

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

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1. Round 1

1.1. Reviewer 1

Reviewer:

In the second paragraph of the Introduction, the manuscript states: “This article seeks to examine this transformation...”. However, the research gap is not explicitly articulated. The authors should add a sentence specifying what existing literature lacks and how this article uniquely addresses that void.

The list of research questions is well structured, but the questions are expressed in abstract terms. For instance, “Which actors are involved in this form of balancing...?” needs operational definitions: what criteria qualify an actor as a “soft-balancing actor”?

The sentence “Soft balancing can be implemented by non-state actors, transnational networks, media outlets...” risks conceptual inflation. Traditional balancing theory is state-centric. The authors should justify why they apply the term “balancing” to non-state entities and how this aligns with established IR theory.

In the paragraph on offensive realism, the authors write: “The United States... can be interpreted as an effort to prevent the emergence of a regional rival.” This is plausible, but the manuscript should acknowledge competing interpretations (e.g., counterterrorism logic), showing theoretical balance.

The paragraph beginning “However, this domination comes under challenge when its legitimacy erodes...” asserts legitimacy decline without offering indicators. What signals legitimacy erosion—UN voting patterns, regional polls, or reduced coalition participation? Include measurable elements.

The sentence “This redefinition not only paved the way for greater U.S. military interventions...” requires temporal specificity. How did this evolve across different administrations? The lack of periodization weakens historical precision.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

1.2. Reviewer 2

Reviewer:

In the “Research Method and Innovation” section, the phrase “qualitative and analytical” is insufficient. The authors should specify which qualitative strategy was used (e.g., thematic analysis, discourse analysis, process tracing), how texts were selected, and how interpretations were validated.

In the section defining soft balancing, the authors state: “Soft balancing relies on non-military and non-confrontational tools...”. While accurate, the manuscript does not demonstrate how these tools connect to the later discussion of offensive realism or hegemonic stability. A bridging paragraph explaining the theoretical linkage is recommended.

In the soft power subsection, the sentence “Actors that lack hard power can... resist domination” is overly general. The authors should specify that soft power does not necessarily guarantee influence, and contextual factors determine its effectiveness.

In the Iran section, the manuscript states: “Iran... has created a form of indirect influence... analyzed as proxy warfare.” The causal chain between Iran’s policies and regional outcomes is insufficiently explained. How exactly do these proxies constrain U.S. behavior? A clearer mechanism is needed.

In the paragraph on Qatar, the phrase “independent foreign policy” is used, but the manuscript does not explain what constitutes independence. Independence from whom—the GCC? The U.S.? Regional blocs? Provide definitional clarity.

The discussion of Oman’s neutrality relies on descriptive statements such as “acting as a mediator”. The authors should connect this to theory—does mediation function as a soft-balancing tool or simply a diplomatic style?

The paragraph stating “China and Russia... have fostered a form of soft balancing” lumps two very different strategic logics together. The authors should compare their motivations separately—economic for China, strategic-military for Russia—to avoid oversimplification.

Authors revised the manuscript and uploaded the document.

2. Revised

Editor’s decision: Accepted.

Editor in Chief’s decision: Accepted.