the first to criticize the performance of conventional IR theorists. Beyond the obvious fundamental critiques presenting alternative paradigms, such as feminist (e.g., Enloe, 1990; 2004; Peterson, 1992; Sylvester, 1994), post-structural (e.g., Ashley, 1986;

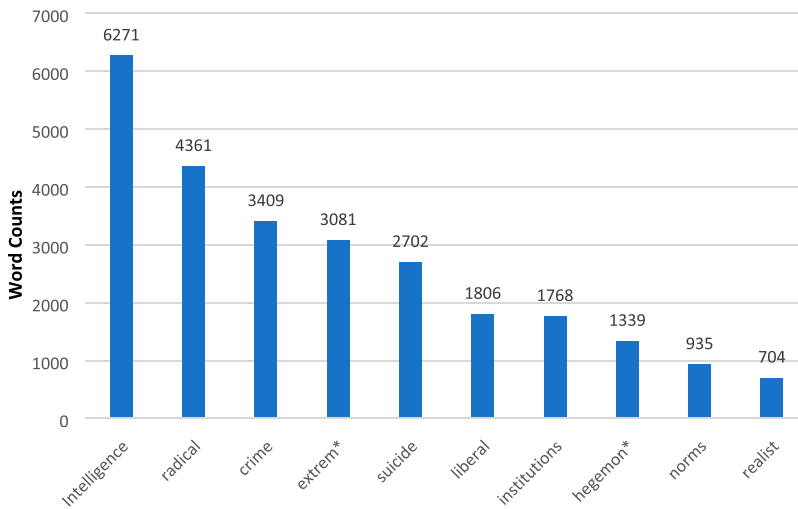
1988) or queer (Peterson, 1999; Weber, 2014) IR theorizing, there have also been voices ranging from those condemning IR theory's limited policy relevance (Lepgold, 1998; Nicholson, 2000; Tetlock, 2005) to those highlighting the failure of grand theorizing in IR (Brown, 2013; Dunne, Hansen, & Wight, 2013; Lake, 2013; Mearsheimer & Walt, 2013; Rosenberg, 2016). There is also the significant body of scholarship, critiquing IR theory that has emerged out of interest in "non-Western" IR, from those focusing on "American" hegemony in the field (e.g. Hoffmann, 1977; Turton, 2016; Waever, 1998) to those more generally decrying the lack of non-Western perspectives (e.g. Acharya & Buzan, 2017; Anderl & Witt, 2020; Bakir & Ersoy, 2022; Hobson, 2012; Lake, 2016; Ringmar, 2020; Wemheuer-Vogelaar, Kristensen, & Lohaus, 2021).

Nevertheless, it could be argued that a particular failure of conventional IR theorizing took place in the years following September 11, 2001, when the field of International Relations was flooded with scholarly works about the event and its perpetrators—for example, such highly cited examples as Byman, 2003; Gunaratna, 2002 and Hoffman, 2002.<sup>4</sup> Scholars like Bruce Hoffman, Fawaz Gerges, or Jessica Stern, who had previously been known primarily within the academic community came to be featured on popular television news networks; IR curricula were revised to add classes about terrorism and Jihadism; and in the years to follow, new journals focused on terrorism, for example, *Perspectives on Terrorism* (2007), *Journal of Terrorism Research* (2007), *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2008), *Behavioral Studies of Terrorism and Political Aggression* (2009), *CTC Sentinel* (2007), were founded to meet the demand for works examining this phenomenon and how to respond to it. Amidst all this activity however, what happened to the IR theorists? 20 years on from 9/11, it is not unreasonable to expect that such a monumental event in global affairs should have spawned significant reconsiderations of the extant paradigms or concepts, if not to understand how they had failed to foresee such developments, then at least to better understand global affairs in their wake. To a large extent, this does not appear to have occurred.

In the case of 9/11 and the violent Jihadists, conventional IR theorists seem to have failed to adhere to the advice of one of the greatest IR theoreticians, James Rosenau, who cautioned in his writings about the risk of becoming trapped in "conceptual jails" (1984; 1990), and often said that to theorize we need to start with a basic question: What is this an instance of? Unfortunately, when it came to 9/11, instead of adhering to that advice, conventional IR theorists appeared more likely to address the immediacy of the shocking event by snatching the handiest item from their conceptual toolbox and reducing the scope of the phenomenon to a "simple" act of "terrorism". This narrowed perspective came with accompanying blinders, both ontological and epistemological.

This accusation is not intended to suggest that theoretical inquiry on 9/11 and al Qaeda was absent in the years after 9/11. Scholars such as Mendelsohn (2005, 2009), Agathangelou and Ling (2004), Hall and Ross (2015), and others made important contributions. Nevertheless, it could be argued that more of the published scholarship in the post-9/11 era emphasized the "terrorism" side of the event and its perpetrators, rather than seeking broader theoretical explanations or implications. In an effort to substantiate this observation, an informal inquiry was made using the Publish or Perish search engine, looking at 877<sup>5</sup> scholarly journal articles published between 2001 and 2011 that contained the keywords "9/11," "al-Qaeda" ("al-Qaida"), "jihadism," or "jihadist" in the title, abstract, or main body.

A frequency list of content words from those articles was created, from which words that could be considered as associated with "IR theory" or with "terrorism" were identified.<sup>6</sup> The results show that terrorism-related words appeared far more frequently in the texts than IR theory-related terms. Of all the words that could be logically categorized into one of these two categories, the five most frequently used overall were: intelligence, radical, crime, extrem\*, and suicide, all of which can be considered as associated with "terrorism." The top five most frequently occurring "theory" related words, liberal, institutions, hegemon\*, norms, and realist, were far less common (see Figure 1). While



**Figure 1.** Top 5 occurring “terrorism” and “theory” words.

conceptualization of 9/11 and al Qaeda may have occurred, the language used in these works suggests that during those first 10 years, the event and the actors involved in it were more likely to be viewed through a terrorism lens.

What if we could go back to the decade following 9/11, and, as IR theorists, remain loyal to Rosenau’s advice? What if we had at that time attempted to conceptualize 9/11 as an “IR phenomenon,” not primarily as an act of crime and terrorism; breaking free of any conceptual jails and asking: “What is this—9/11 and the rise of the violent Jihadist challenge—an instance of?” The next section first provides a brief overview of the violent Jihadist movement and in particular al Qaeda. It then reviews the internal debates that were occurring among balancing theorists in the early 2000s over the concept’s continued relevance, and explores the irony of these discussions taking place alongside the catastrophic global developments of 9/11 and its aftermath—without connections being drawn between them.

## 9/11 as an Instance of Balancing

Al Qaeda’s fight against the United States and the West in general emerged out of a broader power struggle within the Islamic community. For Jihadists, the general understanding is that Muslims are not being governed by “genuine” Islamic practices (Zimmerman, 2004, 37). This failure to adhere to Islamic practices is considered to account in large part for why the Islamic nation (*ummah*) has long fallen behind the Western world and is afflicted with suffering and misery. A good deal of the responsibility for this overall decay of Muslim influence is placed on Arab regimes that have ignored Islamic laws in their governance and allowed Western powers to hold all the strings in Arab politics (Wiktorowicz, 2005).

Some Jihadist groups further converge on the idea that this process needs to be reversed through violence, with their goal being to galvanize Muslims into rebelling against and ousting their regimes (Doran, 2001), and, ultimately, to unite Muslims around the globe under a restored Caliphate (Mendelsohn, 2005). In short, Jihadists are first involved in a contest for political power with more moderate factions of the Muslim world; a “clash inside a civilization, a battle for the future of the Muslim world” (White House, 2002).

Al Qaeda's critical role in shaping this power struggle was its leadership's contention that the biggest impediment to the reunification of the Islamic nation was the Western world. Western support of certain Muslim nations was viewed as a "divide and rule" attempt to dominate the larger, unified Muslim nation. Jihadists had to, therefore, overcome the "far enemy" (the Western world and especially the United States) in order to get rid of the "near enemy" (Middle Eastern regimes). Bin Laden concluded that the "Zionist-Crusader alliance" was the "root of the problem" and hence the only way of correcting injustices against Muslims and restoring their power was to eradicate the root (August 1996). If they could end Western interference in the affairs of the Muslim world, the corrupt rulers of Muslim societies would fall one by one; Jihadists would assume the driver's seat and steer the *ummah* to genuine Islam and a return to the glorious days of earlier centuries.

Turning to the 9/11 attack, it was at its essence, therefore, an act of aggression against the dominant power in the global system. The format of the attack was unusual, but even among states, not all aggressive acts look alike (consider Pearl Harbor, for example). If conventional IR theorists had first put aside the particular identity of the aggressor as a "terrorist," how might they have begun conceptualizing this attack on the United States and subsequent disturbance to the international system? To name just a few possibilities, it is likely that polarity discussions would have exploded; people might have begun questioning alliance structures; some would perhaps have speculated about the changing nature of power or about a new distribution of capabilities in the system; others might have begun considering what the attack implied about the nature of anarchy or about the nature of the world order (was this a sign of continuity or change?); still others might have asked what this suggested about the role of actorhood in the international system.

Drawing on various possibilities of IR concepts to try and understand this phenomenon, what would have likely emerged was a picture of a hegemon and all that it represented politically and economically, being struck dramatically for the political purpose of weakening it. In this sense, the act could have been considered as one of attempted redistribution of power in the international system. If the actor making this attempt had been a known, conventional entity, that is, a state, some IR theorists would arguably have labeled this an instance of balancing. How might 9/11 and the rise of the Jihadists have been conceptualized as a balancing act? To begin such a speculation, we need to consider the debates in the balancing literature at that time.

In the first decade of the 2000s, the apparent lack of concrete evidence of traditional balancing behaviors in the post-Cold War period (e.g., Ikenberry, 2002; Paul, 2004) was provoking numerous criticisms against balance of power theory, leading to such conclusions as it had failed to address multiple contexts (Levy & Thompson, 2010), or it simply could not be considered a universal law (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008; Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth, 2007). Scholars were tackling with the apparent incongruence between theory and practice in different ways, from insisting that balancing would eventually happen (Layne 1993, 2006; Pressman, 2004; Waltz, 2000), to proposing that it had not yet occurred because of the benign nature of the then hegemon (Glaser, 1996). Most interesting though were perhaps those response efforts that were seeking to modify or expand balance of power theory with various concepts, from leash-slipping (Layne, 1993), proxy balancing (Nexon, 2009), complex balancing (Goh 2007/2008), and asymmetric balancing (Arreguín-Toft, 2001; Paul, 2004) to perhaps the most widely discussed of these alternatives, soft balancing (He & Feng, 2008; Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Walt, 2005), namely, non-military forms of balancing behaviors, for example, economic, diplomatic, institutional, aiming to "delay frustrate and undermine" aggressive unilateral policies by the superpower (Pape, 2005, 7).

Reaction to—and criticism of—these revisionary efforts often focused on soft balancing, claiming that it was a watering down of balance of power theory (Mowle & Sacko, 2007), or that it constituted no more than simple international bargaining (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005) and in fact described routine diplomatic friction between countries (Lieber & Alexander, 2005). In other words, soft balancing was accused of being "much ado about nothing" (Lieber & Alexander, 2005, 109). The

apparent impasse presented by the lack of evidence of traditional balancing yet widespread debate over revisionary attempts led some to conclude that the era of balance of power in a bi- or multi-polar world, was over: “Analysts would be wise to invest their talents in investigating novel dynamics of great power bargaining in today’s unipolar system rather than seeking to stretch old analytical concepts that were created to deal with the bipolar and multipolar systems of the past” (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2005, 107).

It is possible to argue, however, that 9/11 and the rise of the violent Jihadists, if viewed as a balancing act, might have prompted scholars to take the position that an expansion of conceptualizing balance of power to respond to new dynamics was in fact the right thing to do, but that the vulnerability of those revisionary efforts came from their failure to extend far enough. Alternative images of balancing, from asymmetric to soft balancing, remained, and indeed, remain, beholden to statist images of global politics. It is ironic that even as they sought to argue for something non-conventional within balance of power theorizing, they backed their arguments with conventional evidence—in this case, that which comes out of statist practice. Going beyond the strictly statist nature of the current debates over balance of power could have provided the breakthrough needed for the aforementioned impasse.

### **Incorporating Non-State Actors into Balancing**

To those who would question the appropriateness of incorporating NSAs into balance of power theorizing, it is important to remember that a theoretical coupling of balancing to state behaviors was not always the case. Early references in the literature often took a less state-centric position. For example, Laswell wrote in the 1930s that balancing was not restricted to certain political entities (1935, chapter 3). He considered domestic and international missions as completely intertwined, and therefore his conceptualization of balancing was not exclusively based on state-to-state behaviors. In an even earlier mention of balancing, balance of power was described as “...merely a manifestation of the primitive instinct of self-defense, which tends to produce combinations in all human affairs...which so often manifest itself in aggression,” thereby describing what could essentially be considered a universal law of humanity (Moore, 1924, 310).

Later balance of power scholarship, in a reflection perhaps of the context from which it emerged, tended to assume a more singular approach on balancing as a state-based activity. In other words, in an era in which nation states came to be seen as the primary if not sole representatives of societies, balancing came to be seen as something only states do, and statism came to overshadow the more basic nature of balancing. One might presume that had the conceptual defining effort been carried out in a much earlier period, the agency would have been different—for example, in medieval times the focus might have been on tribes—but the practice of balancing would have been the same. The downside of an “over-statist” approach, although useful to understanding state-centric international politics, is that it is limited in light of the obvious changes in global politics with respect to agency, and to the recognition in theory and practice of NSAs as independent entities acting “on behalf of their own interest” (Dunne, 1997, 158). Even Kenneth Waltz left the door open for inclusion of NSAs:

Balance of power politics prevails wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive...to achieve their objectives and maintain their security, units in a condition of anarchy—be they people, corporations, states, or whatever—must rely on means they can generate and the arrangements they can make for themselves (1979, 121).

Do NSAs exist in an anarchic environment? The answer is yes, arguably one that is qualitatively more anarchic than the statist realm. In the transnational realm of NSAs, each actor is entirely on its own; there exist few if any overarching rules of conduct, no regimes, no diplomacy, and no guiding



and broadly accepted principles such as sovereignty. This anarchic environment is even further exacerbated in the case of violent non-state actors (VNSAs), who face, in addition to “normal” competition among actors, a constant additional struggle to survive active persecution by states. In other words, while states operate in an oxymoronic world of “regulated anarchy,” NSAs, and in particular violent ones, operate in one of pure anarchy. The resulting collectivity of unrestrained actions and choices by NSAs constitutes an anarchical context in which we should expect not only extensive balancing, but balancing behaviors that are adaptive and innovative, for example, balancing both among the NSAs themselves and also between NSAs and states. Ultimately, it can be argued that neither balance of power theory nor balancing theories need be considered exclusively statist.

## Distinguishing NSA Balancing from Other Revisionary Attempts

Arguing that NSAs may participate directly in balancing behaviors and that theories of balancing should be modified to incorporate such behaviors may be new, but postulating that such actors deserve a role in theorizing about balancing is not. In the case of soft balancing, NSAs are considered as a factor to the extent that they may be used by states in the latter’s own balancing activities. But what if NSAs are not always a hired gun? What if they are not always used to “delay, complicate, or increase the costs” of the superpower’s use of its extraordinary power without openly challenging it? (Pape, 2005, 17) If the balancing acts of an NSA are carried out by that NSA itself, they no longer fit the role defined to them in soft balancing, particularly if the methods being used fall closer in line with traditional hard balancing measures of armament or alliance building.

Other new balancing concepts also allow for or even seem to highlight a role for NSAs. Nexon writes of proxy balancing, referring to transfers of resources, particularly arms, to third parties, with the aim of limiting another state’s power, projection capabilities, or rectifying a regional imbalance of power. Again however, as the name itself suggests, the key “balancer” in this equation is the state providing the resources. He goes on to say that proxy balancing “does not involve formal alliances and may not even carry with it any operational input into the use of transferred capabilities,” which, he concludes, could raise questions about whether some cases even warrant being labeled as balancing (2009, 345–6).

Similarly, Paul (2004) argues that with asymmetric balancing, states may subcontract or sponsor non-state actors to aid in their own indirect balancing and asymmetric warfare.<sup>7</sup> He suggests the possibility of actual NSA balancing by adding that it may also involve “efforts by subnational actors and their state sponsors to challenge and weaken established states using asymmetric means” (Paul, 2004, 3, also 16–17). Yet this latter point remains relatively underexplored, and when the asymmetric balancing concept is referred to or applied in subsequent works, it is almost exclusively used to refer to asymmetry in the power of the states involved. In a chapter from the same book, for example, Layne directly explores the state of balancing theories in the wake of 9/11. While he does pose the question of whether al Qaeda’s actions could be considered as asymmetric balancing, he argues that such actors lack the material capabilities to conduct anything more than actions that resemble balancing behaviors, and therefore they do not “compel a rethinking of traditional notions of the Balance of Power and balancing” (2004, 108). The bulk of his chapter remains focused on state strategy and on asymmetric *state* responses to US hegemony.

Even in these few cases therefore, unconventional balancing elements, that is, NSAs, are generally seen as an expansion of state activity, rather than considering that those elements, in terms of motivation, intent, even capacity, might take initiatives beyond the “master’s” goals and purposes. US transfers of arms and capabilities to Afghan mujahidin during the 1980s for example (see Devine & Mattingly, 2021), were carried out as part of a broad balancing against Soviet interests in Afghanistan (Loveman, 2002). Yet, as later became obvious, those same proxies viewed the arrangement as an unpleasant but necessary alliance with the West to support their own fight and ultimately help them

meet their own goals. We cannot therefore assume that when an NSA and a state are involved, that the NSA will always be the junior partner, the one that acts solely as an extension of state capacity.

## **Criteria for Looking at NSA Balancing**

Such revisionary efforts, though they may self-limit in their continuing broad emphasis on state actors, undoubtedly serve to advance the scholarship by introducing a role for NSAs in balancing activity. It is not easy however, to explore possible balancing efforts by NSAs. Even in the case of statist actors, measuring armament or fully exploring the spread or make-up of alliances may not be an easy task, and with NSAs, the challenge is even greater. What is needed, therefore, is an alternative way of looking at NSA behaviors for evidence of balancing activity. To begin with, we can consider two major balancing-related factors that have been used to limit theorizing to states: the intent and the capabilities of the balancer.

### *Intent*

Lieber and Alexander (2005) write that an NSA's engagement with terror tactics are simply "asymmetric warfare" tactics, and cannot be considered as part of balancing. True, terrorism is an asymmetric tactic for the weak to struggle against the strong, but the determining factor in whether terrorist tactics as asymmetric warfare can be considered as balancing, should not be the tactic itself or the actor employing it, but the overall strategy that the tactic is part of, in other words, intent. Walt emphasized intent as one of the main criteria used to evaluate the relative threat posed by another state (1985, 12–13). Brooks and Wohlforth also posit that intentions are one of the most important determining factors of balancing, noting that some policies that appear like balancing may not actually qualify as such if the intent to balance is not present. For example, Russian assistance to Iran on nuclear capacity building may not be intended as a balancing move against the United States, but as a foreign policy behavior connected to regional relationships. Though an intention-based definition of balancing has been criticized as overly narrow, the given alternative definition of "adding to power assets to create a better range of outcomes" (Art, 2006, 177), seems a very general description of common state behavior, and may be misleading as a criterion for balancing since not all power asset growth can be linked to balancing activity.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, looking at intent as a critical indication of balancing behavior appears a justifiable choice.

What might an NSA's motivation or intent to balance look like? Balance of power theory posits that states decide to balance either in response to the increasing power of a rival state or because they are threatened by a state's offensive capabilities, intentions, and proximity. In either case, the basic reason why states balance against each other is believed to be the maximization of their own security and thus survival. Although it generally appears that states identify their survival with protecting their territories, what ultimately matters is the constituency within these territories; clearly, states survive only as long as their citizens within their borders are secure. NSAs do not possess a state with fixed territorial frontiers, so an NSA may identify its survival as the continuation of a certain group of people, based on their identities (e.g., religious, ethnic, or racial) and a set of beliefs, ideas and practices (e.g., a religion, an ideology, and cultural norms and values). In other words, the NSA's physical existence or survival is ensured as long as this certain group of people (e.g., all Muslims in the world), a certain system of faith (e.g., Islam), or a certain way of life (e.g., Islamic culture) are secure. Arguably, increasing power and offensive intentions by a state can threaten these notions to such an extent that an NSA may feel the need to balance.

It is possible to argue, therefore, that the intent behind NSA balancing resembles that of state-balancing. In both, the security of individuals is at the core. What is unique in NSA balancing is the deterritorial nature of its security maximization sources. Unlike states, which engage in balancing to



protect the security and well-being of citizens within certain national boundaries, NSAs may engage in balancing to secure a particular community irrespective of where its members are and to which state(s) they are formally attached. Moreover, NSA balancing may aim at securing an ideational theme that is transnational in nature, such as religion or ideology. In other words, the nature of what is being threatened and what has to therefore be secured has changed considerably with the dynamic nature of contemporary politics in the first decade of the 21st century.

NSAs may gain additional motivation to balance against a great power due to certain unique advantages they possess as non-states, the most significant of these being that NSAs may have less to fear and therefore be less restrained from engaging in balancing. While states have been described as “sovereignty-bound” (Rosenau, 1990, 36) actors, restricted in their balancing as in other actions by the legal rules and procedures of the state-centric world, NSAs tend to operate transnationally, and as such, to not depend fully on international political and economic ties. Violent NSAs, for example, have been shown to avoid the traditional international banking system (El Qorchi, Maimbo, & Wilson, 2003). They naturally do not employ traditional diplomats for their political relations, and they even avoid the controlled and regulated geographic areas of the international world by tending to operate in “grey” zones, such as failed states (Thomas, Kiser, & Casebeer, 2005, 53–90; Kittner, 2007). When NSAs consider engaging in balancing, therefore, they have fewer concerns about the political and economic implications of their behavior. Significantly, for example, they have little to fear from the threat of international isolation—a powerful deterrent for many states. NSAs may also worry less about the physical retaliation of the preponderant power since they can largely sustain their organizational and operational functions without an easily identifiable territorial base. It is immediately obvious to state decision-makers that if their balancing attempts fail and the preponderant power responds militarily, the implications will be costly and concrete. It has been pointed out however that VNSAs have “no obvious ‘return address,’” and therefore less to fear about an equivalent retaliation (Walt, 2005, 140). While technological advancements like those in drone warfare have somewhat reduced this advantage for transnational actors, the point still retains some validity. Moreover, attempts to respond may even have counter-productive results by serving to boost the NSA’s image and status—a risk familiar from the world of counter-terrorism, in which traditional terrorist strategy is based on gaining recognition from the reaction of states, and therefore such groups perform high profile, provocative acts, for example, the PLO hijackings of the 1970s. Not to react is of course impossible for the state, but by reacting, the state inevitably adds to the terrorist group or VNSA’s profile.

### *Capacity and Impact*

Another potential criticism against the intention argument is that the real determinant of whether an actor is balancing is evident in the outcome of the behaviors, which brings us to a second factor to be considered—impact, and the related idea of capacity. Nexon writes that intentions might be “unrelated to any generalized balance of power mechanism” (2009, 369), and that the determining factor in balancing behaviors is their end result; in other words, the impact. An emphasis on impact reflects what might be expected as the most frequent argument for denying NSAs a place in balance of power theory, namely, that they lack the necessary military and material capabilities to balance against great powers (Layne, 2004, 108–9). In fact, the point has been made that the United States has such immense military and economic strength that no other major state, let alone an NSA, could hope to challenge Washington (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2002). As suggested above, however, it can be argued that NSAs are *not* weak and incapable, and that they are in fact able to balance precisely because of their non-state actorness and their transnational capacities. Several interrelated points support this argument.

Overall, NSAs appear weak and incapable if they are viewed exclusively through statist lenses. If comparing only the military and material capabilities of NSAs and states, there is an obvious discrepancy in favor of the latter; however, NSAs may balance against great powers by drawing on non-statist assets and transnational capabilities. In contrast, states remain largely restricted to military and material capabilities,<sup>9</sup> and these may have limited use against non-state targets—a question of power fungibility. A state may have at its disposal an air force and a stockpile of missiles that remain useless against a non-territorial, non-state opponent. Or, a state may possess nuclear weapons, but be restricted by international norms and treaties from using them. An NSA on the other hand, has clearly identifiable targets and is not restricted in the way states are from being relatively bound by norms, regimes and conventions. An NSA can use whatever weapons it possesses—including those exclusively at its disposal, such as the suicide bomber. Indeed, the presence of the suicide bomber in the NSA's toolbox of means helps to radically transform its power capacity (Horowitz, 2010) by enabling the projection of fear. If the meaning of power encompasses this capacity to project fear, suicide bombing becomes the “nuclear weapon” of asymmetric challengers, as it creates an unprecedented level of fear in society, on top of its physical destructive potential.

Clearly, when thinking about NSAs, there is a need to consider the different dimensions of what is understood as “power.” In balance of power theory, power is generally understood as possessing significant resources of “population, territory, wealth, armies, and navies,” and is often further narrowed down to “military force conceived in the context of war-winning capability” (Baldwin, 2002, 178). Increasingly however, power must be acknowledged as a multidimensional concept, which can be assessed only by considering its various aspects such as scope, domain, weight, costs, and means (Baldwin, 2002, 178–9). Since military and economic power represent only two means of power, it would be an oversimplification to label as weak an actor which may lack in this dimension, but have strengths in others, such as having low costs, a broad domain, and alternative means.

Finally, beyond the actual means used, an NSA's alternative strength may lie in its broader strategy. Strategically, some NSAs may try to pull states out of their familiar realm and wage asymmetric warfare against them; in other words, to entangle states in a web of problems with which they are less prepared to cope. NSAs' distinct balancing power may actually result from their weaker position, and therefore from their obligation to devise alternative tactics. To draw an analogy, an NSA, cognizant it is the weaker actorness, recognizes the impossibility of success in a direct fight with state and so becomes justified in relying on other means and approaches such as the “ambush”—attempting to lead the powerful into a trap that can reduce the power gap between the two. Viewed in this way, terrorist or guerilla attacks may be considered not as warfare tools, but as offensive balancing strategies for violent NSAs. Indeed, such offensive measures may play a critical role in early balancing efforts by an NSA in that they serve as the sole route to claiming legitimacy as true actors in global politics. The NSA is consciously aware that, in statist terms, it is weak and cannot get what it wants by playing by the rules of the state-centric world, nor can it reverse its weakness within the existing distribution of power. By employing terrorist acts, however, the NSA aspires to a new balance of power and to turn the tables on its adversary (for a similar argument, see Lake, 2002, 17, 19).

## **An Instance of Transnational, Ideational Balancing?**

This article considers how IR theorizing based on the 9/11 attack might have evolved had IR scholarship not largely pigeonholed the event under the “terrorism” label and proceeded accordingly with its analysis. Implications may be drawn both for balancing theories specifically, and broader observations about the future of IR theorizing if we remain unable to free ourselves from our conceptual jails.

The broad point that emerges from considering 9/11 as an act of balancing is that conditions traditionally described as leading to balancing by states are valid for NSAs as well. The transnational

order in which NSAs exist is anarchic; NSAs must seek ways of ensuring their survival; and the power of each NSA is relative to that of other actors, both states and other non-states. In terms of intent and capacity, therefore, an NSA can be an eligible party to participate in balancing behaviors. NSAs, like states, may feel the need to engage in balancing behaviors against perceived threats to their own survival, and against the increasing power of those they see as rivals. Their purpose in attempting to balance may be, as is true with states, the desire to maximize their own safety and security, and to guarantee their own survival. In terms of capacity, it was evident in the years after 9/11 and is even more so now that NSAs, in this case the violent Jihadist network, are capable of having a genuine impact on a leading state; imposing a significant impact on American security culture and practices, as well as on both American hard and soft power.

Which brings us to what is perhaps the most interesting point regarding so-called NSA balancing, which is that moving beyond the conceptual jail of “statism” offers new angles from which to consider balancing overall. While balancing and balance of power have not been actor focused, they have been actor presumed, with states assuming that role. Beyond emphasizing the finding that non-states may also participate in balancing, the broadening of the balancing concept to allow for different types of actors also invites new ways of thinking about the practice itself.

One observation is that balancing can be truly a transnational practice from “outside” the system; a practice not just of balancing against a particular hegemonic state but, potentially, against the entire (statist) system itself. While traditional balancing seeks a redistribution of power *within* the system, such “transnational balancing” may seek a fundamental balancing *of* the system—envisioning a new system to take over from the broad, international system of states. Such balancing has not been seen since, arguably, the late 19th and early 20th centuries when the international system was faced with attacks from Anarchism and early forms of Communism. Those earlier transnational balancing challenges were abandoned when the Anarchist movement failed and the Communists became incorporated into the state system, setting the stage for future decades of bipolarity. Looking at past precedent raises the question of what would happen if the violent Jihadists were to take over a country. Would they too become incorporated into the statist system, and would their balancing practices come to conform to those of traditional statist balancing? The experience with the Taliban in Afghanistan today and, to some extent in recent years with the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria, suggests that if these “local Jihad” oriented actors turn their attention to taking over a single state or part of a state, it reflects their choice to reject a “global Jihad” targeting of the broader system. In that sense, they aim to be incorporated into the state system and, to the extent that they are able to achieve this integration, cannot be expected to engage in balancing as transnational NSAs, with the unique characteristics that entails.

If 9/11 was an instance of transnational balancing, what was the primary intent behind this balancing effort? Although further in-depth study is necessary to explore this question, even a brief survey of the writings and speeches of the al Qaeda leaders suggests that at least in rhetoric, they were resisting against what they viewed as threats to the lives of Muslims worldwide; to Islam; and to Islamic culture, norms and practices.<sup>10</sup> In a 1999 interview, bin Laden defined the threat’s parameters as follows:

...there are two parties to the conflict: The first party is world Christianity, which is allied with Zionist Jewry and led by the United States, Britain, and Israel; while the second party is the Muslim world... We believe that it is our religious duty to resist with all the power that we have ...we are pursuing our rights...to prevent them from dominating us. We believe that the right to self-defense is to be enjoyed by all people (June 1999).

The al Qaeda leadership’s discourse of defending Muslims and Islamic values against “the most vicious crusader campaign in the history of Islam” (al Zawahiri, August 5, 2009) could also be seen in

bin Laden's call for a "balance of terror...between Muslims and Americans." The al Qaeda leaders called on Muslims to join the Jihad in order to secure their very existence, and to undermine the United States using means of both hard power ("a sufficient force of Mujahideen must be formed") and soft ("spread information and spread legal and political awareness among the sons of the Ummah," bin Laden, March 14, 2009; "exhaust the American enemy economically and financially," al Yazid, June 2009).

Unlike a state, the Jihadists did not claim to be securing a particular piece of territory within fixed national frontiers, instead they repeatedly asserted that the Christian-Zionist alliance led by the United States threatened the security of (1) the life of Muslims around the globe, (2) Islam, (3) Muslims' economic well-being, and (4) Islamic culture, norms and practices. In other words, they identified their security with that of a deterritorial constituency (i.e., Muslims around the globe) and ideational themes (Islam and Islamic way of life). The attack on 9/11 could therefore be viewed as one motivated by identity insecurity, as the Jihadists saw their religious identity as being at risk. This serves as a reminder that balancing is a social act before anything else and as such may be based on primary instincts, such as identity, in addition to power imbalances and security.

This observation again shows how, by moving beyond statism and considering the possibility that NSAs may balance, we can gain new insights into the act of balancing itself, for example, it may be based on a compelling alternative perspective and idea/ideology. It might be ideational, rather than material or territory-oriented, an idea that has been previously proposed (Rubin, 2014), but failed to gain significant attention in traditional balancing discussions perhaps because it emerged from outside the gated IR theory community. The possibility that there can be other forms of balancing, such as ideational balancing against a hegemonic idea, is evidence that balancing must be liberated from its overt statism.

As mentioned above, 9/11 was not the first instance of ideational balancing. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was regularly highlighted by balancing efforts between capitalist and communist ideas, and indeed, much of world history has been marked by the competition of ideas and the balancing of those ideas. Agencies, it can be argued, including states, are merely instruments to conduct this age-old competition. At the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the world was rocked by the 9/11 attacks. When approached without preconceptions, 9/11 and the rise of the violent Jihadists can be viewed as an example of a powerful and society-backed idea, making a major non-state push to reconfigure the existing distribution of ideational capabilities in global affairs. The perpetrator's intention was to re-balance the ideational global power "imbalance," thereby constituting an instance of identity driven transnational balancing.

Was it successful? In the sense of achieving the goal of raising the ideology of Jihadism to greater levels globally, then no. To be fair though, this failure has not been the result of inappropriate Western countering strategies, but because the greater Muslim world did not find the promoted idea an attractive one. Al Qaeda appeared strong when it was able to successfully hit the heart of the United States, so one might have expected such a show of power to lead to large numbers of followers lining up behind them. That this did not happen shows that the idea did not have mass appeal. The Jihadists failed at their internal balancing efforts, which, in turn, weakened their attempt at external balancing in the sense of globally strengthening their specific ideology.

However, the external balancing effort cannot be called a blanket failure, as it was successful in weakening the dominant power—at least ideationally. The violent Jihadist challenge and, more importantly, the response to it, led to a staining of America's external image, from one of general moral authority and legitimacy, to one of a unilateral bully acting with imperial hubris. This can be seen as a redistribution of ideational capabilities in global affairs, and can be linked to how the United States dealt with this balancing challenge. This suggests a relationship between a conventional discussion of decline, that is, being balanced, and the redistribution of ideational capabilities. Moreover, the shift is being exacerbated by a changing identity internally of the

United States, as we witness a rise in fear-driven fascistic ideas and politics domestically, many of which can be traced directly or indirectly to features of America's 9/11 response effort. These domestic developments have also had a weakening effect on the hegemon and its ideational and political relations with other states globally.

Ultimately, with respect to balancing theories overall, the violent Jihadist challenge suggests that we can talk about new types of balancing practices, for example, substitute balancing. This idea begins with the premise that balancing as a concept precedes states. Balancing is a political behavior that states may engage in, but that other actors may perform as well. At times when states are for some reason unable or unwilling to balance, transnational balancing may still occur via unconventional actors (e.g., NSAs) against a hegemonic power, both physically and ideationally. In the case of 9/11, such a balancing occurred against the supremacy of the United States, carried out by the followers of a violent Jihadist ideology, at a time when conventional powers were unable or unwilling to do so. In terms of balancing theories, we may therefore conclude that just because no *state*-balancing is taking place, it does not mean there is no balancing happening at all. Freed of a statist conceptual jail, we may see in this and other cases evidence of transnational balancing.

## Concluding Thoughts and Implications

Greater recognition of the possibility of ideational balancing raises new policy relevant questions. For example, considering current arguments that *reckless* preponderance led to revisionism, we should ask, was a *careful* preponderance possible? Yes, Western leadership could likely have performed better in the post-Cold War era, but were the failings solely a problem of leadership and diplomacy? This article suggests that other major forces were at play in the post-Cold War decade, including a major attempt—albeit unconventional—to balance the superpower and the West overall. The United States was thus involved in a challenging two-front struggle: a traditional one against rising powers and an ideational balancing effort by an unusual suspect. The essence of ideational balancing is about revealing the weaknesses of the superpower and, in the case discussed in this article, exacerbating fault lines both domestically within the United States and among the Western leadership. If such a perspective had been adopted and somehow found its counterpart in the policy world of the Western leadership/structure, arguably, a route to a more “careful” preponderance, synchronizing this two-front struggle and managing the interim unconventional balancing with future conventional balancing might have been possible.

While waiting for traditional balancing to emerge, the United States remained unprepared for the unconventional balancing they actually faced, and thus were not prepared to conduct effective “ideational counter-balancing.” Because the United States failed to view the violent Jihadists’ efforts and 9/11 itself as an ideational balancing challenge, it responded almost exclusively with force, rather than with ideational counter-balancing. The United States waged a broad reactionary war instead of carefully distinguishing the radical violent Jihadist perpetrators from the idea they were championing—a struggle in the name of Muslims/the downtrodden East against the United States—and thus allowed the challenger to rise into a flagship position of the “dissident” in the Muslim world.

The United States then became embroiled in wars that it could not win because it lacked the moral “ideational” supremacy in the battle lands—thereby falling into the very trap set for it by the weaker challenger. These wars, along with the US rhetoric of waging a vague “global war on terror,” made visible its carefully concealed defects, from human rights abuses (e.g., in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo) to overall incompetence as revealed in the lack of clear victories in Afghanistan and Iraq. These eye-opening events on the world stage were paralleled by internal signs of disarray, from increasing political turmoil and division up to the culminating domestic disaster of the January 6 2021 raid on the capitol. All of this has been giving a clear signal to the world—both state and non-state

actors—that the superpower is not perhaps that “super,” and thus helped create the perfect climate for revisionism.

Twenty years after 9/11, what might “proper” ideational counter-balancing look like for the United States? Essentially, it means responding on the ideological front and countering anti-American sentiments in the world. It requires honest self-reflection therefore, coming to terms with the mistakes made, and, if necessary, extending apologies, in order to reach out to the societies and nations that were directly affected by the global war campaign. It means initiating a global level public diplomacy campaign to revitalize and re-present the ideas and values of the United States as a benign power that is ready to lead in an internationalist manner. Such measures are not only necessary to repair any damage inflicted by previous improper ideational balancing measures, but to also help put the United States in a better position to handle with state revisionism and prepare to confront future state-balancing, as the United States needs global societal support to deal with state challenges. This all begins with ideas.

Criticisms of conventional IR theorizing are common, most loudly in recent years among those arguing powerfully of the need for a more global IR. This article provides fodder to the critical fire, revealing that if IR theorizing around the balancing concept had been freer from conceptual jails like statism and had considered the 9/11 attack with more scholarly objectivity, it might have not only reached different understandings of the event, but gained insights into balancing, a conceptual area that was at the time being sharply questioned for its continued relevance.

This theorizing dilemma may be further exacerbated when dealing with security issues. In the case of 9/11, it was clear that conceptualizing efforts fell prey to emergency treatment instincts. Given the volume of the atrocity, the intensity of the societal threat level, and the existence of a convenient item in the conceptual toolbox (terrorism studies), the initial scholarly reaction was perhaps inevitable. Academia exists, however, so that short-termism, political pressures, and populist tendencies do not overshadow independent scholarly inquiry. It is a fair criticism therefore to say that IR theorists should have been aware of this tendency, and taken measures to adhere to the critical question: what was this an instance of?

Instead, IR theorizing and scholarship appears may at times turn myopic, centered around cliquish, parochial hubs; a phenomenon that not only freezes what should otherwise be a highly dynamic creation of knowledge, but is also a disservice to the overall discipline in the face of the rapidly changing nature of international affairs. When IR theorizing does not adapt to on-going global affairs, the damage is two-fold: first, we fail to fully understand the triggering event, and second, it threatens the very scholarship and theories themselves, because they may start losing explanatory potential and appear to belong to the past as conceptual tools. Questions about the continued relevance or explanatory power of balancing may have been mitigated however, had IR theorists considered the events of 9/11 as a form of balancing.

What is this an instance of? Rosenau’s question remains as pertinent as ever, and should continue to be a starting point for all conceptualization efforts. Alone however, it may not be enough. As global affairs become increasingly globalized and complicated, we must ask the question, but we must do so with an active consciousness of our own conceptual jails, and multiply our efforts to free ourselves from them.

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## ORCID iD

Ersel Aydinli  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8534-1159>

## Notes

1. The term “violent Jihadists” is used here as a general reference to groups or individuals who adopt violent interpretations of “Jihad,” distinguishing them from those with non-violent understandings and practices. The term overlaps to some extent with the term “Islamic extremists” but the former is used here, as Jihad(ist) are the terms they are more likely to use to refer to themselves and their ideology, rather than an outsider labeling of “Islamic”/“Islamist” “extremist/extremism.” Moreover, the agency identified here refers particularly to those violent Jihadists seeking a global level struggle against a hegemonic structure, not local level Jihadist rebellions aimed at taking over individual states or carving out autonomous regions. This debate in objectives was a significant one during the Afghanistan war of the 1980s, with Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri emerging as strong proponents of the globalist argument. Specific groups falling under the “violent Jihadist” label, such as al Qaeda, will be named accordingly.
2. For an interesting computational illustration of how the US’s domestic turmoil influences its global policies, see Ünver & Kurnaz, 2022.
3. The criticism here falls on “conventional” IR theorists, that is, most broadly, those working within state-centric theoretical paradigms, and particularly, those working on balancing or balance of power issues.
4. Further testament to this explosion in works can be seen in a later study that showed that of the 100 most cited articles ever written about terrorism, the majority were published after 2001 (Silke & Schmidt-Petersen, 2017).
5. In order to reduce the resulting number of articles to a manageable size and to focus on the more impactful works arguably shaping the discourse at the time, the list was restricted to those that had been cited at least ten times since their publication.
6. Examples of words associated with “IR theory” include liberal institutions, hegemon\*, norms, realist, revisionis\*, international society, realism, international order, anarch\*, liberalism, international system, english school, balance of power, polarity, constructivis\*, ir theory. Examples of words associated with “terrorism” include intelligence, radical, crime, extrem\*, suicide, insurg\*, countert\*, tactic\*, law enforcement, radicalization, recruitment, rebel\*, counter-insurge\*.
7. Ironically, Paul’s initial conceptualization of these indirect processes has tended to be included into the debates over soft balancing, even though the acts he refers to generally involve violence and “hard” methods.
8. For example, Norway’s relative financial gain after the 2008 global economic crisis did not produce active balancing behaviors.
9. Naturally states are also making efforts to extend their capacities, for example, the apparent US/Israeli-led “cyber-attack” on Iran’s nuclear program in January 2011 or the alleged counterattack by an NSA working on behalf of the Iranian government. Statist moves into alternative realms are nevertheless going to take time, and are likely to remain behind the more flexible efforts of the NSAs.
10. Observation based on readings of translated speeches, letters, interviews and publications of Osama bin Laden and other al Qaeda leaders, available through the Harmony Program at the Combating Terrorism Center (<https://ctc westpoint.edu/harmony-program/>), and the writings of Ayman al Zawahiri, available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Videos\\_and\\_audio\\_recordings\\_of\\_Ayman\\_al-Zawahiri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Videos_and_audio_recordings_of_Ayman_al-Zawahiri).

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## Author Biography

**Ersel Aydinli** is a professor in the department of International Relations at Bilkent University. He has an MA in International Relations from the George Washington University, PhD, in Political Science from McGill University, and post-doctorate from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. His research interests include the disciplinary sociology of international relations, international security with a focus on non-state actors, homegrown IR theorizing, and Turkey's security strategy and foreign policy. He has published several books, for example, *Widening the World of International Relations: Homegrown Theorizing* (2018); *Violent Non-State Actors: From Anarchists to Jihadists* (2016), *Emerging Transnational (In)Security Governance: A Statist Transnationalist Approach* (2015), *Paradigms in Transition: Globalization, Security and the Nation State* edited with James N. Rosenau (2005) and articles in such journals as *Journal of Peace Research*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Journal of Democracy*, *Security Dialogue*, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *International Studies Review*, *International Theory*.