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Lecture- 13



LECTURE 13 Critical Evaluation of Balance of Power

Balance of Power has been strongly praised as well as severely criticize

Some Scholars observe:

“Balance of Power is nearly a fundamental law of politics as is possible to find,” — Martin Wright

“Balance of Power is a basic principle of international relations.” —Palmer and Perkins

As against this several others like Richard Cobden criticize it as unreal, inadequate and uncertain system. They hold that Balance of Power admits war in the have balance and makes the nations power hungry. The supporters of Balance of Power advance a number of arguments in favour and give example of the 1815-1914 period of history to prove the effectiveness of balance of power as a device of power management.

Balance of Power: Arguments in Favour:

(1) A Source of Stability in International Relations:

Balance of Power provides stability to international relations. It is a device of effective power management and peace. During the past 400 years it was successful, at most of the times, in preserving peace.

“Balance of Power has many a times prevented war. War breaks out only when any state assumes excessive power.” —Fredric Geniz

(2) It suits the real nature of International Relations:

Balance of Power is in tune with the dynamic nature of international relations. It helps continuous adjustments and readjustments in relations without any grave risk of war among states.

(3) Ensures Multiplicity of States:

Since Balance of Power postulates the presence of a number of major international actors (7 or 8 even more), it ensures multiplicity of nations and their active participation in preserving balance in international relations.

(4) Guarantees the Freedom of Small States:

Balance of Power ensures the preservation of small and weak states. Its rule that no nation is to be completely eliminated, favors the continued existence of all states. Each state feels secure about its security in the balance of power system.

(5) Balance of Power Discourages War:

Balance of Power discourages war because each state knows that any attempt to become unduly powerful shall invoke an action, even war, by all other states and hence, it keeps its ambitions under control.

(6) A Source of Peace in International Relations:

Finally, Balance of Power is always a source of peace and order in international relations. It supports status quo in relations. Between 1815-1914 it successfully prevented war.

Balance of Power: Arguments Against:

(1) Balance of Power cannot ensure Peace:

Balance of Power does not necessarily bring peace. Even during its golden days, it failed to prevent the domination of small states by the big states. It was not successful in preserving the security of small states. In fact, in the past, wars have been fought in the name of preservation of Balance of Power.

The three periods of stability—one starting from 1648, the second from 1815 and the third from Treaty of Versailles (1918), were preceded by continuous warfare and by the wholesale elimination of small states starting with the destruction of Poland, and followed by a large number of isolated acts of a similar nature. The tragedy is that all these acts were accomplished in the name of balance of power. Balance of Power cannot really secure peace and freedom of the nations.

(2) States are not Static Units:

Each state always tries to secure more and more national power. It does not really belong to any balance of power system. Another point that must be raised about the balance of power is that nations are not static units.

They increase their power through military aggressions, seizure of territory and alliances. They can change their power from within by improving social organisation, by industrializing and by mobilizing internal resources. So the traditional mechanism of the balance of power is not the only cause responsible for an increase of power.

(3) Preponderance of One State in the world can also secure Peace:

A preponderance of power in the hands of one state or group of states does not necessarily threaten world peace or the independence of any nation. The unipolarism resulting from the collapse of one super power (USSR) and the continued presence of the other super power (USA) has not in any way disturbed international peace and security or power balance. In contemporary times the preponderance of one state is a reality and yet there is peace and peaceful coexistence.

(4) Narrow Basis:

The concept of Balance of Power is based upon a narrow view of international relations. It regards power-relations as the whole of international relations. It gives near total importance to preservation of self and national-interest as the motives of all state actions. It fails to give proper weight age to other ends—social, economic, cultural and moral, that provide strong motives to international relations.

(5) A Mechanical view of Peace:

Balance of Power wrongly takes a mechanistic view of world peace as a situation of balance or equilibrium in power relations. Peace does not depend upon balance in power relations. It really depends upon international consciousness and morality.

(6) Equality of a number of States is a Myth:

Balance of Power presupposes the existence of a number of equally powerful states. In practice no two states have or can have equal power. It involves the conception of equilibrium which is in fact disequilibrium and is subject to continuous change.

(7) Nations are not free to break Alliances:

The theory of the balance of power can also be criticized on the ground that it wrongly assumes that nations are free to make or break alliances as and when they may desire for the main consideration of balance of power.

(8) Uncertainty of Balance of Power:

Morgenthau criticizes Balance of Power for its uncertainty. Balance of Power is uncertain because its operation depends upon an evaluation of power of various nations. In practice it is not possible to have an absolutely correct evaluation of power of a state.

(9) Balance of Power is Unreal:

Since the evaluation of the national power of a nation is always uncertain, no nation can afford dependence upon the balance of power. Each nation always keeps a secret about its power. Since all nations keep safe margins, the balance of power at a particular time is always unreal.

(10) Inadequacy of Balance of Power:

Balance of Power in itself is an inadequate device of international peace and security. It even accepts war as a means for maintaining a balance. Fear cannot be a real basis of international relations.

(11) Balance of Power has now lost its Relevance:

Finally, the critics argue that now Balance of Power it is not a relevant principle of international relations. The big changes in the international system as well as in the balance of power system have made it almost an obsolete system. On the basis of above arguments, the critics of Balance of Power advocate its total rejection.

Undoubtedly, in contemporary times the balance of power has lost its utility and much of its importance due to changes in the international system. However it cannot be denied that it continues to be an important factor in the regional power relations among the states of a region. It is used by nations for assessing the nature of power relations at the regional level.

Role and Relevance of Balance of Power in International Relations:

“As long as the nation-state system is the prevailing pattern of international society, balance of power policies will be followed in practice, and in all probability, they will continue to operate, even if effective supranational groupings on a regional or world level are formed” —Palmer and Perkins.

In contemporary times, Balance of Power has lost much of its utility due to several changes in the international relations. The following changes in the international relations as well as in the traditional balance of power system have adversely affected the role and relevance of Balance of Power as a device of power management in International politics.

(1) End of the era of European Domination and the dawn of era of Global Politics:

The structure of international politics has undergone a radical change from the classical period. From a narrow European dominated international system it has come to be a truly global system in which Asian, African and Latin American states enjoy a new and added importance. Today Europe is no longer the centre of world politics. European politics constitutes only one small segment of international politics. This changes has considerably reduced the operation ability of balance of power.

(2) Changes in Psychological Environment:

The characteristic moral and intellectual consensus that characterised European nations during the classical period of Balance of Power (1815-1914) has ceased to exist. Each major power now seeks to protect its interests as universal interests and hence tries to impose these upon others. The use of propaganda and ideology as instruments of national policy has increased manifold. This development has further checked the importance of balance of power.

(3) Rise of Propaganda, Psychological and Political Warfare as instruments of National Policy:

Previously, diplomacy and war used to be the chief means of conducting foreign policies. The decline of diplomacy, rise of new diplomacy and the new fear of war as a means, have brought into operation two new devices- Propaganda and Political warfare, as the instruments of national policy. These have in turn reduced the popularity and role of balance of power principle in international relations.

(4) Emergence of Ideology as a Factor of International Relations:

The new importance of ideology and other less tangible but, nevertheless, important elements of national power have further created unfavorable conditions for the operation of balance of power.

(5) Reduction in the Number of Major Powers:

The most obvious structural change that has seriously limited the role of balance of power has been the numerical reduction of the players of power-politics game. For its operation, Balance of Power needs the presence of a number of major power actors. The presence of two superpowers during 1945-91 discouraged the operation of balance of power and now there is present only one super power in the world.

(6) The Bipolarity of Cold War period and the new era of Unipolarity:

The bipolarity (presence of two super powers and their blocs) that emerged in the cold war period reduced the flexibility of the international system. It reduced the chances of balance of power whose working requires the existence of flexibility in power relations, alliances and treaties. Presently unipolarity characterizes the international system.

(7) The End of the Era of Colonialism and Imperialism:

Another big change in the structure of balance of power has been the disappearance of imperialism and colonialism: It has limited the scope for the exercise of power by the European powers, who in the past always worked as the key players of the principle Balance of Power.

(8) Disappearance of the “Balancer”:

The rise of two super powers the disappearance of the “holder of balance” or the “balancer” considerably reduced the chances of balance of power politics during 1945-91. Traditionally, Britain used to play such a role in Europe. The sharp and big decline in the power of Britain in the post-war period compelled it to abandon its role of balancer between the two super powers. No other nation or even a group of nations was successful in acting as a balancer between the USA and the (erstwhile) USSR. The absence of a balancer further reduced the role of balance of power in post-war international relations.

(9) Change of Concept of War into Total War:

The emergence of nuclear weapons and other revolutionary developments in war technology has produced a big in change the nature of war. The replacement of war by Total War has made war the most dreaded situation in international relations. This has forced nations to reject war as an instrument of balance of power which rests upon the assumption that nations can even go to war for preserving or restoring the balance.

(10) The Emergence of Global Actors:

The rise of the United Nations and several other international and regional actors in international relations has given a new looked to the international relations of our times. The presence of the UN has made a big change in the structure and functioning of the international system. With a provision for collective security of international peace and security, the United Nations constitutes a better source of peace. Due to all these changes in international relations, Balance of Power has come to suffer a big decline. It has definitely lost much of its relevance.

In contemporary times, Balance of Power has ceased to be a fully relevant and credible principle of international relations. However, it still retains a presence in international relations, more particularly, in the sphere of regional relations among states.