

Us future strategy in North-East Asia: Balancing or buck-passing?

Abstract: *This paper examines two strategies that United States can use in order to block the rise of China as a regional hegemon in North-East Asia. The two strategies are balancing and buck-passing and I argue that the first is better for United States than the second. After these two strategies will be presented follows the demonstration that China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia and that the other powers in the region are too weak to oppose, and finally, an explanation of the fact will be provided that why balancing is better for USA in this case than the buck-passing.*

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Keywords: *balancing, buck-passing, North-East Asia, regional hegemony, strategy*

1. Introduction

This paper is about the strategy that United States might adopt in order to contain the rising Chinese state in North-East Asia. The other great powers in the regions are Russia and Japan because of their capabilities which will be presented later in the paper. Given the fact that China is the second economic power in the world after USA¹ and it might seek hegemony in North-East Asia, intention that can attract the United States' adversity.

My analysis is based on Mearsheimer's offensive realism theory, which states that if a regional hegemon is confronting a peer competitor in another region in the world, a rising power, it will make efforts in order to block the rival to achieve the same rank. Another regional hegemon might cause problems in the backyard of another and for that reason it must be stopped.² According to Mearsheimer,

the United States represent the only regional hegemon in history and dominates the Western Hemisphere.³

According to Mearsheimer, '*a hegemon is a state so powerful, that dominates all the other states from the system*'⁴ and '*no other state has the military means to launch a serious fight against it*'.⁵ It represents the only great power from the system and has the advantage of usually interpreting the whole world.⁶ But, beside the improbable denouement in which a state would acquire the decisive nuclear superiority, it is impossible to become a global hegemon, because of the blocking power of water.⁷ Given these circumstances, the best outcome for a great power is regional hegemony, and if possible, to gain control of a

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SNSPA, DRIIE, Security and Diplomacy, IM

ground accessible adjacent region.⁸ Therefore, a regional hegemon is the most powerful state in a region.

This paper is relevant for the International Relations field because it is an analysis of a current situation with recent data and also there are no studies in Romania about the rise of China and its implications from the viewpoint of the offensive realism.

The offensive realism is used as a description tool of the international events, but also it has a prescriptive component, that shows the states the best way to survive.⁹ This means the United States has two strategies available in order to contain the rising China in its way to regional hegemony in North East-Asia. Those strategies are the *buck-passing* and *balancing* and there are the main instruments used by the states in order to preserve the balance of power from the aggressive behavior of other states. Also, there is a strong motivation for the threatened states to pass the buck.¹⁰

For the following purposes of the research, it is needed to emphasize the difference between the buck-passing and balancing. Through balancing the dangerous enemy faces a serious commitment from the threatened states in order to block the threatening behavior, while the buck passing is used when a state makes efforts to pass the task of blocking the aggressor to another great power while it stands aside. Usually, the buck-passing is a more preferred strategy than the balancing because the costs of fighting a war are avoided.¹¹

By taking into account the rise of China in the North-East Asia and the distribution of power in that region the following question appears: Which is the most preferable strategy for the United States to stop the rise of China as a hegemon in North-East Asia?

In the preliminary stage, my answer to this question is that the most preferable strategy for the United States for stopping the rise of China to regional hegemony in North-East Asia is balancing. This is the hypothesis of my paper. The reason for that the balancing is the preferable strategy to buck passing is that China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia and the other great powers are too weak to contain the Chinese threat.

In order to test my hypothesis I will analyze the data for population, economy, military and nuclear forces, and also I rely on the following steps. First, I will make a review on the literature about strategies for survival; second, I will present in detail the strategies of balancing and buck passing; third, I will present some critics to Mearsheimer; fourth, I will demonstrate that China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia and that the other powers in the region are too weak to contain the Chinese threat; fifth, I will explain why balancing is better than buck passing for the US efforts to counter the Chinese rise and answer the question of this paper in order to validate my hypothesis; the sixth part of this paper is reserved for conclusions.

Based on this argumentation I will expect to validate my hypothesis and demonstrate that the best strategy for the United States in the North-East Asia in order to stop the Chinese rising is balancing while buck-passing is counterproductive because the other powers in the region are too weak to take the responsibility to face the Chinese threat.

2. The Literature on Strategies for Survival

The speciality literature reserved a particular place for the strategies that are available for the states in order to survive or to gain power. One of the most important book about these strategies is Stephen M. Walt's 'The Origins of Alliances'. Exploring the origins of alliances¹², Walt addressed an issue of central importance, about the response given by the states to threats¹³

raising a question of high importance: *'Do states seek allies in order to balance a threatening power; or are they more likely to bandwagon with the most threatening state?'*¹⁴

Walt argues that balancing occurs more often than bandwagoning¹⁵ and proposes another approach, by challenging the traditional balance of power theory, arguing *'that states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone'*.¹⁶ From the viewpoint of the balance of threat theory, *'states tend to ally with or against'* the greatest source of threat, taking into account factors as *'aggregate power, geographic proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions'*.¹⁷

According to Walt, the balancing behavior against threats by alliance can be found in different forms. The most common form of balancing is when *'states seek to counter threats by adding the power of another state to their own'*. This kind of balance was used by the superpowers either to mutual countervail of the threats or to prevent the other's expansion in influence, while the states with regional interests appealed for external assistance.¹⁸

The relations between Arab states gave birth to another type of balancing, based on loyalty to Arab goals or solidarity, thus obtaining power and legitimacy. The balance between the Arab countries has been made *'not by adding up armies but by adding up votes'*. What is common to both types of balancing *'is the desire to acquire support from others in response to an external threat'*.¹⁹

Balancing between superpowers, seen as their efforts to counter each other, took two dimensions, where the first is related to countering the other by antagonizing its clients in the region, while the second is the effort made to attract the clients of the opponent to realign, by making a bigger offer or by subversion. In contrast, the regional powers, namely for Walt, the Middle East states, have chosen their alliances almost every time as a reaction to the threat come from another power as the same rank. Almost every time, these threats, come from another regional power, favored the balancing behavior, rather than bandwagoning.²⁰

The balancing behavior is not an universal tendency, therefore, under some circumstances, states join the dominant power. Bandwagoning is more likely to occur, in the case of weak states, due to their vulnerability and small chances to determine their fate²¹, and also to the lack of useful allies because, if they choose to resist, don't want to oppose the threat by their own. The hope that the threatening power will be appeased, moderating its aggressive intentions, appears in most cases of this strategy.²²

The analysis on alliance constitution in the Middle East concludes that balancing is more prevalent than bandwagoning in states' preferences, even when they have to oppose significant threats.²³

Explaining the opposite alliance choices between great powers in Europe before First and Second World Wars, Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder discussed about chain-ganging and buck-passing.²⁴ By using Waltz's theory combined with variables extracted from the security dilemma theory and perceptual theories, the two authors argued that in a multipolar Europe, with checkerboard geography, *'the perception of offensive military advantages gave rise to alliance chain-ganging before 1914, whereas the perception of defensive advantages gave rise to buck-passing before 1939'*.²⁵

For them, in multipolar systems, balancing becomes ineffective because of two alliance dilemmas. The chain gang, as the first problem, leads to an interdependence between the members of the alliance, resulting to a drag of the allies at the moment when a nation goes to war. More exactly, when one member of the chain gang is on the edge of the hollow, the other has no other option but to enter by its side.²⁶ From their point of view *'hyperactive balancing be-*

havior threatens the stability of the system by causing unrestrained warfare that threatens the survival of some of the great powers that form the system's poles'.²⁷

Another pathology of multipolar systems, which opposes the first, is buck-passing, that refers to the failing of timely balancing to oppose a rising threat for the tendency of some states to free-ride on the others efforts to balance. The reason for this choice is that *'they wish to avoid bearing unnecessary costs or because they expect their relative position to be strengthened by standing aloof from the mutual bloodletting of the other powers'.²⁸*

Criticizing Walt regarding to the balancing-bandwagoning dichotomy, Glenn H. Snyder argues that balance can be also made, for example, by military action or armament, not only by alliances.²⁹ A more serious problem, is that the Walt's dichotomy overshadow all the choices available in an alliance and becomes an obstacle for an attempt to analyze in a more discriminating manner. States can have other choices available, apart from an alliance with or against a threatening state, including neutrality (formal or informal), improving relations, but not ally, with third parties, and conciliation or making a compromise with the source of threat.³⁰

The dualism between balancing and bandwagoning leads to other forms as offensive-defensive alliances as well as resistance/accommodation to opponents: balancing alliances have clear defensive purposes, while some kind of bandwagoning alliances have offensive character.³¹

Arguing that balancing and bandwagoning are not opposite behaviors, designed for making states more secure, Randall Schweller affirms that *'states have very different reasons to choose'* between them. For Schweller *'the aim of balancing is self-preservation and the protection of values already possessed, while the goal of bandwagoning is usually self-extension: to obtain values coveted'*. In turn, *'balancing is driven by the desire to avoid losses; bandwagoning by the opportunity for gain'*.³² In this case it is not necessary for bandwagoning the existence of a great threat from exterior. When the goal of bandwagoning is profit instead of security, this strategy is not the opposite side of balancing, but of defensive buck-passing, and it is called „predatory buck-passing”. This last mentioned behavior represents that states which aim to *'gain unearned spoils'* ride for free on the others offensive actions. Therefore, by using a different definition of bandwagoning, Schweller argues that *'it is far more widespread than Walt suggests'*.³³

3. Mearsheimer's Strategies for Survival

Before presenting the balancing and buck-passing strategies, it is necessary to outline Mearsheimer's core assumptions on offensive realism. First, anarchy characterises the international system, but this not mean that it is in chaos or disorder; second, the great powers have an offensive military capacity which can be used to harm or destroy eachothers; third, states never can be sure about the others intentions; fourth, the main goal of the great powers is survival; and fifth, the great powers are rational.³⁴

If all of these assumptions are taken isolated do not mean that relations between great powers should be defined by aggressivity, but, when reunited, create great incentives for aggressive thinking and actions. In particular, fear, self-help and power maximization are the general behavior patterns that result from these assumptions.³⁵

There are a lot of strategies that states use to alter the balance of power, either in their advantage or to prevent the alteration by other states in their advantage.³⁶ The main strategy for gaining relative power is *war*. A more attracting strategy is represented by *blackmail*, for the

reasons it is a cheap method that relies on the threat of force. However, to blackmail a great power is often hard to realise because it will not yield to threats and will choose to fight. *Bait and bleed* is also hard to apply, because it assumes to instigate the rivals to war. *Bloodletting* is a better alternative of this strategy, for the reason that a great power will act to be sure that a war which involves one of its adversaries will be long and deadly.³⁷

Appeasement and *bandwagoning* are not very good alternatives when it comes to deal with aggressors, for the reason that both mean to concede power to a rival.³⁸ Bandwagoning means that a state allies with its dangerous enemy, at least for the spoils that come from the war, thus abandoning to oppose the aggressor. For Mearsheimer, in a realist world bandwagoning is a counterproductive solution because the dangerous adversary can gain more absolute power than the bandwagoner. This is the reason why Mearsheimer does not agree with other positions that place balancing and bandwagoning between the most important strategies.³⁹ A more aspiring strategy is represented by appeasement because it aims to modify the aggressor's behavior by conceding power to make it more secure hoping that the aggressiveness will lower or disappear.⁴⁰

Finally, the other strategies for great powers are represented by *imitation* of the rivals' successful actions and by *innovation* as finding more ways to gain more power than the adversaries.⁴¹

4. Balancing and Buck-Passing

The main strategies for blocking the aggressors to alter the balance of power are the balancing and the buck passing.⁴² Through balancing the dangerous enemy faces a serious commitment from the threatened states in order to block the threatening behavior. The threatened states accept to take on their own expense the task to deter the aggressor or, if necessary, to fight with. The buck passing is a strategy used when a state makes efforts to pass the task of blocking the aggressor to another great power while it stands aside. Usually, the buck passing is a more preferred strategy than the balancing for the main reason that the enormous costs of fighting a war are avoided.⁴³

4.1. Balancing

This strategy refers to the direct responsibility taken by a great power in order to prevent the alteration of the balance of power by an aggressor. Discouraging the aggressor is the initial objective, but if this could not be achieved, the balancing state has to engage in war.⁴⁴

There are three types of actions designed to ensure the success of this strategy. The first action implies sending clear diplomatic signals to the aggressor about the steadfast determination of preserving the balance of power, even if the war occurs. The message transmitted is not about conciliation, is about confrontation, and a sand line is drawn. The aggressor is warned not to cross the line.⁴⁵

The second action is about creating a defensive alliance by the threatened states, that is made for containing the aggressor. This type of action, also known as 'external balancing', is not so efficient in a bipolar⁴⁶ system because there are no great powers available for an alliance and the alliance can be made only with minor powers. The states that make an alliance share the costs of blocking the aggressor, a thing with an extremely importance when the war is launched. Moreover, the more allies a state has, the bigger is the firepower that the aggressor has to face, and also the discouraging is more possibly to be successful.⁴⁷

However, the drawback of the external balancing lies in its frequent slowness and inefficiency. To form a balancing coalition rapidly is a difficult task because it takes time to make an alliance to function in a good way and also the coordination of the efforts, even if there is a general consensus between the members. The states are selfish actors and have strong incentives to bring the costs at a minimum level, and what is more aggravating, the members tend to pass the buck between them.⁴⁸

The third way to block an aggressor is called 'internal balancing' and involves the mobilization of the own extra resources, like rising the defence spendings or general mobilization. This strategy is pure self help. The disadvantage is that the great powers already allocate a great part of their resources for defence and because they seek to maximize their share from the global power, the internal balancing is permanent affair. But when an extremely aggressive enemy has to be confronted, the great powers remove the useless spendings and look for intelligent methods to raise the defence spendings.⁴⁹

The exception for internal balancing occurs when an insular state exerts the balancing. States like Great Britain or United States tend to maintain small military forces when they do not need to block a potential hegemon in a zone of strategic importance. The reason for this practice is that their remote rivals focus on each other, while the stopping power of water provides total security. When the necessity to block a potential hegemon occurs, a balancing great power will rise drastically the power and the dimension of its forces.⁵⁰

4.2. Buck-passing

The main alternative to balancing is the buck passing, where a great power tries to make another state to take the task of discouraging or even fighting an aggressor, while it stays on the sidelines. The state that pass the buck is aware that the aggressor must be blocked, but tries to transfer this task to another threatened state.⁵¹

There are four ways for the threatened states to facilitate the buck passing. First, they could try to have good diplomatic relations with the aggressor, or at least not to provoke it hoping that will focus on the state which takes the buck.⁵²

Second, usually, the states that pass the buck maintain cold relations with the state that has to take it. There are two reasons for this practice: first, the cold diplomatic relations can strenghten the relations with the aggressor, and second, they are not always willing to enter a war at the side of the state which takes the buck. The aim of the buck passer is to avoid fighting the aggressor.⁵³

Third, the great powers could allocate additional resources to make this strategy function for two reasons. First, by strenghtening its own defence, a state that passes the buck is feared by the aggressor, which will focus on the state that takes the buck. The more stronger is a state, the least chances are to be attacked by the aggressor. The state that takes the buck has to contain the aggressor without the buck passer. Second, the states that pass the buck maintain strong armies because no one is sure that would have to confront the aggressor alone and be a victim of this strategy.⁵⁴

Fourth, sometimes is profitable for a state to accept or to encourage a power increasing for the state that takes the buck in order to have more chances to contain the aggressor. This would increase the perspective of standing aside for the buck passer.⁵⁵

The balancing and the buck passing are opposing strategies, but although the danger of disintegration of the alliance is discouraging, in the balancing coalitions the states have a strong

motivation for buck passing or to freeride. Also, the strategy of buck-passing has an offensive part, making it more attractive for the reason that the buck taker and the aggressor fight a long and costly war.⁵⁶ It is very probable that the balance of power will tilt in the favor on the buck passer. After this denouement the state that passes the buck is very likely to be the dominant power after the war. The buck passing is preferably too when a state has to deal with many dangerous enemies, but lacks the force to fight simultaneously with them, and this approach can reduce the number of threats.⁵⁷

However, the strategy of buck passing is not safe from failure and its main drawback is that the state which takes the buck might not succeed in blocking the aggressor. This would endanger the state that passes the buck. Moreover, there is the danger that the state which takes the buck to become so strong and might alter the balance of power. Although these problems give serious thought, there almost finally do not decrease the attractiveness of the strategy and the great powers do not use this strategy thinking to failure.⁵⁸

4.3. Systemic polarity, balancing and buck passing

The choice between the two strategies is influenced mainly by the structure of the international system. In a bipolar system a great power has to counter the adversary because it can not pass the buck to another power. In the multipolar systems with no potential hegemon and with no common frontier with the aggressor, the strategy of buck passing tends to be an often used strategy. But the threatened rivals tend to use the buck passing even if they face a dominant threat. As a general rule, the stronger the potential hegemon, the more probably that a balancing coalition to be formed.⁵⁹

If there in the bipolar and multipolar systems the things are clear, in the unbalanced multipolar system there are a few things to clarify. Even if the potential hegemon is a great threat for all the states in the system, the buck passing often takes place in the unbalanced multipolar systems for the reason that states make efforts to avoid the costs of containment. But, when the dominant state is so strong, the threatened states have nothing to do but to form a coalition designed to balance the aggressor. The reason is that there are too weak to pass the buck to each other.⁶⁰

If the power distribution reflects the buck-passing probability, geography helps to identify the states that are very likely to pass the buck and those which take it. Shared borders make the balancing easier because they give the states the opportunity to put pression on the aggressor by having direct access to enemy territory and also there is the perspective of a war on many fronts. On the other hand, if the threatened state is separated from the aggressor by a buffer zone or by water, it will be hard to put pressure on the enemy by using the militay force. To get to the aggressor, invading a minor power that stands in the way is often a sollution for the threatened state.⁶¹

Also, there are many chances that the great powers that share the borders with the aggressor to counter it because they might feel extremery vulnerable and there are not in the position to pass the buck, even if this strategy is always a temptation.⁶²

5. Critics to Mearsheimer

One of the first critics comes from Glenn Snyder, who rejected the idea of security dilemma as a synoptic concept inside offensive realism. The security dilemma, in most formulations concentrates on the occurrence of power and security competition between status quo states, but uncertainty regarding the intentions of the others compels all the actors to take measures meant to assure their protection which are regarded as threatening to the others.⁶³

Cristopher Layne puts into discussion the geography and regional hegemony variables arguing that *'only an insular power like the United States can successfully project its power into distant regions and bid for global hegemony'*.⁶⁴

The great continental powers have two types of problems. First, throughout history, they had to confront each other, having to deal with the problems at home due to the fact they shared borders with dangerous neighbours. The second problem comes from the first, great continental powers could not obtain the necessary power projection capabilities to confront a distant regional hegemon. In contrast with Mearsheimer, Layne points out that *'because it has no rivals in its own region to worry about, the United States has been free to concentrate its resources and ambitions on becoming a global hegemon'*.⁶⁵

Continuing his critics, Layne puts into discussion the characteristic of the stopping power of water to transform a hegemon from a status quo power to a power maximize. He asks himself why satisfied regional hegemons are worried about what happens at a distant region and why they have the tendency to involve there, while Mearsheimer's argument that is ideal for every great power to be the only regional hegemon in the world does not entirely please Layne. Again, he asks himself if not the regional primacy of a great power, which is far stronger than others, does not turn into global hegemony and, finally, he asks why a regional hegemon should pass the buck to prevent the rising of another regional hegemon or why it will not take action to prevent the appearance of another rival that might cause great problems.⁶⁶

In another article, Layne proposes that United States should be an offshore balancer, contradicting Mearsheimer who argued that it already is.⁶⁷ The United States can balance multilaterally or unilaterally. Multilateral offshore balancing is problematic for four reasons: first, the goal of preserving the US primacy does not fit with the effort of convincing the other that they have nothing to fear; second, it is against the realities of international politics the conception that United States should exert its power with others; third, even if the United States can reassure its allies regarding the wisdom of its actions, it is doubtful if it can do the same thing in the case of potential adversaries, like Russia or China; fourth, this strategy can be seen as a back-up strategy for preserving the US hegemony, rather than being considered as a policy of restraint.⁶⁸ Therefore, as an alternative, Layne proposed the unilateral offshore balancing to be the next great strategy for United States.⁶⁹

Finally, Peter Toft begins his critique with a great problem related to logic, arguing that from the five assumptions it can be extracted only one affirmation, that states are power maximizers.⁷⁰ From the viewpoint of Toft, another problem is that offensive realism focuses only on great powers, thus ignoring the majority of states from the international system. Also, the focus on territorial expansion and military security enclose the possibilities of the theory. Furthermore, in Mearsheimer's world the cooperation is limited, because of the fear and conflict as consequences of anarchy. Finally, the theory has difficulties to explain the contemporary world politics where the United States has a preeminently position.⁷¹

6. China as a Potential Hegemon in North-East Asia

In order to demonstrate why China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia I will use a table which reflects the distribution of power in the region. The table is similar to the one which Mearsheimer uses in the tenth chapter of his book, but with different data, upgraded for nowadays. Also, in order to make things clear, I will introduce in the table recent data for population and economic growth. I will analyze the power of three great powers from North-East Asia: China, Japan and Russia.

To clarify, I have to say that, for measuring the power of a state, Mearsheimer takes into account two types of power, *potential power* and *real power*.⁷² The potential power is given by the size of the population and its wealth level (GDP); there are the foundation of the military power. The real power is given mainly by the ground forces, directly sustained by the marine and air forces. Even if the world is in the nuclear era, the main part of the military power is the terrestrial power.⁷³

Therefore, for the purpose of this part, demonstrating that China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia, I will take into account the population size and GDP for potential power and the size of the army with the nuclear warheads for the real power, together with recent population and economic growth rates.

	Population (mil.)	GDP 2015 (bln. \$)	Size of the army	Nuclear warheads total inventory in 2015 ⁷⁴	Population growth rate 2014 ⁷⁵	Last GDP growth rate
China	1 375 ⁷⁶	11 400 ⁷⁷	2 333 000 ⁷⁸	260	0,5%,	1,6 % ⁷⁹
Japan	126 ⁸⁰	4 120 ⁸¹	247 150 ⁸²	–	-0,2%,	-0,3% ⁸³
Russia	143 ⁸⁴	1 240 ⁸⁵	798 000 ⁸⁶	7 500	0,2%	-0,57% ⁸⁷

As the table shows, China is by far the strongest state in terms of potential power. Compared to Japan or Russia it has the largest population and also the strongest economy. Also, it has superior population and economic growth rates and if this advantage will be constant, the gap between China, Japan and Russia will be wider. And because the potential power is the foundation for the military power it means that in the future China will be able to build superior military forces, at large numbers and with superior technology.

In terms of real power, even if China is inferior when it comes to nuclear forces, is superior regarding to the size of the military. And as I said before, the ground forces are the main part of the military power, even if the world is in the nuclear era. Therefore, China has a great advantage in terms of real power. It is worth mentioning that Japan is under the American nuclear umbrella⁸⁸ and also 53 000 American troops are based in this country.⁸⁹

Therefore, taking into account these data, I state that China is a potential hegemon in North-East Asia that operates in an unbalanced multipolar system. And when will come the moment to counter China from its way to regional hegemony, the other great powers in the region are too weak to block the Chinese aggression.

7. Why Balancing Is a Better Strategy for USA in North-East Asia

Based on what I have shown above, in this part of the essay I will explain why balancing is a better strategy for USA in the North-East Asia region.

First, according to Mearsheimer's theory, USA, as a regional hegemon in the Western Hemisphere will take action and intervene if China will seek for regional hegemony in North-East Asia. The reason is that USA don't want a peer competitor in another region because it can cause problems in the backyard of another. So, this is the reason why China must be stopped to achieve the regional hegemony.

To balance, United States can try, initially, a strategy of discouraging China, having three types of actions available. First, United States can send clear diplomatic signals to China that are determined to preserve the balance of power in North-East China. The signal will be one of confrontation, transmitting that USA will be determined to fight with China if will not cancel its actions. China will be warned not to cross the sand line drawn by USA. It is very difficult to determine the level of Chinese aggression that will be accepted by USA, but it is clear that if China will threaten to alter the balance of power in North-East Asia, the United States will take action and enter in a direct confrontation.

Second, USA can adopt a strategy of external balancing and create a defensive alliance with other states that are threatened to contain China. But, this strategy has a serious drawback regarding the slowness and inefficiency of the alliance, because forming a coalition rapidly and coordinate the efforts are difficult tasks. Although United States have allies in the region, Japan being a great power at a regional level, a problem will be to attract Russia in a counter-alliance with China. Even if USA will be able to form a powerful alliance against China, it will be difficult to coordinate with the allies, especially with Russia.

Internal balancing, or self help, represents the third way available to block the aggressor and means that USA will mobilise its own extra resources, as defence spendings and mobilization, to fight China directly. This strategy is very probable given the fact that USA have a lot of economic and technological resources that can overpass the Chinese advantage on manpower. Even if USA is an insular state and tends to maintain a reduced military force, as history shows, when it has to confront dangerous enemies the spendings on defence will rise. At the end of the First World War the United States spent 22% of GDP, while in the Second World War 41% of GDP⁹⁰, and there is a high probability to allocate almost the same amount (or more) of money to fight China.

As the theory shows, buck passing represents the efforts made by a great power to transfer the task of confronting the aggressor to another great power. There are four ways available to USA to pass the buck. The first is related to having good diplomatic relations with China⁹¹, or not to provoke it, hoping that China will draw its attention to another state. The problem with this strategy is that China, on its way for regional hegemony, will not affect directly USA and will fight with Russia and Japan, the other great powers in the region. But because is in the nature of the regional hegemon to block the other aspirants to this position, USA should take action directly and contain China before it becomes too strong to make troubles on the American continent.

Maintaining cold relations with the state that has to take the buck is the second way related to this strategy, but the problem is that it is not sure which state will take the responsibility

to fight China. It might be Japan, but it is too weak and it is a strategic US ally in the region.⁹² Also, China has a \$400 bln. gas deal with Russia,⁹³ a country that has a great nuclear advantage, but it is very possible for the Chinese state to recover this disadvantage in the future. Also, the US-Russian relations are not in their best moment, Obama himself condemning the actions of Russia in Ukraine.⁹⁴

Third, USA can allocate additional resources to favor the buck passing. By strengthening its own defence USA can be feared by China and also has a guarantee for the case that it will be a victim of its own strategy, having no choice but to enter the war alone.

Fourth, USA can encourage an increase in power for Russia or Japan to have more chances to contain China, a strategy that can bring more chances to the success of buck passing and standing aside from the conflict. If Japan and Russia will increase their power and even one of them will prevail in a regional conflict with China, it will take the place of the Chinese state as a potential hegemon and USA will face the same problem. The US interest in North-East Asia is to preserve a multipolar system in this region.

Indeed, buck passing is a more attractive strategy than balancing, especially that in North-East Asia is a multipolar system (an unbalanced one), but given the fact that China is a potential hegemon, that can increase more in its power, the appropriate strategy is balancing.

As I have shown above, the geography, even in an unbalanced multipolar system can favor the buck passing. USA can pass the buck to another power in the region, but as I have shown in the table about power in North-East Asia, Russia and Japan are too weak to fight with China. Maybe the war will not break out in the region too soon, but if China will continue its rising path and if the economic and population gap between the Chinese state, Japan and Russia will increase, these powers will not be capable of fighting alone. Russia is also a European power and can not concentrate all of its forces to fight China and Japan has to change the Constitution that rejects the war.⁹⁵ The situation seems to be more complicated because of the tense relations between Russia and United States, but as the offensive realism shows, the current enemy can be your friend tomorrow and viceversa.⁹⁶ It is not a crazy thing to see a future alliance between Russia and United States if the Russian interests in the region will be threatened by the rising Chinese state.

Therefore, if Russia and Japan as great powers in North-East Asia will not be able to stand against a rising China, the United States can not pass the buck to them. The only solution is to maintain the alliance with Japan and South Korea, where 25,800 American soldiers are already stationed here.⁹⁷ Another ally for USA in the region is Taiwan,⁹⁸ but this is a minor power. Therefore, the United States are already balancing against China in the region, but this is not enough. If China will seek the position of regional hegemony it will be needed the enormous American resources. The stronger China will be the more will be needed the American implication in the region.

It can be argued that United States and China are separated by the Pacific Ocean and USA will be not affected by the Chinese actions in North-East Asia. According to Mearsheimer, the United States have to intervene and block the Chinese road to regional hegemony, because once China will be regional hegemon can make troubles to USA in America.

United States can pass the buck to Russia in a future war, but it would be counterproductive because the Russian state can gain an enormous advantage and will dominate the region. Even if Russia has a massive nuclear arsenal, in the future China, by using its enormous economic potential, can develop the technology necessary for countering the Russian nuclear ad-

vantage. There is also the probability that Russia can not sustain an arms race with China, a state that can mobilise much more military personnel than Russia. Also, in the current situation between USA and Russia, I expect an American involvement without Russian help. A more viable solution is the alliance with Japan, Taiwan and South Korea.

Buck-passing is also impossible if Japan does not change its constitution that rejects the war. But even if Japan revise its constitution, it has not enough power to counter a rising China in the region. Although the Japanese Parliament passed a law that allows the army to fight overseas,⁹⁹ Japan has not enough power, especially that its own defense forces are regarded as *'more than a police force, less than a military'*.¹⁰⁰ The absence of nuclear arsenal is also another important factor. If the trend will remain the same and Japan will not build a robust military in the future it will be difficult to counter alone a rising threat in the region

Therefore, the only viable strategy for the United States in North-East Asia is to balance against the Chinese threat and not pass the buck because the other great powers in the region, Japan and Russia, are too weak to stand against a rising China. It can be argued that Russia can wipe out China with its nuclear forces and United States can stay on the sidelines, but this also is not a productive strategy, because the Russian state will gain more relative power and might establish its hegemony in North-East Asia. The main interest of the United States in North-East Asia is to keep a multipolar regional balance of power in the region.

8. Conclusions

My conclusion of this analysis is that the more efficient strategy for USA in order to stop the rise of China as a hegemon in North-East Asia is the balancing. The first reason lies in one of the aspects of Mearsheimer's theory and states that USA, as a hegemon in the Western Hemisphere, will take action against any power that seeks regional hegemony in other regions of the World. The second reason that makes me to affirm that balancing is better than buck-passing for USA is that the other great powers in North-East Asia are too weak to stand against China. Also, China is already a potential hegemon in the region and this makes the system in North-East Asia to have an unbalanced multipolar configuration, and the balancing is a more likely strategy than buck-passing. The stronger is the potential hegemon, the more likely is the balancing. For the reasons I exposed above, I conclude that my hypothesis is valid and I answered at the research question.

One of the weak points of this paper could be the data included in the table because might vary over years. Also, it can be argued that I did not take into account South-East Asia or East Asia as a whole, but, I tried to explain a specific phenomenon from a specific region. These regions can represent the object of an extended analysis that for the future.

I believe that the strong points of my paper are the analysis of the balance of power in North-East Asia and the analysis of a current situation, explained from the lenses of the offensive realism.

Notes

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² John J. Mearsheimer, „The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia”, „*The Chinese Journal of International Politics*”, vol. 3 (2010): 388;

³ Ibid.;

⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia politicii de forță*, trans. by Andreea Năstase (Filipești de Târg, Prahova: Antet, 2003), 33;

⁵ Ibid.;

⁶ Ibid.;

⁷ Ibid., 34;

⁸ Ibid.;

⁹ Paul R. Viotti and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory – 5th ed.* (Boston, Columbus et al.: Pearson Education, Inc., 2012), 64;

¹⁰ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 191;

¹¹ Ibid., 101;

¹² Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 1;

¹³ Ibid., 3;

¹⁴ Ibid.;

¹⁵ Ibid., 5;

¹⁶ Ibid.;

¹⁷ Ibid., 21-22;

¹⁸ Ibid., 149;

¹⁹ Ibid., 149;

²⁰ Ibid., 157-158;

²¹ Ibid., 172-173;

²² Ibid., 175-176;

²³ Ibid., 178;

²⁴ Thomas J. Christensen and Jack Snyder, „Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization*, vol. 44, no. 2 (Spring, 1990): 139, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706792>;

²⁵ Ibid.;

²⁶ Ibid., 140-141;

²⁷ Ibid., 141;

²⁸ Ibid.;

²⁹ Glenn H. Snyder, „Alliances, Balance, and Stability,” *International Organization*, vol. 45, no. 1 (Winter, 1991):128, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2706698>;

³⁰ Ibid.;

³¹ Ibid., 129;

³² Randall L. Schweller, „Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Summer, 1994): 74, accessed March 14, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539149>;

³³ Ibid., 74-75;

³⁴ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 27;

³⁵ Ibid., 27-28;

³⁶ Ibid., 101;

³⁷ Ibid.;

³⁸ Ibid.;

³⁹ Ibid. 101-102;

⁴⁰ Ibid., 102;

⁴¹ Ibid.;

⁴² Ibid. 101;

⁴³ Ibid.;

⁴⁴ Ibid. 113;

⁴⁵ Ibid.;

⁴⁶ In NE Asia the system is multipolar;

⁴⁷ Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 113;

- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 113-114;
- ⁴⁹ Ibid. 114;
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.;
- ⁵¹ Ibid.;
- ⁵² Ibid. 114-115;
- ⁵³ Ibid. 115;
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.;
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.;
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 116;
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.;
- ⁵⁸ Ibid. 117;
- ⁵⁹ Ibid. 191;
- ⁶⁰ Ibid. 193-194;
- ⁶¹ Ibid. 194;
- ⁶² Ibid.;
- ⁶³ Glenn H. Snyder, „Mearsheimer’s World-Offensive Realism and the Struggle for Security: A Review Essay,” *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 1 (Summer, 2002): 155, accessed March 15, 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3092155>;
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- ⁶⁵ Ibid., 128;
- ⁶⁶ Ibid., 129;
- ⁶⁷ Christopher Layne, „The Unipolar Illusion Revisited: The Comint of the United State’s Unipolar Moment.” *International Security*, vol. 31, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 39;
- ⁶⁸ Ibid., 39-40;
- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 41;
- ⁷⁰ Peter Toft, „John J. Mearsheimer: An Offensive Realist Between Geopolitics & Power,” Institut for Statskundskab, Københavns Universitet, Rosenborggade 15, 1130 København k (2003);
- ⁷¹ Ibid.;
- ⁷² John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 35;
- ⁷³ Ibid., 36;
- ⁷⁴ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, accessed March 20, 2016, <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/nuclear-forces>;
- ⁷⁵ <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.GROW>, accessed March 20, 2016;
- ⁷⁶ National Bureau of Statistics of China, accessed March 20, 2016, <http://data.stats.gov.cn/english/>;
- ⁷⁷ Chapter Six: Asia, The Military Balance, 116:1, (2016): 240, accessed March 20, 2016, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2016.1127567;
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.;
- ⁷⁹ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/china/indicators> (December 2015), accessed March 20, 2016;
- ⁸⁰ Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, accessed March 20, 2016, <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/jinsui/tsuki/index.htm>;
- ⁸¹ Chapter Six: Asia, The Military Balance, 260;
- ⁸² Ibid.;
- ⁸³ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/japan/indicators> (December 2015), accessed March 20, 2016;
- ⁸⁴ Federal State Statistics Service: http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b14_12/IssWWW.exe/stg/d01/05-01.htm;
- ⁸⁵ Chapter Five: Russia and Eurasia, The Military Balance, 116:1, (2016):189, accessed March 20, DOI: 10.1080/04597222.2016.1127566;
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.;
- ⁸⁷ <http://www.tradingeconomics.com/russia/indicators> (September 2015), accessed March 20, 2016;
- ⁸⁸ James L. Schoff „*Realigning Priorities: The U.S.-Japan Alliance & the Future of Extended Deterrence*,” Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis (2009): 27;

⁸⁹ Emma Chanlett-Avery and Ian E. Rinehart, "The U.S.-Japan Alliance," Congressional Research Service (2013): 1;

⁹⁰ http://www.usgovernmentspending.com/defense_spending, accessed April 24, 2016;

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⁹⁴ <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3183.htm>, accessed April 24, 2016;

⁹⁵ Eiichiro Takahata, „Japan”, in *Encyclopedia of World Constitutions*, edited by Gerhard Robbers, 456-464. (New York: Facts on File Library of World History, 2007), 463;

⁹⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 29;

⁹⁷ Manyin et. al. op. cit., 12;

⁹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedia...*, 266;

⁹⁹ Jonathan Soble, „Japan’s Parliament Approves Overseas Combat Role for Military,” *New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/19/world/asia/japan-parliament-passes-legislation-combat-role-for-military.html?_r=0, last modified September 28, 2015, accessed on March 20, 2016;

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