

# ***Explaining U.S. Foreign Policy Behaviour towards China in the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Soft Balancing of Inverse Roles***

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**Abstract:** This study discusses the origin of a series of readily observable behaviour of international politics during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of soft balancing theory. It aims to examine why the U.S., together with its allies, conducted soft balancing to contain China, a second-tier power during the pandemic since soft balancing is normally a behaviour that second-tier powers perform towards a hegemonic state. This study suggests that the origin of the behaviour cannot be attributed to a failure of soft balancing theory. Instead, this behaviour can be attributed to the role played by China as perceived by the U.S., which was temporarily reversed in the beginning of the pandemic, that is, the U.S. perceived China as a hegemonic state and perceived itself as a declining state in the dynamic balance of the power system. In addition, the U.S. perceived China's behaviour as an inoffensive behaviour in the context of limited competition. These two primary perceptions conjointly prompted the U.S. to conduct soft balancing towards China. As the pandemic stabilized, the perception returned to the status quo politics, and U.S. foreign policy behaviour towards China regained to limited hard balance.

## **1. Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic created a huge global health crisis. In accordance with data from the Weekly Epidemiological Update by the World Health Organization, there were almost 392 million cases and 5.7 million deaths reported worldwide as of March 2022 [1]. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of new cases has fluctuated widely around the world instead of showing a trend of continuous decline despite a variety of measures to stop the spread of the pandemic.

COVID-19 also exerted a direct adverse effect on global socioeconomic activity, and global economic recovery faces considerable challenges and uncertainties. The World Bank found that with a global economic growth rate of -3.3% in 2020, nearly 100 million people around the world were pushed into extreme poverty, and some countries were forced into a debt crisis in response to the pandemic crisis [2].

Europe and the U.S. are regions that experienced rapid spread of the pandemic, the number of new cases in Europe has tended to increase since June 2021, with a total of nearly 150 million cases

thus far. Likewise, the number of new cases reported in the U.S. has been rising again since November 2021. In this context, countries have implemented policies for COVID-19 and continuously eased restrictions to reduce the socioeconomic impact. For instance, the Department of Health and Welfare of the U.K. said in its guidance issued on 21 February that it had decided to end the remaining local regulatory restrictions and use guidelines instead due to the economic cost of the restrictions, awareness of COVID-19, and vaccination campaigns [3].

China has continuously implemented a dynamic zero policy in accordance with the domestic reality. As the director of the Chinese National Health Commission explained it in an interview with the media, to control the spread of the pandemic in an incubation period, close contacts and sub-close contacts should be identified and possibly infected people should be put in quarantine in advance before they can spread the infection to others [4]. Thus, despite the significant impact of the pandemic outbreak on China, the number of new cases in China peaked in February 2020 (approximately 4,000 cases per day). This number gradually dropped under a precise and strict quarantine policy, and there are currently only sporadic cases.

Two plague prevention models based on different social governance conditions have emerged in the world in the process of coping with the pandemic crisis. One policy involves living with COVID-19 policy and has been implemented by most Western countries, and the other is the dynamic Zero policy adopted by China. Both paradigms enable countries to maintain social stability and reduce the effect of the pandemic, which leads to a third effect in international politics.

China and the U.S., two decisive actors in international politics, practice their own different paradigms in responses to the same major international crisis. This triggers instability caused by the counterbalances that these great powers exert on direct or indirect threats to their security in the international political order (e.g., the struggle for predominance in the international order). In fact, the order of any institution reflects the relative power positions of its actual and potential members, which limits the room for feasible bargaining and affects transaction costs [5]. The struggle for order is specifically manifested as follows: one unit attempts to restrict or destroy the order of the other unit in a wide variety of ways to achieve or stabilize a dominant position in the order. However, units with decisive power no longer seek to impose hard balancing on other unit under the circumstance of closer and more complete connections in the international mechanisms and economic activities as well as the lack of an expansionary consciousness of great power [6]. In fact, if a unit can legitimize its power in the perception of other units, there will be less resistance to its attempts to carry out its intentions [7]. Hence, during the pandemic, the U.S. and its allies, have attempted to counterbalance China on the core issues of the pandemic (e.g., virus naming, virus tracing, vaccine policy, and plague prevention policy), so that China cannot assert dominance in the international order.

This study will not analyse the prerequisites of the two different plague prevention paradigms and their advantages and disadvantages. Two issues are addressed in this study based on observable balancing in international politics. First, related behaviours centred on the pandemic, such as virus naming, virus tracing, vaccine policy and plague prevention policy, are a type of soft balancing imposed by the U.S. on China. Second, why would the Western camp, dominated by the U.S., a hegemonic state, adopt soft balancing against a second-tier power, China, in the balance of the power system?

This study focuses on the above questions. First, this study reviews the reasons for the emergence of soft balancing and the criteria in the literature for measuring it and constructs a theoretical framework including original explanations of the theory and the criteria. Second, this study addresses the first issue based on the theoretical analysis framework. Subsequently, this study answers the question of why the Western camp, led by the hegemonic power of the U.S., would oppose a second-tier power with soft balancing in the context of the pandemic. Finally, this study

reconsiders the causes of soft balancing in this case.

## **2. The Original Interpretation and Measurement Criteria of Soft Balancing**

### **2.1. The Interpretation of Soft Balancing**

The concept of soft balancing comes from the analysis of the unipolar system of the balance of power since the formation of the sole hegemony of the U.S. An understanding of the rise of soft balancing is that traditional balancing has gradually collapsed after the formation of the sole hegemony of the U.S. in the world because both the competitors and allies of the U.S. have correlative dependence with it in the terms of trade, investment, and commerce. These countries fear that direct military competition with the U.S. would derail their economic system so they choose not to engage in hard balancing with the U.S. For instance, the competition between China and the United States would not be as drastic as the competition between the U.S. and the Soviet Union considering the position of the global transnational industry chain of China [8]. The State councilor and foreign minister noted that the golden rule of Sino-American relations is that China and the U.S. both stand to gain from cooperation and lose from confrontation. Another example is that even as the trade war between China and the U.S. continues to simmer, these two countries are still trying to resolve their conflicts of interest through dialogue.

However, this does not mean that there is currently no balancing between the major powers in the world. All states have a built-in set of preferences, and the priority is security, the maintenance of territorial integrity and sovereign independence. Hence, states seek to avoid the emergence of an absolute hegemon in international politics [9]. In the above context, second-tier powers seek limited, implicit, and gradual balancing strategies to ensure their own security from a hegemon by organizing alliances or negotiating through international institutions, with the aim of limiting the U.S. to a hegemony.

Thus, soft balancing is defined by Paul as, restraining a threatening power or policy of a targeted state so that the state has difficulty achieving its target through the institutional delegitimization of its behaviour, which is dependent on international regimes, limited and informal agreements, coordinated diplomacy, and economic sanctions (Pape has also stated that territorial denial, entangling diplomacy, economic strengthening and signalling of the resolve to participate in a balancing coalition can be paths to achieve such an intention) [10]. Critically, this definition clarifies that a behaviour is soft balancing only if it is explicitly directed at thwarting offensive behaviours. More importantly, soft balancing aims to address some problems of diplomatic wrangling of the centralized systemic power of the U.S. [11]. Such power is part of the origin of the concept of soft balancing, which refers to a unipolar superpower with systemic and absolute power in the balance of power systems, such as the U.S. In other words, soft balancing occurs in the unipolar structure of the balance of power system in which the second-tier powers can still act independently to safeguard their own actions. On this basis, the second-tier powers have every incentive to contain the further expansion of the unipolar superpower. Furthermore, some subtle behaviours of the unipolar superpower may lead to the perception of a great indirect threat, which may lead second-tier power to believe that the unipolar superpower pursues hegemony. Additionally, the state will not choose an internal balance to cope with external threatening behaviour, because its own power will not exceed the unipolar superpower; instead, it will seek an external balance to limit the behaviour of the unipolar superpower. Finally, balancing a unipolar superpower cannot be achieved by relying on only one state; it is imperative to be dependent on several other second-tier powers to avoid collective failure, thus causing a sudden formation of this balancing. In fact, the optimal choice is to form and absorb as many members as possible [12]. Accordingly, since the 1990s, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union when balance was

lost, the unilateral interventionist behaviour of the U.S. made other second-tier powers highly suspicious of its offshore balance strategy and the justice of its interventions, leading to the emergence of soft balancing against the U.S.

## 2.2. Measurement Criteria for Soft Balancing

In accordance with the above explanation, the five criteria for the existence of soft balancing in international politics are elucidated. The first is whether the system of international politics is in a balance of power status, and there is a unipolar superpower in this balance of power system. If international politics is a hegemonic system or a multipolar system, it is difficult for a second-tier power to adopt soft balancing. In fact, all state behaviour is controlled and dominated by hegemonic power in the hegemonic system, in addition, the second-tier power needs to be dependent on the hegemonic power in its bloc in a multipolar system. For instance, Hungary, which was in the Soviet bloc during the confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, tried to reform but was stopped by Soviet military intervention. There can be soft balancing between the dominant states in a multipolar system, but such a multipolar situation should be regarded as a system of balance of power. For instance, during the confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, the two states always remained quite calm.

Based on the balance of power systems in international politics, the second criterion is that soft balancing behaviour should occur under the following conditions: the power status and military behaviours of a targeted state have attracted wide attention but have not caused a serious challenge to the secondary power. The public goods provided by the dominant state occupy the world economy and security field and cannot be temporarily replaced. The dominant state cannot easily retaliate against the second-tier power since the second-tier power does not have obvious balancing behaviour and does not directly challenge the dominant state with military behaviours [13].

Third criterion refers to, whether soft balancing is designed to achieve one or more of the following targets: the ability to prevent the targeted state from profiting via misconduct, increasing marginal costs to the targeted state for implementing preferences, delegitimizing the behaviour of the targeted state in the perception of third parties, sending a signal to the targeted state that its continued noncompliance may trigger hard balancing [14]. These targets actually point in the same direction, namely, they aim to prevent the targeted state's offensive behaviour or reduce the effect of such behaviour.

Based on the question of how a behaviour can be considered offensive, the fourth criterion refers to whether the behaviours of the targeted state are perceived as offensive by other states. For instance, the developments of new weapons in Britain and China have totally different meanings in the perception of the U.S. The difference in connotation generated by this type of behaviour to a state's behaviour can be explained in three ways. Onuf and Kratocheville's explanation based on language, order and structure; Wendt's view of the role of the state in different international structures and cultures, through the interaction of the two levels of units and systems; and sensitive cognition (overestimation of the other side and overestimation of one's own side as well as recognition and cognitive dissonance arising from expectations and fears) as in Jervis' concepts of cognitive congruence, evoked pattern, and historical baggage.

The fifth criterion refers to the conditions for the occurrence of soft balancing (i.e., the reason for the success of soft balancing), but not all conditions must be satisfied: the competition between the target state and other states is limited and not a matter of life and death; the extent to which a great power regards international legitimacy as the basis of power; whether it is in the immediate aftermath of a major conflict; almost all major states are broadly involved in the institutions; military defence and strategic deterrence systems become daily military weapons; the relative

dependence of the targeted state on limited resources; and the level of international support for balancing. The above five criteria provide important theoretical support for the behaviour of soft balancing, and are indispensable standards for measuring its existence.

### **2.3. Some Criticisms of Soft Balancing**

Although it is a concept that has not been fully established as a theoretical system, soft balancing can still capture and explain specific behaviour in international politics despite its shortcomings. In fact, although Paul has expressed concern about the general shortcomings, including the lack of sufficient practical proof and the difficulty of observing the behaviour of states, soft balancing is not so much a coordinated policy like diplomatic friction, rhetorical tactics, or the questionable value of policy instrument; instead, soft balancing is a coordination process that only takes effect under unipolar conditions. However, Brooker and Wolfs make a powerful point when they suggest that the meta-hypothesis of the theory is wrong: the various behaviours of the second-tier power to curb the excessive concentration of power in the U.S., including military behaviour, are not the root cause of its diplomatic restraint from the perspective of the balance of power theory. The above restrictions may even be better explained by other theories such that the real reason lies in whether policy-makers who serve the U.S.'s long-term interests can be persuaded [15].

Based on this explanation combined with the unique phenomenon of the pandemic, if the epidemic-related behaviours of the U.S. towards China are soft balancing to prevent China from affecting its world order, then as a second-tier power, China will become the targeted state for soft balancing. Soft balancing is widespread competition between great powers. If the concept of soft balancing does not aim for the U.S., which is unipolar in the balance of power, but aims toward the second-tier power affecting the order, it should be a prerequisite to determine whether this type of explanation can make the concept of soft balancing more appropriate and easier to observe and analyse.

## **3. Are behaviours based on the pandemic soft balancing?**

### **3.1. A Unipolar Superpower in a Balance of Power System**

Two questions should be clarified: whether the current world political system is a system of balance of power and which state is the unipolar superpower in this system. Chatterjee has summarized the concept of balance of power as follows. The first type of balance of power is significantly related to the concept of balance. If each state abides by the principle of rationality, the world political system can form a balance of power in which there is neither a dominant state nor combination of states. The second type highlights that the balance of power does not reveal a clear or approximate balance of power among states, the states in a dynamic political balance will constantly seek to increase their own power and generate a dynamic balance of power [16].

In terms of the first concept of balance of power, although scholars of international relations have often assigned rationality to the behaviour of the state, the state does not always abide by the principle of rationality. In fact, the state often stands in a game environment with asymmetric or insufficient information. Moreover, there is clearly a dominant state or coalition in the current world political system, the U.S. and its allies. This can be observed from the reality of the U.S.'s own economic and military power, as well as from the security guarantees, economic assistance, and value guidance that the U.S. has provided to other countries since the collapse of the bipolar regime. Moreover, the U.S. and its allies have generally maintained the same position on China and Russia, suggesting that the U.S. and its global allies still dominate the world political system. In the second concept, it must be acknowledged that there is a large power gap between other states and the U.S.

Even if China and Russia are taken as a whole, there is still a large power gap between the U.S. and its allies, although this is not a necessary condition for determining whether international politics is a system of balance of power. Moreover, the U.S. cannot arbitrate on every affair of international politics. A more crucial measure is that there is a dynamic balance in the system in which the state is constantly seeking to increase its own power; that is, the state always seeks to balance power for other states, thus forming a dynamic balance in a spiral path.

A state that is much more powerful than other states, or a state whose security or other vital interests are not threatened by other states, is a unipolar state [17]. Accordingly, Jervis does not accept that the above indefinable forces are the only important factors that constitute unipolarity. The function of a unipolar state is whether it can stably provide public goods to other states and whether it can build an order that conforms to the values of most states. Based on this criterion, the U.S. has offered many public products to other states since the collapse of bipolarity. In accordance with the 2021 preliminary statistics of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the U.S. is the largest bilateral donor of official assistance programmes, ranking first with 23.6% of the total, and approximately 90% of the assistance for improving people's lives is related to health care [18]. The world order led by the U. S. since the Cold War or the Second World War has played a huge role in maintaining world peace and promoting world economic development. The purpose of the above behaviours was to protect U.S. national security, economic interests and humanitarian aid, but the objective result was that the U.S. undertook the role of a unipolar superpower in the balance of power system.

### 3.2. Perception of the Targeted state

The latest report of the Centre for Strategic Studies in the Hague said that the U.S. remains the most important power and influential state in the international system. It is an important member of many international orders, and an important cornerstone of the security alliance in Europe and East Asia [19]. However, the question is raised of whether the U.S. is confident enough on its own to act as a unipolar superpower in a balance of power system. The targeted state of the theory of soft balancing has usually been a unipolar superpower. Nevertheless, in the context of the pandemic, it seems that the direction of the targeted state has been reversed, and China has become the object of soft balancing carried out by the U.S. and its allies. The root cause of this inverse role is undoubtedly that the U.S.' perception of China in the post pandemic context is that it no longer plays a stable role as a unipolar superpower in the balance of power.

With regard to the above phenomenon, there are three results of the U.S.' perception of China. First, China has become a great challenge to the U.S., but China's behaviour in the context of the pandemic does not pose a serious threat. The Interim National Security Guidelines, published by the White House identified China as the only competitor that poses economic, military, diplomatic and technological challenges to the international system, and suggest that the U.S. should address China's challenges by strengthening alliances, promoting internal development, and building camps of shared values. The report also indicated that the United States should engage in pragmatic and effective dialogue and cooperation with China to avoid miscalculation between the two states, whose interests overlap greatly. The report indicated cognition of the role of China in the United States; China is the only large and comprehensive rival for the U.S. in the current international political system, and China's behaviour embodies confidence. As a result, China could also be a partner for effective cooperation and communication with the U.S. instead of an enemy [20]. This finding is consistent with the second results: China can provide public goods that the U.S. requires and that no other state can replace, including nuclear non-proliferation, global climate cooperation, the development of new energy industries, as well as global prevention of terrorism. Furthermore,



the two leaders communicate by phone in terms of international affairs and manage the intensity of competition between them [21]. Besides, China's behaviour does not pose a serious security threat, although it significantly affects the order of the international system in the perception of the U.S. The United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China states that China poses great challenges to the economy, security, and values of the U.S. To address the above challenges, the U.S. must strengthen alliances and partnerships centred on American values, and reduce or mitigate the effect of Chinese competition [22]. Thus, preventing the realization of its goals and reducing the impact of its behaviours are the main goals of the U.S.

### **3.3. Counterbalance Behaviour: Inoffensive behaviour in limited competition**

In view of the problems between China and the U.S., Chinese leaders also believe that the two sides should strengthen communication and cooperation, and jointly shoulder international obligations and responsibilities. Harmony will benefit both states, while confrontation will hurt both [23]. The high-level definition of the interaction between China and the U.S., which is defined as competition in the international system, maintains dialogue and communication to keep the competition in a fair and benign state. It is therefore suggested that both sides consider such interaction as limited and nonoffensive behaviour.

The virus naming issue became the first issue that the U.S. and most of its strongly influential allies considered to balance China, and the soft balancing involved in this issue has still been at the level of language. The coronavirus that emerged in late 2019 did not have a uniform, official name until the director general of the World Health Organization announced the name COVID-19 at the Global Research and Innovation Forum in Geneva on the evening of February 11, 2020. The president of the U.S., the U.S. secretary of state and some Western politicians called the coronavirus as the Wuhan virus or the China virus many times in public and launched their own media machine in an attempt to connect the virus and China to achieve the purpose of discrediting or slandering China's prestige to achieve curb China's impact on the international system.

After the virus naming problem was solved, the U.S. and its allies developed a virus tracing issue, including hiding cases and hindering traceability into another issue that could balance China. Western politicians, media publicity and international agencies, attempted to make the global public believe the coronavirus came from a virus experiment at the Wuhan Research Institute of China. In 2021, the U.S. National Intelligence Council issued an investigative report regarding the origin of COVID-19 and highlighted that although the virus was not a biological or chemical weapon developed by China, China had gained insufficient insight into it, and China's obstruction of source tracing and concealment of cases caused the virus to spread widely. As a result, the progress of virus research progress has been slow. The report further highlighted that China's inherent medical system and traditional lifestyle may contribute to the spread of the virus from animals to humans, suggesting that the virus originated in China and that China led the public to believe that the virus originated outside the state [24]. Again, the soft balancing involved in this issue remained at the linguistic level.

Vaccine policy and criticism of plague prevention policy are recognized as the third and fourth issues between China and the U.S. These two issues involved soft balancing among most of the world's states. First, the vaccine policy issue included two problems: vaccine assistance and the vaccine effect. In accordance with U.S. foreign aid data, the United States Agency for International Development spent approximately 30 billion dollars in 2021, of which 16 billion went to population health [25]. In terms of vaccine assistance, China directly provided more than 2 billion doses of vaccine to states and international organizations. By February 2022, as suggested by data from the Vaccine and Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization, the U.S. expressed its willingness at

the Vaccine Recommitment Summit to donate 4 billion dollars for COVID-19 vaccine research, development, and procurement, which accounted for 51% of the global total [26]. The U.S. pledged to donate 700 million vaccines and 300 million dollars to facilitate the procurement of vaccines to the World Health Organization. Furthermore, the U.S. donated approximately 43.3% of the total doses that have been donated, with the American companies Moderna, Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer contributing 74 % of the total [27]. Despite the U.S.' claim that it will not trade vaccines for political interest, vaccine diplomacy can clearly heal the rift between the U.S. and its allies that has opened up that opened under President Trump. Furthermore, it can exert sufficient influence over the rest of the world such that the media machine of the United States and its Western allies (such as an article in the Wall Street Journal claiming that the Chinese vaccine does not work) indirectly or directly links to the rest of the world and creates limited competition and nonaggressive behaviour between the two states in the context of the pandemic. In addition, limited competition exists between the plague prevention policies of the two states. Based on differences in the definition of the fundamental rights of people, both states propagate the belief that their plague prevention policy is better than the other side, just as the Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post propagate the idea that the dynamic zero policy of China will inevitably lead to failure.

The reason for the issues involved in applying soft balancing is that the U.S. believes that China is trying to shape itself as a major power in East Asia and the world, reduce the influence of the United States, separate the relationship between the U.S. and its allies and build an order that fits its interest. On the other hand, China is willing to reduce the level of tension between the two states if its interests are aligned with the U.S. Based on this judgement, China also has no intention of engaging in more intense competition with the United States, both states are in a place of limited competition [28]. In the perception of the U.S., China's behaviour is a type of inoffensive behaviour, which ultimately makes the United States and its allies adopt soft balancing with China.

### 3.4. Why is a unipolar state in the balance of power system not necessarily the targeted state?

It is true that there is some observed soft balancing by states against the U.S. in the context of the pandemic, but these can only be classified as sporadic behaviours. This is consistently observed in the behaviour by the U.S. and its allies towards China. However, why does the U.S., a unipolar state in the balance of power systems, not become the targeted state, while China, as a second-tier power, becomes the targeted state? The phenomenon of this reversed role is largely due to the two countries entering a new game environment. When a unipolar state and a second-tier power enter into a new game environment, especially a systemic change of environment, their roles are reversed under the accumulation of certain interactions, which leads to the emergence of soft balancing behaviour.

This shift may be driven by three changes (See Table 1). First, the environment exhibits a temporary change in the nature of the international political system. The old international political system is a dynamic equilibrium status, when the environment changes, there are new conditions that are conducive to a certain second-tier power so that it can obtain larger capacity in the novel environment. As a result, the dynamic equilibrium is terminated, and disequilibrium of the new international political system is created. For instance, China controlled the domestic outbreak in the second half of 2021 while the rest of the world was in the midst of an outbreak burst period. China's plague prevention pattern has received attention from international society, leading China to have a considerable effect at the beginning of the outbreak in the international political system and, more influence than the U.S. with regard to the virus issue. Accordingly, a non-American-led disequilibrium was created in the dynamic equilibrium. Second, although the emergence of a new environment may cause a temporary change in the power balance between states, this change



should be recognized through the interaction between states. Regardless of what type of paradigm or path is adopted to analyse the perception of the interaction between states, an unavoidable issue is a state with two roles in two different international political structures. If the power distribution of the role in the new environment is less than that in the old environment (for instance, the U.S. is unipolar in the old environment whereas it is a ‘declining’ state in the new environment), it can take corresponding behaviour towards a state with more influence in the new environment so that its two roles in two different environments can be synchronized. Third, if China becomes a new unipolar state in the novel environment, whether its behaviours are perceived to be aggressive is of great significance. It can be suggested that China’s behaviours were not perceived by other states, especially the U.S., as offensive in the era of the outbreak. China appears to be performing confident or active behaviour, and the U.S. still requires China to undertake joint international responsibility. As a result, the U.S. has no need to adopt hard balancing against China in the context of the pandemic. Therefore, the U.S. and its allies in the context of the pandemic adopted soft balancing against China based on epidemic-related issues through the media machine, which is an inoffensive behaviour in a limited competition. Finally, the effect of the new environment is offset over a period after soft balancing is conducted and both the structure of the international political system and the roles of China and the U.S. have returned to their prepandemic status. This turned the characteristic soft balancing in the context of the pandemic into limited hard balancing. In other words, from a long-term perspective, the role of the two states has not reversed, which seems to explain why the prerequisite that targeted state should be the unipolar state in the balance of the power system, does not accord with reality. However, if we observe the two states at the early stages of the pandemic, there was a brief role reversal. Therefore, the behaviour of soft balancing can be considered to widely exist in the game of great power. Great power mainly uses soft balancing as means in the game. On the one hand, the role of soft power is increasingly reflected; on the other hand, the degree of global integration is increasing, and the cost of hard balancing between great powers is huge.

Table 1: Three reasons why a unipolar state is not a targeted state.

Targeted state: A unipolar state in the balance of power system. Agent Country: A Second-tier power in the balance of power system.	The United States	China
Role in Pre-pandemic	A unipolar state in the balance of power system	A Second-tier power in the balance of power systems
Perception at early stage	Declined country in the balance of power system	A unipolar state in dynamic equilibrium system
Behaviour at early stage	Soft balancing	Non-offensive behaviour
Role in Post-pandemic	A unipolar state in the balance of power system	A Second-tier power in the balance of power system
Behaviour in Post-pandemic	Return to pre-pandemic interactions: limited hard balancing	

#### 4. Conclusion

This study observed a special phenomenon in the context of the pandemic, i.e. why China, as a second-tier power in the balance of power systems, is subject to soft balancing by the U.S., a unipolar state in the balance of power system. Therefore, this study answers the following question. First, is COVID-19-related behaviour soft balancing? That is, are the issues related to the pandemic,

such as, virus naming, virus tracing, vaccine policy and criticism of plague prevention policy, types of soft balancing imposed by the U.S. and its allies on China? Second, why would the Western camp, dominated by the unipolar United States, in the balance of power system, adopt such soft balancing against China, a nondominant state in the context of the pandemic? This study reviews the theoretical framework of soft balancing. The structure of the international political system, the designation of the targeted state and the behaviour of soft balancing are three important factors to identify soft balancing (See Table 2). More precisely, the structure of the international political system should be a balance of power system. The targeted state is unipolar in the balance of power system, and the behaviour of the targeted state and the agent is identified as inoffensive behaviour in a limited competition. Based on the above three criteria, it can be determined that the structure of the international political system in the context of the pandemic is a dynamic equilibrium system and that the U.S. is the unipolar system while the target state is China. On the one hand, the U.S. regards China as a systemic opponent; on the other hand, it needs China to jointly handle international affairs. At the same time, the U.S. believes that China's behaviour is offensive, so the behaviour conducted by the U.S. towards China is to block and limit China's influence in the context of the pandemic through propaganda and aid, which are inoffensive behaviours in a limited competition. Finally, this study explains why China, a second-tier power in the balance of power system, is regarded as a targeted state of soft balancing. The sudden change in the environment made China become unipolar in a short time in a state of dynamic equilibrium in the balance of power system. Furthermore, the role of the U.S. had less power distribution such that China became the targeted state. On the other hand, since China's behaviour is considered inoffensive and China remains indispensable for the U.S. to deal with international affairs, the United States and its allies will exert soft balancing on China in the context of the pandemic. With the restoration of the international political system, this type of behaviour will return to limited hard balancing.

Table 2: The main evaluation items of the soft balancing.

	Structure of international politics	Identification of the targeted state	Balancing
Theory	The balance of power system with a unipolar state	A unipolar state in the balance of power system	Non-offensive behaviour in limited competition
Reality	The balance of power system with a unipolar state	The Second-tier power with impact on order	Non-offensive behaviour in limited competition
	The international political system is in dynamic equilibrium and the United States is the unipolar part of this system	Targeted state is China. Agent is the United States. The US sees China as a systemic adversary. The United States needs China to handle international affairs together.	The United States and its Allies have used propaganda and aid to deter and limit China's influence in the pandemic

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