

Soft balancing among weak states?

Evidence from Africa

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In recent years, several African countries that have historically been friendly towards the United States have taken a stand in opposition to American policies. It is not surprising that the leaders of Libya, Sudan and Zimbabwe resist US pressures. They have been identified by American policy-makers as dictators, and at times have been targeted by US sanctions. It is surprising, however, when some of the United States' closest allies on the continent become its most vocal challengers. Leaders in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, Mali, Namibia and Niger especially have resisted US policies and refused to support key initiatives. Over time, these countries have started to see themselves as a like-minded group and have received domestic and international support for their approach. While their strategy admittedly is not highly confrontational, and they continue to cooperate with the US in many areas, their refusal to go along with some US policies is a significant shift from past behaviour. With a new United States president in office, notably one of African descent, such patterns are starting to change—but mainly because US policies have moved in a new direction rather than because African leaders have yielded to US pressure.

This article seeks to explain the strategies of opposition that some African countries have pursued in their interactions with the United States. The first section discusses the literature on 'soft balancing' with a view to assessing its usefulness for understanding this behaviour. The next section examines areas in which these African countries have opposed the United States, including the 'war on terror', the International Criminal Court and the US Africa Command. The third section of the article explores four possible explanations for these countries' decision to stand up to the United States: balance of power concerns; international alignments; economic interests; and domestic politics. While soft balancing helps to explain the behaviour of some countries, their strategies cannot be understood fully without exploring domestic political pressures. Finally, in the conclusion, I ask whether African resistance to the United States really matters. In the short term, it may slow the implementation of US policies in the region. In the long term, it may in fact advance important American foreign policy goals.

The debate over soft balancing

In recent years, the global dominance of the United States has led scholars to ask how other states respond to US hegemony. Drawing on notions of balancing and bandwagoning from the balance-of-power literature, they suggest that some states adopt 'strategies of opposition' towards the global hegemon while others pursue 'strategies of accommodation'.¹ Considerable attention has been given to explaining the absence of military alliances against the United States ('hard balancing'). Instead, some theorists argue, states in the international system have sought to challenge US hegemony through means other than the threat of force ('soft balancing').

The notion of soft balancing has generated considerable academic debate.² Proponents of the soft balancing argument offer a wide range of definitions, some of which include nearly any action taken by a weaker state to gain influence with a stronger state. Others restrict the notion to coordinated efforts among less powerful states and to actions responding to security threats from the hegemon. In between, the most commonly used definition sees soft balancing as 'actions that do not directly challenge US military preponderance but that use nonmilitary tools to delay, frustrate, and undermine aggressive unilateral US military policies'.³ Critics argue that the theory interprets nearly all strategies of opposition as responses to the balance of power, instead of considering other possible motivations.⁴ They point to similar behaviour during earlier periods as evidence that recent patterns represent normal diplomatic friction and not a reaction to unipolarity.⁵ However, 'those who take a sceptical view of soft balancing risk setting the bar too high and underplaying the role of US power and US policies in shaping policy across a range of apparently very diverse issue areas'.⁶ The purpose of this article is not to argue for or against soft balancing as a theory; rather, it is to ask whether the argument helps to explain the strategies of opposition that have been adopted by a small group of African countries.

The literature on soft balancing provides convincing if incomplete explanations for a number of recent events, but it has several gaps. First, most discussions of soft balancing focus on second-tier powers, mainly in Europe, and rising powers such as China and India. Little attention is given to weak states, presumably because they are less able to challenge the hegemon. The balance-of-power literature almost uniformly predicts that weak states will bandwagon with great powers, especially when offered economic incentives.⁷ Soft balancing, however,

¹ Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American power: the global response to US primacy* (New York: Norton, 2005).

² See especially the four articles on soft balancing in *International Security* 30: 1, Summer 2005.

³ Robert A. Pape, 'Soft balancing against the United States', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, p. 10.

⁴ Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, 'Hard times for soft balancing', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 72–108.

⁵ Keir A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander, 'Waiting for balancing: why the world is not pushing back', *International Security* 30: 1, 2005, pp. 109–39.

⁶ Andrew Hurrell, 'Hegemony, liberalism and global order: what space for would-be great powers?', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, p. 16.

⁷ Stephen M. Walt, *The origins of alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987); Randall L. Schweller, 'Bandwagoning for profit', *International Security* 19: 1, 1994, pp. 72–107. An exception is Eric J. Labs, 'Do weak states bandwagon?', *Security Studies* 1: 3, 1992, pp. 383–416.

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does not require the same level of military or economic power as hard balancing, and thus presumably is a strategy available to weak states.⁸ Initial evidence suggests that some weak states do exhibit balancing behaviour, but such patterns have not been sufficiently explored.

Second, as is true of balance-of-power arguments generally, the focus is on structural determinants of state behaviour. States are presented as engaging in soft balancing as a response to the global power structure, not as a result of deliberate policy choices. Little attention is given to other factors that could be driving such behaviour, including the agency of state and non-state actors. This is especially true for small states, whose foreign policies are assumed to be driven almost exclusively by systemic factors.⁹ Thus, the literature generally falls short in explaining why a state would adopt strategies of opposition rather than strategies of accommodation.¹⁰ In order to understand the agency of weak states, it is necessary to examine the factors informing their policy choices. In many cases, this requires delving into domestic politics. Several authors have argued that leaders of weak states enter into foreign alliances to fend off domestic rivals,¹¹ thus 'omnibalancing' against both external and internal threats.¹² Even so, these studies generally overlook the possibility that domestic considerations may push leaders of weak states to balance against external powers rather than to bandwagon with them.

Third, much of the literature lumps together all forms of resistance, whether it reflects opposition to US goals or opposition to US strategies for achieving those goals. A few authors acknowledge a difference between soft balancing among enemies and soft balancing among friends.¹³ Along these lines, Kelley distinguishes between conflict arising from incompatible policy preferences and conflict when common ground exists but the weaker party deliberately rejects an agreement.¹⁴ The latter is likely when a weaker party agrees with the long-term goals of the hegemon but not with its short-term strategies to achieve those goals. Thus, it is important to examine underlying motivations in order to differentiate among forms of oppositional behaviour.

⁸ Alexandru Grigorescu, 'East and Central European countries and the Iraq War: the choice between "soft balancing" and "soft bandwagoning"', *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 41: 3, 2008, pp. 281–99.

⁹ Miriam Fendius Elman, 'The foreign policies of small states: challenging neorealism in its own backyard', *British Journal of Political Science* 25: 2, 1995, pp. 171–217.

¹⁰ Several studies examine why countries choose soft balancing over hard balancing, but not why they choose balancing in general over bandwagoning. See Kai He, 'Institutional balancing and international relations theory: economic interdependence and balance of power strategies in Southeast Asia', *European Journal of International Relations* 14: 3, 2008, pp. 489–518; Kai He and Huiyun Feng, 'If not soft balancing, then what? Reconsidering soft balancing and US policy towards China', *Security Studies* 17: 2, 2008, pp. 363–95.

¹¹ Deborah Welch Larson, 'Bandwagoning images in American foreign policy: myth or reality?', in Robert Jervis and Jack L. Snyder, eds, *Dominoes and bandwagons: strategic beliefs and great power competition in the Eurasian rimland* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 85–111; J. S. Levy and Michael M. Barnett, 'Alliance formation, domestic political economy, and Third World security', *Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 14: 4, 1992, pp. 19–40.

¹² Steven R. David, 'Explaining Third World alignment', *World Politics* 43: 2, 1991, pp. 233–56.

¹³ Walt, *Taming American power*; Franz Oswald, 'Soft balancing between friends: transforming transatlantic relations', *Debate* 14: 2, 2006, pp. 145–60.

¹⁴ Judith Kelley, 'Strategic non-cooperation as soft balancing: why Iraq was not just about Iraq', *International Politics* 42: 2, 2005, pp. 153–73.

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This article attempts to address some of these gaps by asking whether soft balancing helps to explain strategies of opposition in sub-Saharan Africa, a region little considered in traditional balance-of-power literature. In addition to the soft balancing argument, it explores other possible explanations for such behaviour, including international alliances, economic factors and domestic politics. To the extent that the oppositional behaviour of African countries is driven by balance-of-power concerns, this would seem to provide support for the soft balancing argument. If other explanations are more convincing, however, this raises doubts about the usefulness of the approach for understanding the behaviour of weak states.

Standing up to the United States

In recent years, several African countries have started standing up to the dictates of the United States. Political leaders in historically friendly countries have taken pride in asserting their independence from the US on a range of issues. To be sure, these countries are not alone. A wave of national leaders, especially in Latin America, has gained international headlines for criticizing American policies. In Africa, though, these leaders are speaking out without breaking away. Despite their frequent refusal to go along with US-backed initiatives, these countries are some of the United States' closest partners on the continent.

The resistance of these African countries has been evident in several areas, starting with the war in Iraq. In 2003, as the Bush administration built a coalition to remove Saddam Hussein, several African leaders were among the voices of dissent. Former South African President Nelson Mandela condemned the US for ignoring international opinion and pursuing reckless unilateral action. The African Union initially expressed opposition, but a split emerged at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Uganda, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda and Angola joined the 'coalition of the willing', while South Africa, Nigeria, Senegal and Tanzania strongly criticized the operation. Bolstered by massive anti-war protests in his country, the South African President Thabo Mbeki was an especially vocal critic and, along with his counterparts in Nigeria and Senegal, sent a harsh letter to the White House.

Several African countries also asserted their independence from the United States in the 'war on terror'. Starting in late 2001, the US pushed countries around the world to enact anti-terrorism legislation similar to its own Patriot Act. These bills enhance law enforcement powers, increase surveillance and limit personal freedoms in the name of national security. While many African countries passed such measures quickly and with little opposition, others stood up to US pressure and debated the proposals.¹⁵ In South Africa, civil liberties concerns forced the government to withdraw an anti-terrorism bill in early 2004; the version that was passed later that year included substantial revisions to protect constitutional

¹⁵ Beth Elise Whitaker, 'Exporting the Patriot Act? Democracy and the "war on terror" in the Third World', *Third World Quarterly* 28: 5, 2007, pp. 1017–32.

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freedoms. The Kenyan government withdrew an anti-terrorism bill in 2003 when civic leaders expressed outrage over the possible loss of newly gained democratic rights. Although a 2006 draft bill included better protection of civil liberties, leading members of parliament vowed to block it precisely because it was supported by the United States.¹⁶ In Nigeria, an anti-terrorism bill introduced by the President in late 2006 was essentially ignored by law-makers, mainly because it was seen as a US initiative instead of a Nigerian one. Renewed American pressure after the attempted aeroplane bombing by a Nigerian national on Christmas Day 2009 prompted law-makers to return to the proposed legislation, reigniting debate over how much Nigeria should cooperate with US counterterrorism efforts. Tanzania's anti-terrorism law was passed quickly in 2002, but subsequent protests against measures allowing for enhanced cooperation with US law enforcement agencies resulted in the government dragging its feet on implementation. Clearly, then, US efforts to promote the harmonization of counterterrorism laws have faced resistance in some African countries.

It was on the issue of the International Criminal Court (ICC) that these African leaders most blatantly resisted US demands. Concerned about the ICC being used for politically motivated charges, the Bush administration negotiated bilateral immunity agreements with countries around the world. Known as 'Article 98 agreements' after the relevant section of the Rome Statute, these deals in effect protected nationals of both countries from being turned over to the ICC for crimes within its purview. In 2002, the American Servicemembers' Protection Act (ASPA) required the suspension of some categories of US economic and military assistance to countries that had ratified the Rome Statute but not signed Article 98 agreements. In the face of such pressure, more than 100 countries signed such agreements, including 43 in Africa. But six African countries (Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, South Africa and Tanzania) that had ratified the Rome Statute refused to sign Article 98 agreements.¹⁷ As US-funded programmes were cut under the 2002 law, leaders in these countries held firm to their conviction that they would not give in to US bullying.¹⁸ In 2008 and 2009, as US policy-makers became concerned about punishing important allies, Congress repealed the relevant sections of the ASPA and allowed the Nethercutt Amendment to expire, thus restoring all categories of assistance to countries that had not signed bilateral immunity agreements with the United States. Under the Obama administration, which takes a different position from its predecessor on the ICC, there is no longer any pressure on states in Africa (or elsewhere) to sign Article 98 agreements.

The most recent US initiative to generate African opposition is the creation

¹⁶ Beth Elise Whitaker, 'Reluctant partners: fighting terrorism and promoting democracy in Kenya', *International Studies Perspectives* 9: 3, 2008, pp. 254–71.

¹⁷ Benin and Lesotho also resisted signing Article 98 agreements for several years, but relented in 2005 and 2006 respectively. In 2005, after the Nigerian president signed a bilateral immunity agreement with the US, the Senate passed a resolution declaring the agreement unconstitutional and calling on the President to withdraw; there is no evidence that the agreement was ever revoked.

¹⁸ When Pentagon officials complained in 2006 that funding cuts to several of these countries were detrimental to the 'war on terror', presidential waivers were signed to resume certain categories of military assistance.

of an Africa Command (AFRICOM) in the Department of Defense.¹⁹ The decision, announced in 2007, reflected growing concern about terrorism, oil and Chinese influence in Africa. The reaction among Africans was immediate and largely negative, with politicians, journalists and academics alike decrying the securitization of US policy in the region.²⁰ Although criticism was widespread throughout the continent, the pushback against AFRICOM was mobilized by many of the same countries that had been resisting other US initiatives. Leading the charge was South Africa, whose Defence Minister refused to meet with the AFRICOM commander. The Zambian President also spoke out against the plan, and the Southern African Development Community agreed not to host the new unit. Nigeria similarly criticized the proposal, and made clear that it would not welcome AFRICOM headquarters anywhere within West Africa. Seemingly the only African leader who was enthusiastic about the initiative was Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, who wrote a widely circulated opinion piece promoting it as an opportunity for Africa.²¹ The Defense Department initially hoped to locate AFRICOM's headquarters in Africa; faced with such resistance, however, the decision on a permanent location was postponed. With a temporary home in Germany, AFRICOM became operational in 2007 and assumed independent command status a year later. Meanwhile, a public relations effort was launched to make a better case for AFRICOM to African leaders and other critics.²² Interestingly, the incoming Obama administration embraced AFRICOM as a key part of its policy in the region, but has not yet raised the issue of moving its headquarters to the continent.

On several issues, then, a group of African countries has been standing up to the United States. As detailed above, the most outspoken and consistent critics of US initiatives are South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, but Tanzania, Zambia, Senegal, Mali, Niger and Namibia also have taken positions against one or more US policies. However, while these countries have become increasingly critical, they are far from cutting ties with the global superpower. They cooperate extensively with the United States on intelligence-gathering, law enforcement, military training and border control. Within their respective regions, Kenya and Mali in particular are actively involved in identifying and pursuing terrorist cells. Cultural links are also very significant, with American television, films and music exceedingly popular. Within Africa, Nigeria and Kenya send the largest number of university students to the US each year, with South Africa not far behind.²³ A

¹⁹ Responsibilities for Africa were previously divided among other US commands.

²⁰ For more detailed analyses of these debates, see the symposium on 'The troubled rise of AFRICOM', *Contemporary Security Policy* 30: 1, 2009, especially the articles by Stephen Burgess, Ken Menkhaus and Laurie Nathan.

²¹ Frida Berrigan, 'The new military frontier: Africa', *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 18 Sept. 2007, <http://www.fpfif.org/fpifxt/4561>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

²² Resistance to AFRICOM also has been evident within the US government, with State Department officials especially concerned about the extension of the command's mandate to cover humanitarian assistance and development.

²³ Rajika Bhandari and Patricia Chow, *Open Doors 2008: report on international educational exchange* (Washington DC: Institute of International Education, 2009).

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recent survey in Kenya found that 84 per cent believe it is important to maintain good relations with the United States and 66 per cent want to visit some day.²⁴ Clearly, despite recent resistance to US policies, people in these countries are not radically anti-American.

From the US perspective, these countries are some of its most important allies on the continent. Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa are key anchor states within their respective subregions, and are among the top beneficiaries of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act of 2000. Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa and Tanzania each receive more than \$100 million a year from the United States in economic and military assistance. Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Tanzania and Zambia have all been deemed eligible to apply for funds from the Millennium Challenge Account. So, although the United States has faced resistance from these countries in achieving its goals, it generally has not punished them. The question remains why these African countries have developed an oppositional approach towards the global hegemon.

Explaining defiance

To the extent that these recent actions by African leaders have undermined American military policies, they could be said to have had a balancing effect on US power. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the motivations underlying such actions to determine whether these leaders are intentionally pursuing a strategy of soft balancing. Some argue that the consequences of state behaviour are more important than the intentions,²⁵ but most would agree that the concept of soft balancing involves some sort of deliberate response to the exercise of US power.²⁶ While weak states in Africa can hardly expect to mount a serious challenge to the global hegemon, their actions may still be driven by a desire to constrain US power.

In seeking to explain recent strategies of opposition among these African countries, it is necessary to examine several possible factors. Much of the literature on soft balancing fails to consider alternative explanations for state behaviour that constrains US power.²⁷ As a result, it tends to exaggerate the importance of systemic structure and downplay the role of policy choices.²⁸ The analysis set out here seeks to understand why several African countries have resisted the policy preferences of the United States, in contrast to the majority of their neighbours. The following subsections consider four possible explanations for this behaviour (balance of power concerns, international alignments, economic interests and domestic politics) and find varying levels of support for each. Nevertheless, contrary to the conclusions of some critics of soft balancing, the existence of

²⁴ Whitaker, 'Reluctant partners'.

²⁵ Robert J. Art, 'Correspondence: striking the balance', *International Security* 30: 3, 2005, pp. 177–96.

²⁶ Lieber and Alexander, 'Waiting for balancing'.

²⁷ Brooks and Wohlforth, 'Hard times for soft balancing'.

²⁸ Rosemary Foot, 'Chinese strategies in a US-hegemonic global order: accommodating and hedging', *International Affairs* 82: 1, 2006, pp. 77–94.

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these other explanations does not necessarily negate the soft balancing argument; rarely are government policies driven by a single factor. Rather, it suggests that policy-making in weak states is as complex as it is in other states, and that both systemic and domestic factors are relevant in such contexts.

Regional balance-of-power concerns

One possible explanation for the behaviour of African countries is essentially the soft balancing argument. Instead of attempting a military balance against the United States, which would be beyond the capacity of these relatively weak states, leaders may otherwise seek to undermine, delay and frustrate US policies. Although these leaders have little hope of challenging the hegemon on a global level, they may seek to block its initiatives within their own geographical region. Theorists argue that leaders are primarily concerned about balancing against threats in their immediate vicinity.²⁹ To the extent that US initiatives represent such a threat, African leaders would seek to undermine them. This is particularly relevant for states that benefit from the current balance of power in Africa, that is, the relatively strong states within a generally weak continent. Thus, one would expect regional powers to demonstrate greater resistance to US initiatives that might threaten their pre-eminence in the neighbourhood.

Several of the countries that have opposed US policies in recent years are indeed—or want to be seen as—major powers within Africa. To some extent, they are competing with one another for such a role. South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya have all expressed interest in holding a permanent seat to represent Africa if the United Nations Security Council were to be expanded. South Africa may have the best claim, given its comparative economic and military power, but is hampered by the legacy of white minority rule. Nigeria is the most populous African country, and enjoys sizeable oil wealth, but has perennial struggles with military rule and corruption. Kenya has the largest economy in East Africa, but may not even be the strongest power within its strategically important subregion. In fact, Kenyan opposition to some American policies helps set it apart from neighbouring rivals such as Ethiopia and Uganda, which have cooperated extensively with the US in recent years, especially in the ‘war on terror’, and from Djibouti, where there is a large American military base. Whereas these countries are often perceived as tools of the Americans, Kenya’s resistance allows it to stake a claim as the major independent power within the Horn of Africa. Regardless of the basis for their claims, therefore, South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya are aspiring middle powers in Africa. To some extent, their opposition to US initiatives is a way to assert their dominance within the region.

Attention to such regional balance-of-power concerns has been most obvious in recent discussions about AFRICOM. Perhaps because its middle power status is most threatened, South Africa especially has spoken out against AFRICOM and spearheaded the effort to prevent the command’s headquarters from being located

²⁹ Walt, *The origins of alliances*.

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in southern Africa. South African Defence Minister Mosiuoa Lekota refused to meet with the AFRICOM commander, and argued that 'Africa has to avoid the presence of foreign forces on her soil'.³⁰ This language of anti-imperialism is strategically designed to mobilize broad support in a continent where the experience of colonial rule is still fresh in many people's minds. Despite recent public relations efforts on the part of AFRICOM that seem to have softened criticism in some countries, most leaders in South Africa remain highly sceptical towards the initiative. South African opposition to AFRICOM is seen by many analysts as an effort to prevent the United States from challenging its power within the region.³¹

Most other countries in southern Africa have joined South Africa in rallying against AFRICOM. This may reflect an effort to bandwagon with the proximate power (South Africa), which is more of a threat than a distant aggregate power (the United States). Among these is Zambia, whose government spokesman offered a telling critique: 'It is like allowing a giant to settle in your home. And what would you do if you find him with your wife?'³² Interestingly, two countries that have expressed support for AFRICOM (Liberia and Botswana) are both lesser powers in subregions dominated by aspiring middle powers (Nigeria and South Africa respectively); they may be seeking to bandwagon with the US in an effort to contain their subregional rivals. On the basis of this logic, though, countries like Mali, Niger and Namibia would also have an incentive to bandwagon with the US, but they have not done so. Thus, while soft balancing may help to explain the behaviour of regional powers, it does not explain why some smaller African countries would align with them and others would support the United States.

As weak states in the international system, African countries cannot present a significant challenge to US power on a global scale, but they can try to constrain US power within Africa. The effort to do so has been most obvious, and most widespread, in the fight against AFRICOM. The fact that African opposition to US initiatives is strongest in some of the more powerful countries on the continent suggests that leaders are motivated at least in part by concerns about the regional balance of power. By standing up to the United States and blocking its exercise of power, these leaders have gained support and influence beyond their borders. In addition, they have started to see themselves as a like-minded group whose lead they hope other African countries will follow.³³ The soft balancing argument does little to explain the resistance of smaller African countries to US policies, however, suggesting the need to explore other factors.

³⁰ Berrigan, 'The new military frontier'.

³¹ Stephen F. Burgess, 'US Africa Command and African perceptions of US-Africa policy', paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, New York, 15 Feb. 2009; Stratfor, 'South Africa, US: dueling for hegemony in Africa', *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 4 Sept. 2007, http://www.stratfor.com/south_africa_u_s_dueling_hegemony_africa, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

³² Pascal Fletcher, 'US Africa Command: aid crusader or meddling giant?', Reuters, 30 Sept. 2007, <http://www.reuters.com/article/reutersEdge/idUSL3030068820070930>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

³³ In an NTV television interview on 4 May 2006, the Kenyan foreign affairs minister was asked why the government had not signed an Article 98 agreement when over 30 other African countries had already done so. He responded that Kenya would rather be in the same category as South Africa, Tanzania and others refusing to sign than with the less powerful countries that had capitulated.

Alternative international alignments

Another possible explanation for resistance to US initiatives among some African countries is that they are doing it because other countries are doing it too. In fact, as mentioned earlier, several authors stipulate multilateral cooperation as a necessary element in their definitions of soft balancing. Thus, we would expect oppositional behaviour among weak states when they can find support from other countries, especially countries that can provide protection and resources in the event that the hegemon chooses to punish them for their resistance.

African leaders wanting to resist US policies have made a strategic decision to align themselves with middle powers in Europe and aspiring powers like China. In their opposition to the war in Iraq and criticism of the 'war on terror', for example, these African leaders made common cause with many of their counterparts in Europe. Similarly, on the ICC issue most European countries have not signed Article 98 agreements with the United States; and several European diplomats have joined African voices in criticizing AFRICOM and warning about its potential effects. In positioning themselves on these issues in opposition to the US, but in alignment with many European powers, African leaders can both better justify their stance and nurture relationships with alternative donors whose aid may become even more important if the United States reduces funding.

Leaders throughout Africa also have been cultivating ties with China in an effort to diversify their bases of support. They argue that this is not an explicit rejection of any western country; after all, the United States itself has increased trade with China. But the rhetoric surrounding negotiations with the emerging Asian power emphasizes African leaders' desire to avoid the many conditions placed on aid and trade by western countries. Chinese trade with Africa has increased dramatically in the past decade and Chinese leaders have become frequent visitors to the continent, where they have announced large infrastructure projects and loans in each port of call. In late 2006, Beijing hosted a major summit that was attended by nearly every African head of state. For leaders worried about any economic consequences of resisting US policies, therefore, China remains an important source of support.

Finally, many African leaders are pursuing South–South alliances with their counterparts in other regions. Nigeria, Kenya and Tanzania, among others, have been nurturing direct ties with countries in Asia and Latin America. This process has gone furthest in South Africa, which has institutionalized its relationship with aspiring powers in those regions. The India–Brazil–South Africa (IBSA) Dialogue Forum, created by the heads of state in 2003, meets regularly to promote economic and security cooperation and to enhance South–South collaboration. It is unclear whether such relationships provide any alternative sources of funding, but they do foster cross-regional solidarity and potentially represent another level of resistance to US policies. Ironically, the strength of the IBSA Dialogue Forum in particular is based in part on Washington's recognition of the three member states as emerging powers within their respective regions.³⁴

³⁴ Chris Alden and Marco Vieira, 'The new diplomacy of the South: South Africa, Brazil, India and trilateralism', *Third World Quarterly* 26: 7, 2005, pp. 1077–95.

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To some extent, therefore, African leaders who have been standing up to the United States have aligned themselves with other countries around the world. This suggests that strategies of opposition are somewhat contagious, and is consistent with the finding that weak states are especially likely to balance if a powerful ally is available.³⁵ However, if the presence of alternative allies were the driving cause behind this behaviour, more African countries would resist US initiatives; this factor does not explain why some have nurtured such relationships in opposition to US policies and others have not. Thus, the availability of alternative allies has not caused the behaviour of these African countries, but it has allowed them to pursue strategies of opposition without worrying about the consequences of punishment by the United States.

Economic interests

Economic factors provide a third possible explanation for the decision of African leaders to support or to oppose US initiatives. Although most African countries receive some aid from the United States, the amounts, and the extent to which individual countries depend on it, vary. One would expect countries that depend heavily on US aid to go along with the donor's policies and priorities, and less dependent countries to be in a better position to resist. In addition, one would expect greater compliance from states to which the US has offered financial incentives for the implementation of its initiatives. Countries for which the United States is an important trading partner may also be more likely to comply with its preferences.

If we compare the six African countries that have refused to sign Article 98 agreements with those on the continent that have signed such agreements, the data suggest that the former are wealthier and less dependent on aid. For these six countries in 2003,³⁶ aid represented 8.9 per cent of gross national income (as compared to 16 per cent for the others), aid per capita averaged \$39 (versus \$53), and the mean per capita income was \$1,043 (as compared to \$903).³⁷ However, no conclusions can be drawn from these data because none of these differences is statistically significant. This could be because some data are missing, or because data for aid dependence are not donor-specific. A country that has never received significant levels of aid from the United States may feel less compelled to go along with its initiatives than one that has been receiving US assistance for many years. But the data do not support this argument either. In fact, on average, the six countries that refused to sign Article 98 agreements received 12.5 per cent of their official development assistance (ODA) from the United States; for the countries that signed such agreements, US assistance represented just 11.4 per cent

³⁵ Labs, 'Do weak states bandwagon?'

³⁶ This was the last year before the US government started suspending aid to countries that refused to sign Article 98 agreements.

³⁷ Data are drawn from World Bank, *World Development Indicators*, <http://data.worldbank.org>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

of ODA.³⁸ Although this difference is not statistically significant either, it is clear that the relative importance of US aid to a country does not have a strong effect on its decision whether or not to support US policies.

African countries may also be influenced by incentives offered by the United States to go along with its initiatives, and punishments for not doing so. Even here, though, patterns are not consistent. Kenya, Mali, Namibia, Niger, South Africa and Tanzania have all seen economic and military assistance from the United States increase dramatically in recent years, but have continued to oppose US policies in a number of areas. The fact that US aid levels increased despite their defiance suggests that aid decisions are based on other factors. When the stick approach was used, it also had a mixed record. The suspension of certain categories of US assistance under the 2002 ASPA may have helped to persuade previously reluctant leaders in Benin and Lesotho to sign Article 98 agreements, but did not have the same effect on the other six countries.

Another economic factor that may influence the decision of African leaders to comply (or not) with US policies is trade. One might expect countries for which the US is an important trading partner to be more likely to go along with its initiatives. Again, though, the data are not conclusive. In 2008, on average, five countries that refused to sign Article 98 agreements sold just 3.5 per cent of their exports to the United States. In contrast, the US purchased about 13.5 per cent of the exports from 37 countries that signed such agreements.³⁹ However, these differences are not statistically significant. Thus we cannot conclude that the importance of the US as a trading partner plays a role in the decision of African leaders to comply with its policies.

On a range of economic variables, then, African countries that have been resisting US policies seem to be wealthier and less dependent on American aid and trade than their neighbours. In each category, though, the mathematical differences between the two groups are not statistically significant. Therefore, it is not clear that the decision of African leaders to comply with or oppose US initiatives is driven by economic incentives. Other factors are clearly at work in both directions. This is consistent with previous findings that 'efforts to attract allies by offering aid will fail in the absence of compatible political goals'.⁴⁰ In some cases, the comparative economic independence of an African country may be an enabling factor that gives its leaders greater freedom to resist US initiatives when they so choose. The decision to resist in the first place, however, would seem to be based on other considerations.

³⁸ Data are drawn from the OECD. Stat database of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, <http://stats.oecd.org>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

³⁹ Data are drawn from the Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010. Data for several countries, including Namibia, were not available.

⁴⁰ Walt, *The origins of alliances*, p. 241.

Domestic politics

A final possible explanation for the resistance of these African leaders to US initiatives is that it is a winning strategy in the domestic power game. One would expect a leader to oppose the United States if it helps him or her politically at home. Thus, African leaders would be more likely to resist US initiatives in countries where the public is critical of the United States and its policies. It also seems reasonable to expect greater resistance from countries with larger Muslim populations. Of course, the logic of these arguments assumes some degree of responsiveness to popular preferences on the part of national leaders. Thus, in contexts where popular opinion is critical of US initiatives and/or there is a large Muslim population, such views would be more likely to translate into opposition among leaders in more democratic countries.

Public opinion data from Africa are notoriously difficult to collect, and cross-national surveys are especially rare.⁴¹ Between 2002 and 2009, eleven sub-Saharan African countries were included in the annual Pew Global Attitudes Project survey.⁴² Of these, four have adopted oppositional strategies towards the US as represented by refusing to sign Article 98 agreements; the other seven signed such agreements. When it comes to their favourability ratings of the United States, however, there is no difference between the two groups. Nearly three-quarters of people (73.5 per cent and 73 per cent respectively) in each set of countries had 'very favourable' or 'somewhat favourable' views of the United States in the most recent survey. Interestingly, these averages are quite high when compared to other countries; in fact, African countries are regularly at the top of the rankings.⁴³ Clearly, from the limited opinion data that are available, there is no reason to assume that attitudes towards the United States are any different in countries that have resisted American policies as compared to countries that have complied. Moreover, there is no statistical difference in the size of Muslim populations between the two groups of countries.⁴⁴

These data, however, do not provide information about people's attitudes towards the US government in particular or US initiatives more specifically. It is possible for people to have a favourable view of the United States generally, but to be critical of its government and policies, especially when they affect Africa. A survey of 420 Kenyans conducted in 2006 illustrates this distinction.⁴⁵ Among

⁴¹ An exception is the Afrobarometer project, which conducts regular surveys about domestic political and economic conditions in 20 African countries. Unfortunately for the purposes of this article, the survey does not include questions about the US and its policies.

⁴² Pew Global Attitudes Project data are available online at <http://pewglobal.org/database/?src=hpgraphic>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

⁴³ In 2007, the five countries globally with the highest favourability ratings of the US were Côte d'Ivoire (88%), Kenya (87%), Ghana (80%), the United States itself (80%) and Mali (79%). The reasons for the comparatively high favourability ratings of the US in Africa are beyond the scope of the current analysis.

⁴⁴ Data are drawn from CIA, *CIA World Factbook*. Muslims represent 43% of the population in five countries that refused to sign Article 98 agreements, as compared to 36% in 31 countries that signed. Estimates were not available for Namibia, but would probably pull down the average of the first group.

⁴⁵ The author is grateful for the assistance of Mark Gaya, Patrick Kamau, Norah Kiereri and Naima Mohammed, who conducted the survey as part of an independent study project at United States International University in Nairobi, Kenya.

the respondents, 56 per cent agreed that 'the United States promotes democracy and human rights in Africa' and 51 per cent agreed that 'Americans are generally good and try to help other countries'. On specific policies, however, opinions were more varied. While 48 per cent approved of the way the US was waging the 'war on terror', 46 per cent said that 'the US is forcing Kenya to pass anti-terrorism legislation' and 73 per cent said that 'the US travel warning is wrongly penalizing the Kenyan economy'.⁴⁶ The survey did not cover other US policies, but the point is that opinions about specific government initiatives may differ significantly from views about the United States generally. Thus, without more cross-national data, it is difficult to assess the role of public opinion in African leaders' decisions.

Beyond public opinion, civil society organizations also can put pressure on governments to support or oppose the United States. It is in this respect that the countries that have resisted US policies stand out from many of their neighbours. In South Africa, journalists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and academics were strongly mobilized against many American initiatives, from the war in Iraq to AFRICOM. The debate over US-supported anti-terrorism legislation was particularly heated, with South Africa's largest labour union threatening to strike if an early version was passed. In Kenya, human rights activists, lawyers, religious leaders (both Christian and Muslim), journalists and opposition politicians were among those who spoke out against the anti-terrorism bill and Article 98. After an anti-terrorism law was rushed through the Tanzanian parliament, NGOs organized large anti-American protests.⁴⁷ In none of the countries were there significant lobbying efforts to support these US policies. While civil society groups in Africa claim to represent a broader public, they are largely elite-driven and tend to reflect the views of a wealthier and more educated segment of the population.

The extent to which these pressures against US policies make a difference depends on how insulated leaders are from them. Given the range of political institutions in Africa, one would expect leaders in the more democratic countries to resist US initiatives when there is domestic pressure to do so—and indeed, the countries that have been standing up to the United States are among the most democratic in Africa. All have multiparty political systems and are rated as free or partly free by Freedom House.⁴⁸ The six countries that refused to sign Article 98 agreements with the United States have an average Polity IV score of 5.83, placing them solidly on the democratic side of a scale that ranges from -10 (most authoritarian) to +10 (most democratic).⁴⁹ In contrast, 31 sub-Saharan countries that signed Article 98 agreements have an average score of 0.97. The difference between the two groups is statistically significant. Of course, not all democratic countries in Africa have adopted an oppositional strategy towards the global

⁴⁶ Since 2002, primarily because of concerns about terrorism, the US State Department has issued a series of warnings for American citizens travelling to Kenya. The early warnings coincided with a drop in the number of American tourists, for which many Kenyans blamed the warning, but that number has since risen again.

⁴⁷ Whitaker, 'Exporting the Patriot Act?'

⁴⁸ For Freedom House's 'Freedom in the World' ratings, see <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

⁴⁹ Polity IV datasets are available at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

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hegemon,⁵⁰ but the countries that have are more democratic on average. Comparative political freedom in these countries has allowed civil society to mobilize against US policies. In addition, four of the six countries (Kenya, Mali, Niger and Tanzania) have significant Muslim populations that represent an important voting constituency.⁵¹ With the United States doing little to punish countries for their resistance, rallying against the big bully on the block is an easy way for politicians to gain media attention and appease critics as they compete for popular support. Thus, domestic politics help to explain resistance to US policies by leaders in more democratic African countries, including smaller ones such as Mali, Namibia and Niger whose behaviour cannot be explained by the soft balancing argument.

The domestic political argument would seem to undermine any claim that African leaders are in fact engaged in soft balancing but there is potentially some overlap between the two. To the extent that domestic opposition represents a response to US power, and not simply disapproval of specific policies, the resulting actions of leaders could be seen as soft balancing.⁵² In Africa there has been plenty of genuine disagreement with US policies. At the same time, though, some activists opposed US initiatives simply because of the Bush administration's unilateral approach; opposition along these lines could be interpreted as soft balancing. In South Africa, for example, some critics focused on problematic provisions in the anti-terrorism bill (vague definition of terrorism, restrictions on free speech), while others questioned US motivations for promoting the legislation. One editorial accused America of 'using the anti-terrorism drive to further its global imperialist aims',⁵³ and another warned about 'the grand design of the US and the UK to extend their influence and hegemony throughout the world'.⁵⁴ Again, the use of anti-imperialist language was a strategic attempt to tap into a broad-based fear among many Africans of anything that smacks of colonial rule. In Kenya, key members of parliament blocked a similar anti-terrorism bill because it was backed by the United States.⁵⁵ In the survey of 420 Kenyans mentioned above, 61 per cent of respondents said that 'the US is arrogant and pushy in its interactions with other countries'. These examples are representative of a broader feeling of resentment towards the US for its power and for its willingness to exercise that power unilaterally.

Thus, domestic opposition to US initiatives in these African countries has been driven both by policy critiques and by concerns about US power, although it is impossible to determine the balance between them. African leaders have found domestic political support by tapping into these views and resisting US pressure

⁵⁰ Two of the countries with the longest democratic records in Africa (Botswana and Mauritius) have generally accommodated US interests.

⁵¹ Although Muslims represent just 15% of the Kenyan population, their political importance has increased since the 1990s.

⁵² Brooks and Wohlforth, 'Hard times for soft balancing', p. 80.

⁵³ Jane Duncan, 'Anti-Terrorism Bill will stamp on human rights—*The Sowetan*', Media Monitors Network, 10 Jan. 2003, <http://www.mediamonitors.net/janeduncan1.html>, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

⁵⁴ Iqbal Jassat, 'US-inspired climatic changes in the form of anti-terror laws—will these rain clouds unleash a torrent of hail?', Media Review Network, 17 June 2003, http://oldsite.mediareviewnet.com/opinion_detail.asp?key=502&itemNumber=620, accessed 18 Aug. 2010.

⁵⁵ Whitaker, 'Reluctant partners'.

on certain issues. It is important to note, however, that people in these countries generally do not harbour deeper biases against the United States. To the extent that their views can be labelled 'anti-American', they are typically of the liberal variety described by Katzenstein and Keohane,⁵⁶ critical of the United States for not living up to its ideals. Many Africans in these countries have long viewed the US as a champion of democracy and freedom, but have been disappointed by recent policies that seem to prioritize security over liberty. For this reason, they want to resist US demands.

Overall, the main driving forces behind the strategies of opposition adopted by these African countries appear to be concerns about the regional balance of power and domestic political considerations. Interestingly, public opinion in these countries is motivated both by disagreements with US policy and by resentment over the predominance of American power. Thus the evidence from Africa both confirms and challenges the notion of soft balancing. On the one hand, the behaviour of African states is driven at least in part by the global balance of power—both directly, as leaders respond to relative power concerns within the continent, and indirectly, as citizens put pressure on their leaders to resist the hegemon. On the other hand, these findings challenge the underlying premise that state behaviour is determined solely by structural concerns. The oppositional behaviour of African states has both systemic and domestic explanations. In fact, in some cases the global power structure seems important largely to the extent that public reactions to it are channelled through the democratic process. Not only does this research challenge systemic theories of international relations, therefore; it also raises doubts about the traditional distinction between unit- and system-level analyses.

Conclusion

In recent years, several African countries have been standing up to the United States on a range of issues, including the 'war on terror', the International Criminal Court and AFRICOM. This behaviour has been driven primarily by domestic politics, particularly public pressure against cooperating with the United States, and by concerns for the regional balance of power, especially the need to contain American military influence on the continent. Certain African leaders may have found it possible to resist US pressure because of the relative economic independence of their countries and the availability of alternative international donors, but these have not been the driving factors behind their positions.

These findings from Africa generate three conclusions with broader implications. First, weak states may choose to soft balance against external power instead of bandwagoning with it under certain conditions. One is when doing so helps them in the domestic power game, thus making oppositional behaviour more likely in democratic countries where leaders compete for votes. This argument

⁵⁶ Peter J. Katzenstein and Robert O. Keohane, *Anti-Americanisms in world politics*, Cornell Studies in Political Economy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

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ties into the ‘omnibalancing’ concept discussed earlier, in that the threat of losing to a domestic rival is greater than the possible punishment for standing up to the hegemon. Another condition is when soft balancing helps preserve the existing balance of power within the neighbourhood, suggesting that such behaviour will be more likely among regional powers that want to protect their positions. Thus, although weak states in Africa may face constrained foreign policy options, they are not uniformly forced to go along with the United States.

Second, balancing behaviour may be a *direct* outcome of the global distribution of power, as is generally theorized, or an *indirect* outcome as structural concerns shape public perceptions of the desirability of cooperating with the hegemon. In the African countries under examination here, democratically elected governments have been pushed to resist US initiatives by civil society organizations, journalists and others. To the extent that opposition to the United States reflects legitimate policy differences, the resulting behaviour is not soft balancing. When domestic opposition is driven by popular resentment of the predominance of power held by the United States, however, the resistance of these governments can be seen as soft balancing. This is consistent with recent findings that US *realpolitik* behaviour may be driven partly by realist views among the American public.⁵⁷ Thus, soft balancing behaviour in Africa has both systemic and unit-level explanations, and to some extent raises doubts about the distinction between the two.

Third, this study suggests that soft balancing among friends is different from soft balancing among enemies: the former may undermine the policies of the hegemon, but not to the point where the hegemon finds it necessary to retaliate in a significant way. These African countries remain some of the United States’ closest allies on the continent. Even after the funding cuts related to Article 98, they were among the biggest recipients of US assistance. This pattern largely holds true for other instances of soft balancing among friends as well. European opposition to the war in Iraq, for example, had little impact on overall relations with the United States. Thus, the muted response of the hegemon to African opposition does not seem to be a consequence of the region’s comparatively low geopolitical importance.

Given this dynamic, how much do strategies of opposition among weak states in Africa really matter? In the short term, this behaviour can slow the implementation of US goals in the region. For the time being, for example, the United States has been forced to locate AFRICOM headquarters in Germany instead of Africa. This has been an embarrassment, but not a major impediment to US plans. Perhaps more importantly, by aligning themselves with middle powers elsewhere in the world, these African countries may be joining a coalition that has the potential to challenge US hegemony in the future. At least for now, though, oppositional behaviour in this broader coalition is informed largely by ‘liberal anti-Americanism’.⁵⁸ This outlook is characterized by criticism of the United

⁵⁷ Daniel W. Drezner, ‘The realist tradition in American public opinion’, *Perspectives on Politics* 6: 1, 2008, pp. 51–70.

⁵⁸ Katzenstein and Keohane, *Anti-Americanisms in world politics*.

States for not living up to its ideals, a sentiment shared by many Americans. In this sense, it is not really a threat to US hegemony, but more of a check on the excesses of US power. These countries share similar long-term goals with the United States, including democracy, free markets and an end to terrorism. If soft power is about 'getting others to want what you want',⁵⁹ the United States is still in a very good position.

Finally, there is the question of whether world leaders will continue to try to undermine US initiatives now that there is a new president in the White House. Perhaps not surprisingly, recent resistance to US policies was partly a response to the perceived arrogance of the Bush administration, whose 'you're either with us or against us' mentality earned it a reputation for unilateralism and pushiness. In many ways, therefore, the election of Barack Obama provides a good test of soft balancing theory overall. The fact of US power has not changed with the new President, but the way in which it exercises that power has. If other countries stop opposing the United States, it may be concluded that recent behaviour was probably driven more by policy disagreements than by discomfort with the global power structure. Although most would agree that foreign policy rhetoric under Obama has changed more than actual policies, resistance does seem to have declined in some regions, notably Western Europe. This may reflect a sense that US policy is starting to fall more into line with its perceived ideals, undermining the basis for liberal anti-Americanism. At the same time, though, resistance has continued among other countries, especially Iran, where resentment of US hegemony is strong. Insofar as the extent of and motivation for anti-Americanism varies across countries and regions, it may not necessarily change with the inauguration of a new US president.⁶⁰

It is especially interesting to watch this transition play out in Africa, where expectations of the new President are high, given his personal connection with the continent. Even before Obama was inaugurated, several controversial US policies in Africa were already changing. The Bush administration launched a major public relations effort for AFRICOM, for example, and stopped suspending aid to countries that had not signed Article 98 agreements. Since Obama came into office, US policy towards Africa has changed only on the margins. The 'war on terror' has a new name and AFRICOM has no plans to relocate its headquarters, but these initiatives and others continue essentially unabated. Even so, with a few exceptions, African leaders now express little resistance to US policies. Some are disappointed that Obama has not placed Africa higher on the priority list, but most generally are anxious to cooperate with him. In fact, Obama's popularity within Africa has allowed his administration to put more pressure on African leaders about issues such as corruption, largely because those leaders cannot get as much traction as they once could by responding with anti-American rhetoric. All of this suggests that earlier resistance to US policies in Africa was mainly about leader-

⁵⁹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft power: the means to success in world politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

⁶⁰ Shale Horowitz and Sunwoong Kim, 'Anti-Americanism in electoral politics: insights from South Korea's 2002 presidential election', *International Interactions* 34: 3, 2008, pp. 258–81.

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ship. It would be wrong to assume, however, that those days are over. African leaders have won domestic and international support for their willingness to stand up for national interests in the face of pressure from the global superpower. In the event that they are pushed to support initiatives that contradict those interests, it seems unlikely that they will back down easily, even to a popular US president whose father was African.

In the end, the rise of anti-American rhetoric and oppositional behaviour in Africa in recent years is not surprising. Although the trend emerged under the Bush administration, leaders within Africa have now found their voices and gained support for their independent approach. With the realization that resistance elicits only minimal penalties and does not prevent the continuance of close connections, African leaders are unlikely to give in easily to the demands of subsequent administrations. At the same time, though, the United States has little to fear in such displays of resistance. These countries remain some of its closest friends on the continent, and their people value good relations with the United States. Rather than worrying about their opposition, the US should appreciate the opportunity to negotiate with countries that have similar values and are seeking to claim their own seats at the international table.

