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Original Research

Soft Balancing and the Challenges to U.S. Hegemony in the Persian Gulf after September 11

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The geopolitical transformations following the September 11, 2001 attacks ushered the foreign policy of the United States in the Persian Gulf into a new phase. This phase was characterized by the expansion of military interventions, the redefinition of threats, and efforts to reconfigure the regional order. This redefinition pushed the logic of U.S. domination beyond the traditional framework of hard power and sought to consolidate hegemony through a combination of military, economic, and cultural instruments. In response to this multilayered dominance, regional and extra-regional actors increasingly turned to indirect strategies, commonly referred to in the international relations literature as "soft balancing," rather than engaging in direct confrontation. This article, focusing on the concept of soft balancing, examines the emergence of non-military, diplomatic, and media-based forms of resistance to U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf. The theoretical framework integrates offensive realism, hegemonic stability theory, and soft power theory. The research method is qualitative and analytical, drawing on credible scholarly sources. The findings indicate that soft balancing, as an emerging strategy, has partially shifted the region's geopolitical landscape away from unilateral domination and facilitated a transition toward a multipolar order. This transformation has not only generated challenges for the continuation of U.S. hegemony but has also created opportunities for independent regional actors.

Keywords: *Soft balancing, U.S. hegemony, foreign policy, Persian Gulf, post-September 11, regional resistance, soft power*

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1. Introduction

The Persian Gulf region, due to its unique geopolitical position and extensive energy resources, has continuously stood at the center of great power rivalries. The United States, particularly after the end of the Cold War, has sought to consolidate its position in this region through diverse instruments of domination (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023; Vaezi, 2010). With the occurrence of the September 11 attacks, U.S. foreign policy entered a new phase characterized by extensive military interventions, regime change operations, and the redefinition of threats (Jalinousi et al., 2014; Salehi et al., 2025). This transformation shifted the logic of American domination away from its traditional form and turned it into a multilayered and complex structure (Keohane, 2005). In response to this dominance, regional and extra-regional actors, instead of engaging in hard confrontation, adopted indirect strategies that can be analyzed within the framework of "soft balancing" (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Rezaei, 2008). This article seeks to examine this transformation from theoretical and

strategic perspectives and demonstrate how indirect forms of resistance have challenged U.S. hegemony.

The Persian Gulf for the United States is not only an energy-driven region but also a platform for projecting geopolitical influence and guaranteeing the security of strategic allies such as Israel (Vaezi, 2010). Extensive military presence, the conclusion of security agreements, and direct interventions in regional crises indicate the significance of the region within the broader American global strategy (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). From Washington's perspective, control over the Persian Gulf equates to control over energy flows, managing regional rivalries, and preventing the rise of alternative powers (Keohane, 2005; Morgenthau, 1948). This strategic importance has led U.S. foreign policy toward the Persian Gulf to consistently be accompanied by interventionist and domination-oriented approaches.

The events of September 11 constituted a turning point in U.S. security policymaking. Following this incident, security threats were redefined, and preemptive policies were placed on the agenda (Salehi et al., 2025). The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq exemplified this shift, undertaken with the aim of reconstructing the regional order and confronting emerging threats (Jalinousi et al., 2014). However, instead of consolidating American domination, these interventions increased regional tensions, fueled indigenous resistance, and facilitated the rise of actors who mobilized non-military tools to counter U.S. hegemony (Sharifpour et al., 2020). This transformation paved the way for the emergence of soft balancing against the United States' hard hegemony.

The main objective of the article is to analyze the formation and function of soft balancing against U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf after September 11. The central questions include:

• How does soft balancing differ from hard balancing, and how has it emerged in the Persian Gulf?

• Which actors are involved in this form of balancing, and what instruments do they employ?

• What challenges has U.S. hegemony faced in the face of this type of resistance?

• Can soft balancing steer the regional order toward multipolarity?

Research Method and Innovation of the Article

The research method is qualitative and analytical, drawing on library resources, scholarly articles, and strategic analyses. The theoretical framework integrates three approaches: offensive realism, hegemonic stability theory, and soft power (Keohane, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001; Nye, 2004). The innovation of the article lies in its focus on the concept of "soft balancing" as an emerging strategy against U.S. hegemonic domination—an issue that has been less independently examined in Persian-language literature despite its considerable potential for analyzing regional order (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Zavari, 2025).

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Defining and Elaborating the Concept of "Soft Balancing"

The concept of "soft balancing" has emerged in recent decades as one of the modern strategies in the international relations literature. Unlike hard balancing—based on military buildup, defense alliances, and arms competition—soft balancing relies on non-military and non-confrontational tools designed to constrain the behavior of hegemonic powers (Zavari, 2025). Soft balancing is employed when weaker actors lack the hard-power capacity for direct confrontation but seek to reduce the dominant power's influence through mechanisms such as multilateral diplomacy, international institutions, media-based narrative formation, and cultural engagement (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

Within the framework of balance-of-power theory, soft balancing is defined as an indirect reaction to the hegemon's domination. Unlike hard balancing, which typically manifests through military alliances and arms races, soft balancing proceeds through constraining diplomacy, temporary coalitions, proxy conflicts, and the use of international legal institutions (Nye, 2004; Zavari, 2025). In other words, soft balancing does not seek to undermine the hegemon's hard power directly but aims to limit its behavior within legal, ethical, and media-based frameworks.

Asqar Ghahramanpour, in *Power and Soft Balancing in International Politics*, argues that soft balancing, especially in regions under great-power domination, can serve as an effective strategy for weaker actors (Ghahramanpour, 2017). He maintains that countries such as Iran, Venezuela, and some Central Asian states have used public diplomacy, cultural narratives, and multilateral interactions to resist U.S. dominance.

In a regional example, the Islamic Republic of Iran, by employing media capacities such as Press TV and Al-Alam, organizing international conferences, expanding cultural relations with Muslim countries, and supporting resistance discourse, has developed a form of soft balancing against U.S. interventionist policies (Salehi et al., 2025). Although these actions lack direct military dimensions, they have significantly influenced public opinion, political legitimacy, and diplomatic interactions vis-à-vis the hegemonic power.

2.2. Differences between Soft Balancing, Hard Balancing, and Traditional Balancing

The concept of balance of power has long been a central tool for confronting great-power domination. However, its methods have evolved over time into forms such as hard balancing, traditional balancing, and soft balancing. Hard balancing is traditionally rooted in military buildup, defense alliances, and arms races. During the Cold War—particularly between NATO and the Warsaw Pact—this approach was prominent and shaped by the logic of deterrence and power equilibrium (Zavari, 2025). Under this framework, states counter potential threats by expanding military arsenals, signing defense treaties, and joining security coalitions.

In contrast, soft balancing focuses on non-military tools used to constrain the hegemon's behavior. These tools include multilateral diplomacy, leveraging international institutions such as the Security Council, media-driven narrative construction, cultural engagement, and even support for proxy conflicts without direct involvement (Ghahramanpour, 2017). Soft balancing is employed when weaker actors cannot enter military competition but seek to restrict the dominant power through legal, ethical, and public opinion mechanisms.

Traditional balancing, largely rooted in classical realist theories, assumes that states—as primary international actors—seek to preserve their security by enhancing national power and counterbalancing great powers (Morgenthau, 1948). While relevant in classical international relations, its efficacy has diminished in an era of globalization and the rise of non-state actors. In contrast, soft balancing can be implemented by non-state actors, transnational networks, media outlets, civil institutions, and even public opinion. This flexibility has made soft balancing an increasingly attractive strategy, especially in regions dominated by great powers. Joseph

Nye's theory of soft power underscores that in the information age, the ability to shape others' preferences through cultural attraction, political legitimacy, and media narration can substitute for hard power (Nye, 2004).

In the Persian Gulf, countries such as Iran, Qatar, and Oman have used soft instruments to create indirect balancing against U.S. dominance. Although these actions are non-military, they have had considerable effects on diplomacy, media influence, and international institutional dynamics (Salehi et al., 2025).

2.3. Related Theories: Offensive Realism, Hegemonic Stability, Soft Power

The analysis of soft balancing against United States hegemony in the Persian Gulf requires the use of multilayered theoretical frameworks capable of explaining the complex behavior of regional and extra-regional actors. In this regard, three key theories—offensive realism, hegemonic stability, and soft power—possess the greatest capacity to account for this phenomenon (Keohane, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001; Nye, 2004).

2.3.1. Offensive Realism

Offensive realism, developed by John Mearsheimer, is based on the assumption that great powers, in order to guarantee their survival, are compelled to expand their influence and increase their power. In this view, the international system is inherently anarchic and no supranational institution can guarantee security; therefore, states act offensively to prevent potential threats (Mearsheimer, 2001). From this perspective, the behavior of the United States in the Persian Gulf after September 11—including the occupation of Iraq, the reinforcement of military bases, and attempts at regime change—can be interpreted as an effort to prevent the emergence of a regional rival and to consolidate its domination.

Within the framework of offensive realism, soft balancing can be understood as an indirect reaction by weaker actors to the United States' domination-oriented logic. Instead of entering military competition, these actors employ tools such as multilateral diplomacy, media-based narrative construction, and cultural

interactions to constrain the behavior of the hegemonic power (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

2.3.2. Hegemonic Stability Theory

Hegemonic stability theory, rooted in the work of Robert Keohane, holds that the international order is stable when a dominant power assumes responsibility for providing public goods such as security, economic stability, and legal rules (Keohane, 2005). However, this domination comes under challenge when its legitimacy erodes or the costs of maintaining it increase. In the Persian Gulf, the extensive U.S. military presence, direct intervention in the internal affairs of states, and unconditional support for certain regional regimes have reduced its legitimacy in public opinion and raised its strategic costs (Salehi et al., 2025).

Under such conditions, regional and extra-regional actors have sought, through soft balancing, to challenge U.S. domination by means of legal mechanisms, multilateral diplomacy, and media narratives. Although these responses do not directly overturn the hegemonic order, they gradually erode it over the long term (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Keohane, 2005).

2.3.3. Soft Power

The theory of soft power, introduced by Joseph Nye, emphasizes the ability to exert indirect influence through cultural attraction, political legitimacy, and narrative construction. In this view, power is exercised not only through coercion but also through persuasion and appeal (Nye, 2004). Actors that lack hard power can, by using soft power, resist domination and even participate in the process of order-building.

In the Persian Gulf, countries such as Iran, Qatar, and Oman have employed transnational media, cultural diplomacy, and regional interactions as concrete examples of this type of power. Iran, by supporting the discourse of resistance, developing international media outlets such as Press TV, and organizing cultural forums, has attempted to present an alternative vision of regional order (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Salehi et al., 2025). Qatar, by launching the Al Jazeera network, has disseminated alternative narratives of regional crises and played an influential role in shaping public opinion (Rezaei, 2008). Oman, through its balanced foreign policy and cultural engagement, has acted as a mediator in regional crises.

2.4. Application of the Theories in Analyzing the Behavior of Regional Actors

Analyzing the behavior of regional actors vis-à-vis U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf requires the integration of several key theories in international relations. Offensive realism, hegemonic stability theory, and soft power each explain, from a particular angle, how these actors respond to the structural domination of the United States. These theories illuminate not only the behavior of states but also the role of transnational networks, civil institutions, and media in the process of soft balancing (Keohane, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2001; Nye, 2004).

2.4.1. Iran: Active Resistance, Narrative Construction, and Cultural Diplomacy

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the most significant critic of the U.S.-led order in the Persian Gulf, has adopted a multilayered strategy within the framework of soft balancing. From the perspective of offensive realism, Iran's behavior can be interpreted as a reaction to U.S. efforts to contain independent regional powers. By supporting non-state actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Iran has created a form of indirect influence in the region that can be analyzed as proxy warfare (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

Within the soft power framework, Iran has used transnational media such as Press TV and Al-Alam to promote an alternative narrative of regional order. These narratives, which emphasize resistance to domination, justice-seeking, and political independence, have influenced segments of regional public opinion. Furthermore, Iran's cultural diplomacy—through international conferences, student exchanges, and religious interactions—has played an important role in reinforcing soft balancing (Salehi et al., 2025).

2.4.2. Qatar and Oman: Independent Foreign Policy and Transnational Narratives

Qatar and Oman, by adopting independent foreign policies that diverge from traditional alignments, have played effective roles in soft balancing. Qatar, through the establishment of Al Jazeera, has created a platform for transnational narrative-making that has frequently challenged U.S. policies and those of its allies. By covering regional crises such as the Iraq war, the Gaza blockade,

and developments in Yemen, this network has significantly influenced Arab public opinion (Rezaei, 2008).

Oman, by maintaining neutrality in regional crises—especially in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia—has acted as an active mediator. Drawing on quiet diplomacy and cultural interactions, the country has served as a facilitator in several sensitive cases, including the Iranian nuclear talks. Within the hegemonic stability framework, Oman's behavior can be understood as an attempt to preserve regional order without full dependence on the hegemonic power (Sharifpour et al., 2020).

2.4.3. China and Russia: Economic Diplomacy and Political Support

China and Russia, as two extra-regional powers, have fostered a form of soft balancing against U.S. domination by using economic diplomacy, infrastructure investments, and political support for regional actors. China, through the Belt and Road Initiative, long-term agreements with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and its presence in the Persian Gulf energy market, has expanded its economic influence (Jalilvand, 2017).

Russia, by selling arms, providing diplomatic support for Iran in international institutions, and engaging in regional crises such as Syria, has played a significant role in weakening U.S. domination. Although these actions lack a direct military dimension in the Persian Gulf itself, they have strengthened soft balancing at structural and political levels (Keohane, 2005).

3. U.S. Hegemony in the Persian Gulf after September 11

3.1. Redefining Threats: Terrorism, Fundamentalism, Iran

The September 11, 2001 attacks marked a turning point in the evolution of the U.S. security discourse and the redefinition of regional threats. As the largest terrorist attack on U.S. soil, this event prompted Washington to shift its security approach from containing traditional powers to confronting transnational and unconventional threats. Within this framework, international terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and the expansion of Iranian influence were identified as key threats in the Persian Gulf (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023).

According to strategic analyses, the United States, after September 11, sought to legitimize its military presence in the region by highlighting transnational threats—especially terrorism and fundamentalism. This redefinition not only paved the way for greater U.S. military interventions in regional states but also led to the formation of new security coalitions with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Defense agreements, intelligence sharing, and the deployment of forces to bases in Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates were integral components of this new strategy (Vaezi, 2010).

In this context, the Islamic Republic of Iran—as an independent actor, critic of the U.S. order, and supporter of the resistance discourse—was portrayed in U.S. security discourse as a regional threat. This image was reinforced by focusing on Iran's support for non-state groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Ansar Allah, as well as its nuclear program. By linking Iran to terrorism and fundamentalism, the United States sought to obtain international legitimacy for containment and sanctions policies against Tehran (Salehi et al., 2025).

From the perspective of offensive realism, this redefinition of threats can be seen as an effort by the hegemonic power to prevent the emergence of a regional rival. By altering its security discourse, the United States not only marginalized traditional threats but also, by emphasizing transnational threats, expanded the scope of its interventions and reorganized the regional security architecture to serve its own interests (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

Consequently, the post–September 11 redefinition of threats transformed the Persian Gulf security order from one based on inter-state balance of power to one structured around confronting unconventional threats. This development facilitated the expansion of U.S. hegemony while simultaneously creating fertile ground for the emergence of soft resistance by independent regional actors (Rezaei, 2008; Zavari, 2025).

3.2. Instruments of Domination: Military Presence, Regime Change, Media Narrative Construction

Following the redefinition of security threats after the September 11 attacks, the United States employed a set of hard and soft instruments to consolidate and reproduce its hegemony in the Persian Gulf. These instruments—implemented through extensive military

presence, regime change policies, and media-based narrative construction—fundamentally transformed the region's security architecture (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023; Vaezi, 2010).

3.2.1. Extensive Military Presence and the Consolidation of the Security Structure

One of the most important instruments of U.S. domination was the expansion of its military presence in key states of the region. After the occupation of Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the United States, by establishing permanent bases in Qatar (Al Udeid Air Base), Bahrain (the Fifth Fleet), the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait, effectively positioned itself at the heart of the region and gained direct control over energy routes, maritime passages, and regional security developments (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). This military presence not only had a deterrent function but was also used as a tool to exert political and economic pressure on independent regional actors such as Iran.

Within the framework of offensive realism, this strategy can be interpreted as an effort to prevent the emergence of rival powers and preserve the United States' strategic monopoly in the region. Extensive military presence enabled Washington to intervene rapidly in crises, monitor the military movements of other states, and guarantee the security of its regional allies (Mearsheimer, 2001).

3.2.2. Regime Change Policies and the Reconfiguration of the Regional Order

Alongside military presence, regime change policy was also placed on the U.S. agenda as an instrument for reconfiguring the regional order. The occupation of Iraq and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's government marked the starting point of this strategy. The objective was not only to eliminate hostile regimes but also to establish political structures aligned with U.S. interests and to weaken regional axes of resistance (Salehi et al., 2025; Vaezi, 2010). Efforts to weaken the Syrian state, pressure on Iran through extensive sanctions, and support for specific political movements in Arab countries formed part of this order-changing strategy.

Although these policies achieved partial success in some cases, they generated long-term political instability, intensified sectarian tensions, and expanded insecurity across the region. From the perspective of hegemonic

stability theory, these actions reflect the hegemon's attempt to preserve its preferred order, even at the cost of rising human losses and declining international legitimacy (Keohane, 2005).

3.2.3. Media Narrative Construction and the Legitimation of Domination

In addition to hard instruments, the United States drew on the soft power of media to legitimize its interventions. Global networks such as CNN and BBC, along with aligned Arab media such as Al Arabiya and Al Hurra, played a major role in shaping regional and global public opinion. By focusing on terrorist threats, the dangers of fundamentalism, and the negative portrayal of Iran and resistance movements, these media outlets sought to present U.S. military interventions as necessary and legitimate (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

Within the soft power framework, such media narrative construction can be understood as a tool for persuading public opinion, undermining the legitimacy of regional rivals, and reinforcing the hegemonic image of the United States. Through selective news coverage, the amplification of crises, and the downplaying of the human consequences of interventions, the media created the psychological space required for the continuation of U.S. domination (Nye, 2004).

3.3. Expansion of Direct and Indirect Interventions

U.S. interventions in the Persian Gulf after the September 11 attacks were not limited to direct military actions; they also acquired indirect, structural, and multilayered dimensions. Aimed at consolidating Washington's hegemony and preventing the rise of independent regional powers, these interventions were implemented through economic sanctions, the design of joint security mechanisms, and the use of international institutions.

3.3.1. Economic Sanctions and Structural Pressure

One of the most important indirect instruments used by the United States against independent regional actors—especially the Islamic Republic of Iran—was the imposition of broad economic sanctions. These sanctions, applied both unilaterally and multilaterally, targeted key sectors of Iran's economy, including energy, banking, transportation, and foreign trade. Their primary objective was to weaken Iran's economic

capacity, restrict the financial resources of resistance groups, and increase domestic discontent (Salehi et al., 2025).

Sanctions also functioned as a tool of diplomatic coercion: by exerting economic pressure, the United States sought to compel Iran to accept its political and security conditions. This strategy, as a form of non-military hard balancing, complemented the military presence and expanded Washington's influence within the region's economic structures (Keohane, 2005).

3.3.2. Joint Security Initiatives and Strategic Dependency

In parallel with sanctions, the United States supported joint Arab security initiatives—such as the idea of an "Arab NATO"—in an effort to design a security structure that would increase Arab states' dependence on Washington. These initiatives, which aimed to confront shared threats (such as Iran, terrorism, and regional instability), strengthened military, intelligence, and logistical cooperation between the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council states (Vaezi, 2010).

As Vaezi's analysis suggests, these mechanisms not only reinforced the U.S. role as the provider of regional security but also constrained the strategic autonomy of Arab states (Vaezi, 2010). In effect, by creating security dependency, the United States was able to steer Arab governments' political behavior in line with its own interests and to prevent the emergence of an independent regional order.

3.3.3. Use of International Institutions and the Quest for Legitimacy

Another dimension of indirect U.S. intervention was its use of international institutions to legitimize its actions. The United Nations Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency, and human rights bodies were employed as instruments for exerting legal and political pressure on Iran and other independent actors. Through its influence in these institutions, the United States attempted to present its unilateral measures as multilateral and to secure international legitimacy for them (Keohane, 2005).

However, this legitimacy-building strategy faced serious challenges at the level of regional public opinion. Many regional elites and media outlets interpreted these moves as tools of domination and interference,

contributing to the decline of U.S. credibility in Arab and Islamic societies (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

3.4. Security and Political Consequences for the Region

The expansion of U.S. domination in the Persian Gulf after September 11 produced complex and multifaceted consequences for regional security and politics. These consequences can be examined on two main levels: first, the direct effects of military presence and political interventions; second, the indirect and indigenous reactions that emerged in the form of soft resistance and shifts in public opinion.

3.4.1. Rising Security Tensions and the Emergence of Indigenous Resistance

The extensive U.S. military presence in Arab states of the region—particularly in Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates—fueled heightened security tensions and catalyzed indigenous forms of resistance. Although this presence was initially justified as a response to transnational threats such as terrorism and fundamentalism, it was in practice perceived as a symbol of domination and interventionism, provoking negative reactions among local societies (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). Groups such as the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and even civil movements in Bahrain are examples of indigenous resistance to U.S. military presence that have operated within the logic of soft balancing (Rezaei, 2008).

From the perspective of offensive realism, these reactions can be interpreted as the natural outcome of a great power's expanding domination within a constrained geopolitical space—where local actors turn to indirect tools of resistance in order to preserve their identity and independence (Mearsheimer, 2001).

3.4.2. Constraining the Strategic Autonomy of Arab States

The security dependency of Arab states on the United States—especially after the signing of defense agreements and the deepening of intelligence cooperation—reduced their strategic autonomy in dealing with regional developments. Abbasi Eshlaghi emphasizes that this dependency prevented Arab states from adopting independent and balanced positions in crises such as the Syrian war, the blockade of Yemen, and

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Iran–Saudi tensions (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). In practice, their foreign policies became heavily shaped by Washington's strategic preferences, and their national decision-making space narrowed.

From the standpoint of hegemonic stability theory, this situation illustrates that although a dominant power may create apparent order, its prolonged domination ultimately erodes the independence and legitimacy of subordinate actors (Keohane, 2005).

3.4.3. Erosion of U.S. Legitimacy in Regional Public Opinion

U.S. interventionist policies—including the occupation of Iraq, support for authoritarian regimes, and the imposition of sweeping sanctions—led to a marked erosion of its legitimacy in regional public opinion. Independent and transnational media such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, and Press TV played a crucial role in this shift by providing critical coverage of U.S. actions (Jalilvand, 2017; Rezaei, 2008). Jalinousi and his colleagues argue that these developments created a favorable environment for the emergence of soft balancing against U.S. hegemony (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

Within the soft power framework, the decline of U.S. cultural and political attractiveness in the region enabled independent actors to line up against Washington's domination by leveraging soft tools such as public diplomacy, media-based narrative construction, and cultural engagement (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Nye, 2004).

4. The Emergence of Soft Balancing against U.S. Hegemony

4.1. Reasons for the Inefficiency of Hard Balancing against U.S. Domination

Hard balancing, which is based on increasing military capabilities, forming defensive alliances, and engaging in arms races, has shown limited effectiveness against the structural, multilayered, and complex domination of the United States in the Persian Gulf. This ineffectiveness can be analyzed at three levels: strategic, structural, and empirical.

4.1.1. Absolute U.S. Superiority in the Military, Intelligence, and Logistical Domains

One of the fundamental reasons for the inefficiency of hard balancing is the absolute superiority of the United States in the military, intelligence, and logistical domains in the region. By maintaining the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and a broad presence in the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Iraq, the United States has created a network of hard power across the region with which no regional actor is capable of directly competing (Vaezi, 2010). This superiority is evident not only in troop numbers and equipment but also in information technologies, defensive systems, and rapid reaction capabilities.

Under such conditions, any attempt at hard balancing by regional states faces serious constraints, since they lack both the financial resources required for such competition and the political will necessary to establish independent alliances.

4.1.2. Security Dependency of Arab States and the Absence of Collective Will

The second factor is the security dependency of Arab states on the United States, which has prevented the formation of independent regional alliances capable of countering Washington's domination. The members of the Gulf Cooperation Council—particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain—are heavily dependent on the U.S.-led security structure due to defense agreements, extensive arms purchases, and joint military training (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). This dependency has not only restricted their strategic autonomy but has also hindered them from adopting collective and independent positions in the face of shared threats.

From the perspective of hegemonic stability theory, this situation indicates that the hegemonic power, by creating security dependencies, obstructs the emergence of alternative orders and effective hard balancing.

4.1.3. Historical Experiences and the High Costs of Military Confrontation

Historical experiences such as the war in Afghanistan (2001) and the occupation of Iraq (2003) have shown that military confrontation with the United States not only fails to weaken its domination but also leads to

increased regional instability, the escalation of sectarian tensions, and the growth of extremism. Despite their extensive human and economic costs, these wars did not improve the regional order; instead, they generated greater insecurity, forced migrations, and the weakening of central governments (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

Consequently, regional actors, rather than entering into hard military competition, shifted toward indirect and soft strategies that entail lower costs and pursue longer-term effectiveness. These strategies—which include public diplomacy, media-based narrative construction, cultural interactions, and the use of international institutions—are encapsulated in the notion of soft balancing.

4.2. The Formation of Indirect and Multilayered Resistance

In response to the structural and multifaceted domination of the United States in the Persian Gulf, a set of indirect, multilayered, and diverse behaviors emerged among regional and extra-regional actors that can be analyzed within the framework of soft balancing. Unlike direct military confrontations, these forms of resistance were pursued through informal, cultural, media, and diplomatic channels and gradually challenged U.S. hegemony.

4.2.1. Iran: Cultural Diplomacy, Support for Non-State Actors, and Media Narrative Construction

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the most important critic of the U.S.-led order in the Persian Gulf, has adopted a multilayered strategy of soft balancing. This strategy includes the use of cultural diplomacy, support for non-state actors, and media-based narrative construction. By organizing cultural conferences, promoting scientific and religious exchanges with Islamic countries, and strengthening the discourse of resistance, Iran has sought to erode the legitimacy of U.S. domination in regional public opinion (Salehi et al., 2025).

Moreover, Iran's support for groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and Ansar Allah in Yemen possesses not only military dimensions but also cultural and identity-based aspects. These groups, grounded in an anti-hegemonic discourse, have been able to provide alternative narratives in opposition to U.S. hegemonic frames. Media outlets such as Press TV and Al-Alam, through critical coverage of Washington's policies, have also played a significant role in shaping public opinion.

4.2.2. Qatar: Transnational Media-Building and Independent Foreign Policy

Qatar, by launching the Al Jazeera network in 1996, created a platform for transnational narrative construction that has frequently challenged U.S. policies and those of its allies. By focusing on humanitarian crises and offering critical coverage of the Iraq war, the Gaza blockade, and developments in Yemen, Al Jazeera has influenced Arab public opinion and weakened official U.S. narratives (Rezaei, 2008).

In addition to media-building, Qatar has played an active role in soft balancing by adopting an independent foreign policy—especially in regional crises such as relations with Iran, support for the Muslim Brotherhood, and mediation in diplomatic dossiers. Although these behaviors faced pressures from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, they contributed to consolidating Qatar's position as an independent and influential actor.

4.2.3. Oman: Neutral Diplomacy and Mediating Role

The Sultanate of Oman, by maintaining neutrality in regional crises and acting as a mediator in sensitive cases, has managed to consolidate its position through soft diplomacy. The country played a facilitative role in the nuclear negotiations between Iran and the West and succeeded in earning the trust of both sides. Oman's balanced foreign policy—based on engagement with all parties and avoidance of sharp polarization—is regarded as a successful example of soft balancing at the regional level (Sharifpour et al., 2020).

4.2.4. Beyond States: Civil Institutions, Media, and Transnational Networks

Indirect resistance to U.S. domination has not been limited to states. Civil institutions, independent media, social networks, and even transnational movements have also played important roles in shaping soft balancing. Through content production, the organization of protests, and the construction of alternative narratives, these actors have helped to free the region's psychological and cultural space from U.S. monopoly (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

4.3. The Role of Public Diplomacy, Regional Media, and Cultural Interactions

Public diplomacy, as one of the key instruments of soft balancing, has played an important role in shaping public opinion and delegitimizing U.S. domination. Iran, by hosting international conferences, expanding cultural relations with Islamic countries, and supporting "resistance media," has attempted to offer an alternative narrative to the U.S. security discourse (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Salehi et al., 2025).

Regional media outlets such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, and Press TV, through their critical coverage of U.S. policies, have contributed to the erosion of U.S. legitimacy. By focusing on the humanitarian crises generated by U.S. interventions—such as the wars in Iraq and Yemen—these media organizations have heightened regional public sensitivity to Washington's domination (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

Cultural interactions—including student exchanges, academic cooperation, and religious diplomacy—have also strengthened soft balancing. Such interactions, particularly among Islamic countries, have fostered cultural solidarity and reduced dependence on Western narratives (Nye, 2004).

4.4. The Use of International Institutions and Legal Mechanisms

Within the framework of soft balancing, the use of international institutions and legal mechanisms is one of the most effective tools for constraining the behavior of hegemonic powers. Relying on legal legitimacy, global consensus, and institutionalized rules, these instruments make it possible to confront domination indirectly. In the Persian Gulf, actors such as Iran and some Arab states have sought to exploit these capacities to weaken U.S. dominance.

4.4.1. Iran: The Nuclear File and the Use of Legal Institutions

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as an independent actor critical of the U.S.-led order, has endeavored in its nuclear file to use international institutions to gain legal legitimacy and counter unilateral U.S. pressure. Through ongoing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the submission of technical reports, and acceptance of periodic inspections, Iran has sought to frame its nuclear program within the parameters of international law (Salehi et al., 2025).

Furthermore, Iran has at times used the International Court of Justice to file complaints against U.S. sanctions and to challenge Washington's actions in legal terms. Although these steps have not completely prevented pressure, they have strengthened the legitimacy of Iran's positions in global public opinion and legal forums (Keohane, 2005).

4.4.2. Arab States: Participation in Multilateral Institutions and Legal Complaints

Some Arab states, particularly within the framework of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, have attempted to constrain U.S. behavior through multilateral mechanisms. Supporting anti-U.S. resolutions, filing legal complaints in international bodies, and participating in human rights forums have all been part of this strategy. By highlighting the human consequences of U.S. interventions in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, these countries have sought to sensitize global public opinion to Washington's hegemonic conduct (Keohane, 2005).

In some cases, even U.S. allies have adopted critical positions in bodies such as the UN Human Rights Council, illustrating the complexity of the international order and the potential of legal mechanisms to serve soft balancing.

4.4.3. The Role of International Institutions in Weakening the Legitimacy of Domination

International institutions—particularly those with monitoring, adjudicative, and consensus-building mechanisms—can play a significant role in weakening the legitimacy of domination. The Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Court of Justice, and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation are examples of institutions that regional actors have used to constrain U.S. behavior. By creating spaces for dialogue, issuing binding or symbolic resolutions, and publishing independent reports, these institutions can limit the conduct of the hegemonic power within legal and ethical frameworks (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Keohane, 2005).

5. Soft-Balancing Actors in the Persian Gulf

5.1. Iran: Axis of Resistance, Regional Diplomacy, Narrative Construction

The Islamic Republic of Iran, as the principal critic of the U.S.-led order in the Persian Gulf, has pursued a soft-balancing strategy through the Axis of Resistance, regional diplomacy, and media-based narrative construction. By supporting non-state groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, and Ansar Allah in Yemen, Iran has managed to expand its indirect influence across the region. Beyond their military dimension, this support also carries cultural and identity-based aspects and is framed within the broader project of resistance against Western domination (Salehi et al., 2025).

In the diplomatic arena, Iran has sought to establish strategic relations with neighboring states such as Iraq, Syria, Oman, and Qatar. Diplomatic visits, cooperation agreements, and participation in regional summits have been among Iran's main tools for strengthening soft balancing. At the same time, media outlets such as Press TV and Al-Alam have played a significant role in constructing alternative narratives and attempting to project a different image of U.S. policies in the region (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

5.2. Qatar and Oman: Independent Foreign Policy, Mediation, Transnational Media

Qatar and Oman, by adopting independent foreign policies that do not fully align with traditional regional polarizations, have played effective roles in soft balancing. Qatar, through the launch of the Al Jazeera network, has created a platform for transnational narrative-making that has, in many cases, challenged the policies of the United States and its allies. By covering regional crises such as the Iraq war, the Gaza blockade,

and developments in Yemen, this network has influenced Arab public opinion (Rezaei, 2008).

Oman, by maintaining neutrality in regional crises—especially in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia—has acted as an active mediator. Relying on quiet diplomacy and cultural engagement, the country has served as a facilitator in a number of sensitive dossiers, including Iran's nuclear negotiations. The balanced foreign policy of these two states is considered an instance of soft balancing against the structural domination of the United States (Sharifpour et al., 2020).

5.3. China and Russia: Economic Diplomacy, Non-Military Presence, Political Support

China and Russia, as two extra-regional powers, have generated a form of soft balancing against U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf through economic diplomacy and political support. China, via the Belt and Road Initiative, investment in port and energy infrastructure, and the conclusion of long-term agreements with Iran and Saudi Arabia, has succeeded in expanding its economic influence in the region (Jalilvand, 2017).

Russia, by selling arms, providing diplomatic support for Iran in international institutions, and intervening in regional crises such as Syria, has played an important role in weakening U.S. domination. Although these two powers do not maintain an extensive military presence in the Persian Gulf, they have nonetheless contributed to regional order-building through indirect instruments (Keohane, 2005).

5.4. Comparing Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Soft-balancing strategies among different actors vary in terms of instruments, strategic objectives, and levels of effectiveness:

Table 1

Comparing Strategies and Their Effectiveness

Actor	Main Instruments	Strategic Objective	Level of Effectiveness
Iran	Axis of Resistance, cultural diplomacy, resistance media	Undermining U.S. legitimacy, strengthening the resistance discourse	High in identity and proxy domains; limited in international legitimacy
Qatar	Al Jazeera, independent foreign policy	Shaping public opinion, mediation	High in media and diplomacy; vulnerable to regional pressure
Oman	Neutrality, quiet diplomacy	Facilitation, preserving stability	Effective in mediation; limited in structural influence

| China | Investment, economic diplomacy | Expanding economic influence, weakening U.S. monopoly | High in the economic sphere; limited in regional security |
| Russia | Political support, arms sales | Countering U.S. influence, protecting allies | Effective in politics; limited in physical presence |

Overall, soft balancing has succeeded in challenging U.S. domination, but it has not yet reached the point of fully replacing it. The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the degree of coordination among actors, their domestic capacities, and the broader international environment.

6. Challenges to U.S. Hegemony in the Face of Soft Balancing

6.1. Declining International Legitimacy

One of the most significant challenges facing U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf is the erosion of its international legitimacy as a result of military interventions, unilateralist policies, and unconditional support for certain regional regimes. The invasion of Iraq without Security Council authorization, extensive sanctions against Iran, and silence in the face of human rights violations by regional allies have all undermined the moral and legal credibility of the United States at both global and regional levels (Salehi et al., 2025). This decline in legitimacy has facilitated the strengthening of alternative narratives and increased the inclination of states to pursue policies more independent from Washington.

6.2. Rising Costs of Military Presence

The extensive U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf—especially after the occupation of Iraq—has imposed substantial financial, human, and political costs on Washington. As Abbasi Eshlaghi notes, the expenses associated with maintaining military bases, securing energy routes, and countering regional threats have placed heavy pressure on the U.S. defense budget (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023). In addition, human casualties and the psychological consequences of prolonged wars have reduced domestic support for interventionist policies. These pressures have pushed the United States toward reducing its military commitments and relying more on indirect instruments.

6.3. The Rise of Multipolar Powers

Over the past two decades, the international system has been moving from a unipolar toward a multipolar structure. The rise of China as a global economic power, Russia's return to the geopolitical arena, and the growing regional roles of states such as Iran, Turkey, and India have subjected U.S. hegemony in the Persian Gulf to structural challenges (Rezaei, 2008). By drawing on economic diplomacy, security cooperation, and political support for independent actors, these powers have succeeded in wresting part of the region's strategic space from U.S. monopoly and contributing to the formation of an alternative order.

6.4. Transformation of Regional Public Opinion

Public opinion in Gulf countries—especially after the bitter experiences of the Iraq war, the Syrian crisis, and the blockade of Yemen—has adopted a more critical view of the U.S. presence in the region. Regional media such as Al Jazeera, Al Mayadeen, and Press TV, through their critical coverage of U.S. policies, have played an important role in shaping this transformation. The expansion of public awareness, the proliferation of social networks, and the growth of civil society organizations have challenged the legitimacy of official U.S. narratives and created space for the reception of alternative discourses (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

6.5. Weakening of Hegemonic Narratives in the Media

Media narrative construction has been one of the key soft-power instruments of the United States in the region. In recent years, however, these narratives have faced robust competition from independent and regional media. Networks such as Al Jazeera, Al Alam, and even Russian and Chinese outlets have attracted portions of Arab and Islamic audiences by offering alternative interpretations of regional crises. By focusing on the human consequences of U.S. interventions—such as displacement, infrastructure destruction, and political instability—these media have challenged hegemonic

narratives and diminished their legitimacy (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

7. Strategic Analysis and Foresight

7.1. Can Soft Balancing Replace Hard Balancing?

Soft balancing, as an indirect, flexible, and relatively low-cost strategy, has in recent years acquired a significant position in the foreign policies of regional and extra-regional actors. However, its complete replacement of hard balancing requires profound changes in the global and regional power structure. Ghahramanpour argues that soft balancing can only replace hard balancing when the hegemonic power faces a crisis of legitimacy, resource depletion, and binding international constraints (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

In the Persian Gulf, although soft instruments such as public diplomacy, transnational media, and international institutions have been able to challenge U.S. domination, hard power remains the ultimate arbiter in moments of acute crisis. Therefore, soft balancing should be viewed as a complement to hard balancing that, under specific conditions, may play a substitutive role. In the long term, with rising military costs, changes in public opinion, and the expansion of multipolarity, the likelihood of a partial replacement of hard balancing by soft balancing is likely to increase (Keohane, 2005; Zavari, 2025).

7.2. Future Scenarios for the Regional Order

Based on current trends, three main scenarios can be envisaged for the future of the regional order in the Persian Gulf:

First, a scenario of continued U.S. domination, in which Washington maintains its military bases, strengthens security alliances, and controls energy flows to preserve its hegemonic role. This scenario presupposes higher military expenditures and ongoing struggles with legitimacy challenges (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023).

Second, a scenario of transition to a multipolar order, in which regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia—together with extra-regional powers such as China and Russia—play a greater role in order-building. This transition will be accompanied by intensified competition, greater diplomatic complexity, and a reduction in U.S. exclusivity (Rezaei, 2008).

Third, a scenario of regionally driven integration independent of great powers, in which Gulf states seek to shape the regional order through joint security and economic mechanisms without reliance on external powers. This scenario requires political will, confidence-building, and the reduction of historical tensions (Sharifpour et al., 2020).

7.3. The Role of the United States in a Multipolar Order in the Persian Gulf

If a multipolar order materializes, the role of the United States will shift from a dominant hegemon to a still influential but more limited actor. In such a context, Washington may replace direct intervention with non-military instruments such as economic diplomacy, technological cooperation, and support for regional institutions. This transformation requires a redefinition of U.S. strategic interests in the region and acceptance of a more active role for other actors (Salehi et al., 2025).

Furthermore, to maintain its influence within a multipolar architecture, the United States will need to rebuild its legitimacy, reduce its reliance on hard power, and strengthen its cultural and media engagement. Otherwise, declining participation in regional order-building may marginalize the U.S. position in the Persian Gulf.

7.4. Opportunities and Threats for Regional Actors

Regional actors facing a transition to a new order encounter both opportunities and risks. Opportunities include expanding strategic autonomy, assuming the role of mediator, attracting foreign investment, and reinforcing multilateral diplomacy. States such as Oman and Qatar can enhance their positions by preserving a balanced foreign policy (Ghahramanpour, 2017).

Conversely, threats include increased regional competition, the risk of new polarizations, and potential proxy interventions by extra-regional powers. Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the two principal poles, may enter a cycle of persistent tensions if differences are not managed effectively. Additionally, institutional weaknesses, the absence of mutual trust, and economic dependence on external powers remain key obstacles to establishing a stable and autonomous regional order (Jalinousi et al., 2014).

8. Conclusion

The geopolitical transformations in the Persian Gulf following the events of 11 September 2001 illustrate a fundamental shift in patterns of domination, resistance, and order formation. The United States, through the use of hard power, widespread military presence, regime-change policies, and media-driven narrative construction, attempted to restructure the regional order in line with its strategic interests. However, this dominance encountered multilayered challenges, including declining international legitimacy, rising military costs, shifts in regional public opinion, and the emergence of multipolar power centers (Abbasi Eshlaghi, 2023; Jalinousi et al., 2014).

In response, regional and extra-regional actors adopted an indirect strategy labeled "soft balancing." Unlike hard balancing, which is based on military confrontation and defense alliances, soft balancing employs tools such as public diplomacy, transnational media, cultural interactions, and international institutions. Iran, Qatar, Oman, China, and Russia each engaged in various forms of resistance and managed to reclaim part of the region's strategic space from U.S. monopoly (Ghahramanpour, 2017; Rezaei, 2008).

Regarding the first research question, soft balancing—despite its structural differences from hard balancing—has demonstrated significant capacity to constrain hegemonic behavior under specific conditions. While it has not yet replaced hard balancing entirely, prevailing trends show that the instruments of soft balancing are expanding in influence.

The second research question, concerning the principal soft-balancing actors, showed that Iran, through the Axis of Resistance and cultural narrative construction; Qatar, through transnational media; Oman, through neutral diplomacy; and China and Russia, through economic diplomacy and political support, each play distinct roles in confronting U.S. dominance.

The third research question highlighted the challenges to U.S. hegemony, demonstrating that Washington faces crises of legitimacy, increased military expenditures, rising competition from new powers, and a transformed regional public sphere.

Finally, the fourth research question emphasized that despite inherent limitations, soft balancing has gained increasing significance in regional order-building and may evolve into a dominant strategy in the future—especially if regional actors strengthen soft-power capacities, reduce reliance on external powers, and expand indigenous and multilateral mechanisms (Rezaei, 2008; Sharifpour et al., 2020).

Soft balancing, as a multilayered, flexible, and low-cost strategy, possesses high potential for shaping order in regions under the influence of major powers. In the Persian Gulf, this strategy has succeeded in reclaiming portions of geopolitical space from U.S. exclusivity and facilitating the emergence of a multipolar order. Its importance lies in the fact that weaker actors can participate in order formation without entering direct military confrontation, using diplomacy, media, and international institutions as effective instruments.

Soft balancing also enables the participation of non-state institutions, media platforms, and public opinion in policymaking and expands the scope of resistance from the state level to the societal level. This quality—especially in the era of information and social networks—has become increasingly significant and serves as an important complement to hard power.

8.1. Recommendations

8.1.1. For Regional Policymakers:

• Strengthen public diplomacy and cultural narrative-building as core tools of soft balancing.
• Reduce security dependence on extra-regional powers and develop indigenous regional mechanisms.
• Utilize international institutions to legitimize independent policies.
• Support transnational and regional media outlets to shape public opinion.
• Expand cultural, scientific, and religious cooperation to enhance regional cohesion.

8.1.2. For International Relations Scholars:

• Develop indigenous theoretical frameworks for analyzing soft balancing and indirect resistance.
• Conduct comparative studies of soft balancing across world regions.
• Examine the role of non-state actors, media, and civil institutions in order-building.
• Carry out foresight analyses on global and regional transitions toward multipolar structures.

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• Evaluate empirically the effectiveness of soft-power instruments in countering structural domination.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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