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***Leverages and Constraints for Turkish Foreign Policy in Syrian War: A Structural Balance Approach***

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# Leverages and Constraints for Turkish Foreign Policy in Syrian War: A Structural Balance Approach

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## ABSTRACT

Various balance and imbalance conditions among the U.S., Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran are analyzed to present how changes in the direction of conflict and cooperation disturb the regional balance in the Syria conflict. We find that given a stable hostility between the U.S. and Russia, and the stable friendship between Russia and Syria, Turkish preferences over coveting friendship and leaning toward enmity are central in the formation of balances. Turkey-Syria relations constitute a key for the balance in the region. A main Russian foreign-policy problem thus remains to help Turkey and Syria to conduct friendlier relations. A competition or an agreement between the U.S. and Russia over Kurdish independence underlies TFP alignment choices and a high likelihood of a protracted conflict for years to come in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Structural Balance Theory, Balance of Power, Unbalanced and Balanced Systems, Enmity and Friendship

## Türk Dış Politikasının Suriye Savaşındaki Etkisi ve Sınırları: Bir Yapısal Denge Yaklaşımı

### ÖZET

Bu makalede A.B.D., Rusya, Türkiye, Suriye, ve İran arasındaki denge ve dengesizlik koşullarının çatışma ve işbirliği yönlerinden Suriye'deki çatışma ve bölgesel denge değişimlerini nasıl etkiledikleri çözümlenmektedir. İstikrarlı A.B.D.-Rusya husumeti, Rusya-Suriye işbirliği altında Türkiye'nin işbirliği ve çatışma tercihleri dengelerin oluşumunda merkezî bir rol oynamaktadır. Türkiye-Suriye ilişkileri bölgedeki dengenin anahtarıdır. Bu nedenle Rus dış politikasının en önemli sorunu Türkiye ve Suriye'ye tekrar işbirliğine dönmelerinde yardımcı olmaktır. A.B.D. ve Rusya arasında Kürtlerin bağımsızlığı yönünde rekabet ve anlaşma Orta Doğu'da yüksek olasılıkla yıllar boyu sürecek bir çatışmanın ve Türk dış politikasının müttefik seçimlerinin altında yatmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yapısal Denge Kuramı, Güçler Dengesi, Dengede Olan ve Olmayan Sistemler, Düşmanlık ve Dostluk

## Introduction

Realities of international politics reveal themselves with multiple facets. The conflict in Syria is no exception. It evolves at such a pace that changing alignments and strategic moves of involved states puzzle and baffle observers. Faced with daily observations policy analysts and international relations (IR) experts have a tough time to make meaning out of the conflict's complexity. Do Turkey, Russia, and the United States (U.S.) agree or disagree on alternative issues such as the faith of the Assad regime, the support to Syrian Kurds especially the Democratic Union Party (PYD), the Free Syrian Army (FSA), or the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Al-Sham (ISIS)? The answers to these questions would demonstrate that the complexity of the conflict unfolds through interlocked issues at stake.

One does not need to be an IR scholar to notice the myriad of issues underlying armed clashes ravaging Syria. Everyone knows that major IR actors, terrorist groups, regional powers, international organizations in governmental or nongovernmental varieties (and any other actor or actors the readers of this article can add in) are involved in this bloody conflict. Thus, a need arises for systematic evaluations to analyze Turkish foreign policy (TFP) and other states' choices in the conflict. We argue that such appraisals become feasible and easier by the use of an analytic tool. The tool is the theory of Structural Balance (SB).<sup>1</sup>

Fritz Heider is the architect of the theory of SB.<sup>2</sup> Heider did not originally focus on IR but on interpersonal relations. The theory is first used to study envy, jealousy, and competition in social settings.<sup>3</sup> Its generalization to more general empirical configurations is due to Cartwright and Harary.<sup>4</sup> Harary later applied his generalized version of the theory to study the stability of balance in the region of Middle East.<sup>5</sup> The theory is not used in 1980s and during the following decades due to the change of focus in the academic discipline of IR theory. Researchers preferred to use game-theoretic tools to study balance of power among states during the heydays of the so-called Neo-Neo debate pitting Neorealism against Neoliberalism.<sup>6</sup> Game-theoretic analyses of balance of power did not generate a fruitful research program. Like the theory of SB, the interest in the use of Game Theory to study formation of alliances among states has declined. The research was doomed to fail as few IR theorists followed or found game-theoretical arguments of balance of power helpful. The Neo-Neo debate is later replaced in the discipline by another one centering on the divide between positivism versus post-positivism. The current discussion is about whether positivist methods are suitable to study IR

1 We always capitalize the name Structural Balance and other theories as they refer to specific modes of analysis and therefore are proper nouns.

2 Fritz Heider, "Attitudes and Cognitive Organization", *Journal of Psychology*, Vol.21, No.1, 1946, p.107-112; Fritz Heider, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Relations*, New Jersey, London, Lawrence Erlbaum, 1958.

3 Frank Harary, "The love-hate structure of Dangerous Corner", *Semiotica*, Vol.54, No.3-4, 1985, p.387-393; Carol J. Auster, "Balance Theory and Other Extra-Balance Properties: An application to fairy tales", *Psychological Reports*, Vol.47, 1980, p.183-188.

4 Donald Cartwright and Frank Harary, "Structural Balance: A Generalization of Heider's theory", *Psychological Review*, Vol.63, 1956, p.277-293 and Frank Harary, "On the Notion of Balance in a Signed Graph", *Michigan Mathematical Journal*, Vol.2, No.1, 1953, p.143-146. An example of direct application of Heider's theory to twenty states and their triadic relations is due to Michael Moore, "An International application of Heider's balance theory", *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol.8, No.4, 1978, p.401-405.

5 Frank Harary, "A Structural Analysis of the Situation in the Middle East in 1956", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.5, No.2, 1961, p.167-178.

6 See R. Harrison Wagner, "The Theory of Games and the Balance of Power", *World Politics*, Vol.38, No.4, 1986, p.546-576; Emerson Niou and Peter C. Ordeshook, "A Theory of the Balance of Power in International Systems", *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.30, No.4, 1987, p.685-715.

further withering away from analyses of balance of power. The concept and research on the very topic of balance of power does no longer constitute a theoretic hotspot in IR.

What we understand from this brief description is that a pattern exists in the use of theories and research they spawn in the IR discipline:

The development of theories in the social sciences follows an apparently lawlike pattern: at the outset some more or less precise theoretical ideas are advanced. If these elicit the attention of other scientists, the following happens: some authors catch on to these ideas, modify them and conduct empirical investigations to test them. Further modifications and empirical investigations follow. After some years there exist a great many different versions of the initial ideas and numerous empirical investigations. Nobody knows how exactly the many variants differ, which research results confirm or falsify which variant and which variant is superior. The interest of the scientists in the respective theory declines and they turn to other questions. There exist once more a great many unsolved problems and the expectation of finding a theory nearly as successful as natural science theories is disappointed.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the focus in the IR discipline shifts and takes different directions over time. The theory of SB is no exception to the rule; theories come and go. The Network Theory (NT) seems to revive interest in balance of power analyses in IR recently.<sup>8</sup> The theory defines a network “as a set of units—nerves, computers, individual, organizations, states—and a rule that defines whether, how, in what way, and to what extent any two units are linked with each other. This is what we call a relational network...What is network analysis? In a nutshell, network analysis is a science of interactions. It is a perspective on the physical, biological, and social world that is based on several fundamental premises.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, the NT leans towards complexities. The analysis of war in Syria according to the theory can deal with mutually embedded interdependences between issues, people, leaders, and all involved actors. Such an analysis indeed requires data that could take several years to collect and evaluate. More important, it requires interest of other IR scholars who might vary in their preferences toward statistics and data collection. There is a precise distinction between scientists’ preferences over simplification and directly dealing with complexity: “For me, the best models are as simple they have to be but not simpler. One can go wild with complexity, sometimes to the point of having to resort to computer simulations or numerical techniques to solve a model, but I prefer to go in the opposite direction and keep stripping the model of features until any further simplification would not let me the story I wish to tell.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, we go in the opposite direction in this paper. Our primary aim is to discipline our arguments and thoughts in simple terms; we do not deal with complexity directly.

We choose the SB as a tool to analyze conflict in Syria for several reasons. First, we prefer simplicity. The theory is simple and accessible to layman and IR theorists who avoid formalism. However, one should not deduce the conclusion that the accessibility of our analysis means that it

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7 Karl. D. Opp, “Balance Theory: Progress and Stagnation of a Social Psychological Theory”, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences/Philosophie des Sciences Sociales*, Vol.14, No.1, 1984, p.27.

8 Zeev. Maoz, “How Network Analysis Can Inform the Study of International Relations”, *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol.29, No.3, 2012, p.247-256; T. Antal, P. L. Krapivsky, S. Redner, “Social Balance on Networks: The Dynamics of Friendship and Enmity”, *Physica D.*, Vol.224, 2006, p.130-136.

9 Maoz, “How Network Analysis Can Inform”, p. 248.

10 Branislav Slantchev, “On the Proper Use of Game-Theoretic Models in Conflict Studies”, *Peace Economics, Peace Science and Public Policy*, Vol.23, No.14, 2017, p.12.

is not rigorous. The existence of formulas, statistical charts are not sufficient to establish rigor that is rather connected with deduction.<sup>11</sup> The theory of SB posits principles of balance from which consequences are derived. Therefore, we present a deductive model simplifying reality: “Models are a constrained, best effort to capture what the modeler believes to be the essence of a complex empirical phenomenon or at least an important aspect of it.”<sup>12</sup> Second, and more important, the theory has a precise definition of balance unlike balance of power theory harboring at least eight meanings of balance condition in IR.<sup>13</sup> This aspect is immensely precious in the discipline of IR which suffers from endless debates and arguments as theorists do not possess commonly accepted definitions of central concepts as, say, economists or psychologists.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the theory of SB does not mirror reality like any other theory either in physical or social sciences. Theories are tools to explain phenomena. They do not reproduce observations. To illustrate, the theory of SB does not report the fact that Turkey and Russia actually cooperate. It explains why they do so. An inclusion of all possible variables and causal connections in a theory leads to the reflection of the complexity of the empirical world. In contrast, theories simplify reality by concentrating on few variables and connections. They explain why and how things are related. The theory of SB helps to answer questions such as: “How do involved states’ alignments and strategic moves change? What are the opportunities and drawbacks TFP may possibly face? What does the Turkish-Russo rapprochement mean and what are its future consequences? Is there a possibility of Turkish-Syrian cooperation and under what circumstances? How will the U.S. help to Kurds affect the balance in the system? How and why do recent Israeli declarations regarding the Kurdish state formation affect the balance in the system?” The principles upon which the theory is based produce answers to such questions. They reveal alternative configurations demonstrating different trajectories the conflict can evolve through. We do however not claim that each theoretical implication of our analysis will be empirically substantiated since we cannot expect that each implication will be corroborated by observations. The reason is simple: one can never be certain that a future observation will not contradict the theory.<sup>15</sup> Theories can never be proven to be true.

## Structural Balance

The theory of SB is based upon the following principles: “a friend of my friend, as well as an enemy of my enemy, is my friend; a friend of my enemy, as well as an enemy of my friend, is my enemy” in a three-actor system called a triad.<sup>16</sup> The violation of one of these rules implies imbalance in the

11 The Nobel laureate Thomas C. Schelling’s work *The Strategy of Conflict* does not discuss bargaining among states in highly formal terms so that the aficionados only can have an access to, but it is rigorous.

12 Robert Powell, *In the Shadow of Power: States and Strategies in International Politics*, Princeton, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999, p.24.

13 Ernst Haas, “Balance of Power Theory: Prescription, Concept, or Propaganda?” *World Politics*, Vol.5, No.3, 1953, p.442-477.

14 Economists do have commonly accepted definitions of inflation and those of other concepts. As to psychologists, they cannot differ wildly on how to define the concept of ego, for example. Yet, it is quite normal to discuss and talk about the aim of the academic discipline of IR theories after decades of theorizing and empirical testing. See the specific issue of the *European Journal of International Relations* titled: “The End of International Relations Theory?” Vol.19, No.3, 2013.

15 Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, New York, Basic Books, 1959, chapters 1-5; Nelson Goodman, *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1983. This is the territory of the philosophy of science interested readers can wander around at their own peril.

16 Antal, Krapivsky, and Redner, “Social Balance on Networks”, p.130.

triad. The simplest way to establish whether there exist balance or not is to multiply the number of positive signs of mutual friendship and negative signs of mutual enmity in a system of any size. The multiplication of positive and negative relations constitutes a cycle. If the cycle is positive, the system is balanced; otherwise not. Consequently, if in the triad of ABC all three states are friendly with each other, so that there is the multiplication of positive signs, thus the cycle of  $(+).(+).(+)$  is  $(+)$ , then the system is said to be balanced. There exists no inconsistency in three states' preferences, so that there is no violation of balancing rules, when all become mutual friends: "the friend of my friend is my friend."

The other case of balance is two states' friendship targeting the common enemy, that is, when two states gang up against the third. This configuration corresponds to the cycle of  $(+).(-).(-) = (+)$ . The alliance of AB targeting C in the triad of ABC implies for A that "C is my enemy; B who is the enemy of C is my friend." As to C, it reasons in the following way: "my enemies A and B are mutual friends; B (or A), the friend of my enemy A (or B), is my enemy." Therefore, if relations between two actors are friendly but the actors' relations with the third are marked by hostility, then the triad is said to be balanced; otherwise the triad is unbalanced.

A triad is unbalanced either if all three dyadic relations, or, equivalently, dyads, are negative so that we have the cycle of  $(-).(-).(-) = (-)$ , or, two are positive and one is negative that corresponds to the cycle of  $(+).(+).(-) = (-)$ . Unbalanced triads generate the problem of holding relations, choices, beliefs, and attitudes in harmony in opposition to balanced triads. The problem is called "cognitive dissonance."<sup>17</sup> The theory however does not imply how the cycle of  $(+).(+).(-)$  will transform into  $(+).(-).(-) = (+)$  or  $(+).(+).(+) = (+)$ . To better illustrate what the cognitive dissonance problem is about, we can give the example of "pivot" defined as the friendly state toward two enemy states.<sup>18</sup> One would claim that a pivot occupies an advantageous strategic position by playing one friendly state against the other one. Hence, a friend of the pivot conducts hostile relations with the other so that we have "the enemy of my friend is my friend" in opposition to balanced systems where "the enemy of my friend is my enemy." The pivot would face sooner or later a problem of satisfying both enemies who would press it for a decisive cooperative shift. It is common that a state believes an enemy-supported actor has hostile intentions and interests. Each enemy must make sure and certain that the common friend is indeed a "friend" rather than a shrewd actor playing one against the other. Thus, the pivot must find a way to re-establish consistent relations by siding with one of the friends while its other friendship relation transforms into antagonism. The theory does not specify however which of the two enemies the pivot will select as its friend but implies that pivotal advantages do not last forever. The other case of imbalance obtains if all three states are mutual enemies. Such a situation implies that "the enemy of my enemy is my enemy" contradicting the balance principle of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." There will again be tendencies for balance in such systems, because two states in conflict would benefit from the conduct of friendly relations with another state against each other. Conflicting states would perceive that the hostility of the third can be directed against the other than itself, so that a common ground for friendly relations can be explored and be eventually established.

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17 Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1957; J. M. Goldgeier and Philip. E. Tetlock, "Psychology and International Relations", *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 4, 2001, p.67-92; Lee Ross and Andrew Ward, "Psychological Barriers to Dispute Resolution", *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol.27, 1995, p.255-304.

18 Lowell Dittmer, "The Strategic Triangle: An Elementary Game-Theoretical Analysis," *World Politics*, Vol.33, No.4, 1981, p.499.

The same logic applies to larger systems. According to the structural balance theorem, in a system of any size, either all relations are friendly or they can be divided into two groups such that each pair of relations in each group is friendly but all relations across the two groups are antagonistic.<sup>19</sup> The theorem establishes that systems containing more than three actors are balanced if and only if each triad in the system is balanced. To illustrate, there are four triads in systems of four states, ten in systems of five, twenty in systems of six, thirty-five in systems of seven, and fifty-six triads in systems of eight states. The results are obtained by the combination formula of  $C(n, r) = \frac{n!}{r!(n-r)!}$  where  $C(n, r)$  is the number of combinations of  $n$  things in terms of the number of groups of  $r$  things. Hence, as systems get larger, increasing friendship-hostility conditions must be satisfied for balance. We are now ready to discuss balance and imbalance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria System.

## Balance and Imbalance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria System

We assume that the prospect of an independent Kurdish state in Syria is the key issue in the conflict. The formation of a Kurdish state in Syria and, equivalently, a territorial division of Syria is the backbone of enmity and friendship relations among involved actors. Therefore, a Russo-Turkish accord towards Syria's territorial integrity and the U.S. help to Kurds are assumed to be source of friendship and enmity in Russo-Turkish and U.S.-Turkish dyads, respectively. By the same token, Russian removal of troops from Afrin region prior to the Turkish "Olive Branch Operation," is interpreted as friendship in the sense that Russia gives green light to Turkey in its military efforts to prevent Kurds to establish an independent state in Syria; otherwise Russia would not take such an action.

Compared with the Russian action, the U.S. declaration that a Turkish military operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed wing of the PYD and an affiliate of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), is qualified as enmity. The U.S. fully understands Turkish concerns yet procures the Syrian branch of the PKK, namely, the YPG with arms and military education. One can naturally ask: "How these two NATO allies can be in conflict?" A reputed historian's answer to the question is striking and powerful. Turkish membership of NATO does not automatically imply a U.S.-Turkey friendship as "the ultimate test of an alliance is action rather than promises."<sup>20</sup> The U.S. openly takes a hostile action against Turkey while it declares: "We fully understand Turkish concerns about the PKK. It's a terrorist organization. We appreciate that. But we need to stabilize the north, and we very much hope that Turkey works with us and the international community in ways that we think advance Turkish interests."<sup>21</sup> This is just an example of cheap talk. The U.S. help to Syrian Kurds strengthens Turkish beliefs that the U.S. prefers the formation of an independent Kurdish state in a long or a short term. Turkey suspects that the U.S. has a hidden agenda of supporting the formation of an independent Kurdish state covering Northern Syria so that the ISIS presence in Syria is nothing but a pretext for the U.S. to supply arms to the YPG. Would Turkey and the U.S. befriend each other again? The answer to the question is affirmative provided that the U.S. collects all arms and equipment it offered to the YPG and withdraws its military personnel actively involved in helping and educating the YPG forces. Actions speak louder than words.

19 The theorem is proven by Frank Harary. "On the Notion of Balance in a Signed Graph", *Michigan Mathematical Journal*, Vol.2, No.2, 1953, p.143-146.

20 G. Blainey, *The Causes of War*, New York, Free Press, 1988, p.52.

21 See <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/277545.htm>, (Accessed on 16 February 2018).

Russia plays a critical role in the Syrian conflict concerning Kurdish independence and its energy competition with the U.S. at global level. Putin visited Ankara in 2014, two years before the military coup of 2016 and proposed an alternative pipeline called Turkish Stream. The pipeline was proposed to transport Russian natural gas to Turkey and to European markets through Greece. It is worth noting here that Bulgaria, a traditional Russian ally but now a European Union member, rejected Putin's proposal of the South Stream project linking Russian gas to Bulgaria and Europe under European Union and U.S. opposition. The Turkish Stream proposal meant that the U.S. and Turkey had drifted apart attracting U.S. concerns.<sup>22</sup> The emerging friendship between Russia and Turkey was so strong that it survived and recovered after less than two years of Turkish downing of a Russian warplane in 2015. We observe four key developments following Turkish action and apology to Russia: a failed coup attempt took place in Turkey in July 2016, Turkish President Erdoğan visited Saint Petersburg in August, Putin and Erdoğan met in September during the G20 meeting in China, Putin visited Istanbul in October for the Turkish Stream signing ceremony followed by Russia and Turkey agreeing on the evacuation of Aleppo in November, Russian Ambassador to Ankara is assassinated in December. Russia, Turkey, and Iran negotiated a ceasefire in Syria a few days later to call Idlip a zone of "de-escalation." Actually, Russia decided to withdraw its forces from the Afrin region where Turkey and FSA together conduct military operations targeting the YPG forces. Thus, Russia-Turkey friendship fully began in 2016 and is still not disrupted.<sup>23</sup>

In a typical conventional discourse, we can summarize these interactions as while the U.S. and Turkey were once friends opposing Russia especially through the U.S. supported Qatari pipeline project, Russia and Turkey later became friends opposing the U.S., the reason being that Turkey is unhappy with the U.S. friendship and that Russia competes with the U.S. and finds Turkey as a valuable friend in this context. The theory of SB would label such a claim as a reshuffling of a balanced configuration, one after the other. However, the theory adds insight by first asserting what exactly balance means in U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria relations, and, second, it helps us to explore the implications of Russo-Turkish friendship in larger systems. We can obtain answers from the following questions: What would the Russo-Turkish friendship imply for Russia-Syria and Turkey-Syria relations? And what are the implications of the Russo-Turkish friendship in larger systems?

The Russo-Turkish friendship is not unproblematic. Its stability is closely related to Turkish-Syria relations. Unless Syria and Turkey re-establish their friendship, the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria system is unbalanced. If Russia befriends Turkey and Syria but Turkey and Syria are enemies, then Russian foreign policy should encourage friendly relations between Turkey and Syria. Russia should spend efforts to convince Turkey that the Syrian government is not necessarily an enemy and force the Syrian government to cooperate with Turkey. Thus, Russia should reduce mistrust and uncertainty in the Russia-Turkey-Syria triad so that Russia-Turkey rapprochement does not damage the Russia-Syria friendship. Otherwise, from the Syrian perspective, the Russo-Turkish friendship would produce a perception of "my best ally now cooperates with my sworn enemy." Syria would wonder how long the Russia-Turkey can remain friends or how deep is the friendship. Hence, Syrian suspicions would urge Russia to explain Syria why it shifted from conflict to cooperation when dealing with Turkey.

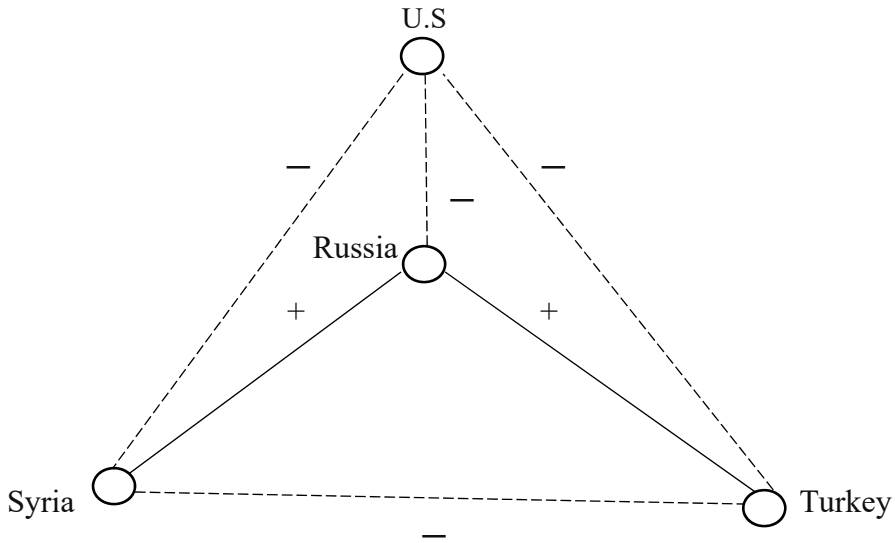
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22 John Galt, "Why the CIA, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are Furious about Erdoğan's Russian Rapprochement," <https://theinternationalreporter.org/2016/08/15/why-the-cia-saudi-arabia>, (Accessed on 23 October 2017).

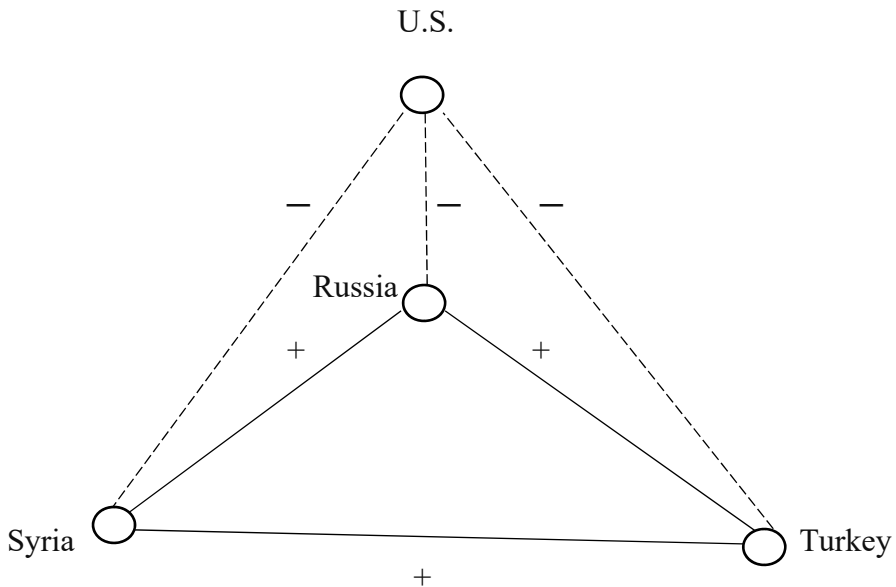
23 F. Stephen Larrabee, "The Turkish-Russian Rapprochement: How Real? How Durable?" Rand Corporation, <http://nationalinterest.org/print/blog/the-buzz/the-turkish-russian-rapp>, 21 November 2016, (Accessed on 2 December 2016); Brandon Turbeville, "Turkey Warms to Russia; Pipeline, Sanctions To Be Discussed, Qatar Blames KSA, UAE For Coup," <http://www.activistpost.com/2016/07/turkey-warms-to-russia-pipeline>, 28 July 2016, (Accessed on 11 January 2017).



As to Turkey, it would now ask “How can we secure our objective of ousting the Assad regime supported by my new friend, Russia?” The Turkish foreign policy problem then becomes whether the Turkish objective of toppling the Assad regime will be realized under the rapprochement. A reversal in Turkish foreign-policy and a Syrian military move to support Turkey in its fight against YPG are key conditions for a stable U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria system. Hence, the only way toward balance in the system is a new phase of Turkey-Syria friendship while Bashar Al-Assad remains in power. The figures below show the unbalanced and balanced systems of U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria, respectively where dashed negative and solid positive lines denote enmity and friendship, respectively.



**Figure 1:** Imbalance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria System



**Figure 2:** Balance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria System

If Turkey-Syria relations are friendly, then the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria system is balanced; the system is unbalanced, otherwise. To put differently, a Russia-Turkey-Syria coalition opposing the U.S. generates balance in the system. A Russian mediation and diplomacy to mollify mutual Turkish and Syrian attitudes and beliefs might produce a modus vivendi such that Turkey coexists with an unchanged Syrian regime that fights Kurds operating in its territory. As there is no Turkey-Syria friendship, the system is actually unbalanced. Any Syrian move of militarily helping Turkey in its actual Afrin operation can be interpreted as friendship between Syria and Turkey. Such Syrian help can take the forms of actual fighting against the PYD positions in Afrin aligning with Turkey and the FSA: it can withdraw its forces from the regions adjacent to Afrin or can declare neutrality. Hence, possibly under Russian advice, such Syrian moves either direct or not can be interpreted as Syrian friendship toward Turkey. Thus, it is up to Russia to shoulder the task of mollifying conflicting attitudes, hostile beliefs and behaviors between Syria and Turkey.

An eventual Russian help to Syrian Kurds would definitely end Russo-Turkey rapprochement transforming it into a dyad of hostility. Therefore, TFP should reduce, if possible, Russian incentives to help Kurds. Nevertheless, had Russia supported the YPG by procuring weapons, military advisers, and personnel similar to the U.S., the result would not automatically be a U.S.-Russian friendship targeting Turkey. Russia and the U.S. should come on an agreement over the allegiance of a Kurdish state in Syria. Therefore, if Russia and the U.S. agree over the fate of Syrian Kurds, the U.S.-Russia-Turkey system would become balanced with a U.S.-Russia bloc pitted against Turkey; otherwise the system would be unbalanced with each dyad being characterized by hostility and competition. Hence, a Russo-Turkish enmity would not change the imbalance in the system but would simply increase the systemic pressure to reach balance.

In the larger system of the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria, if Russia convinces the Syrian government that an autonomous Kurdish state in Syrian territory does not constitute a territorial loss, the alliance array in the triad would be in the form of Russia-Syria facing Turkey and therefore be balanced. The U.S.-Turkey relations then become critical. If Syrian government prefers to stay in power at the cost of such a loss, so that Russia and Syria remain allies, Turkey would distance itself from Russia. The result will be imbalance in the system provided that U.S.-Turkish relations remain antagonistic implying pressures for future changes in friendship-hostility relations in the system.

It follows that two possible balance configurations exist in the system of the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria: the U.S. and Turkey side together against the Russia-Syria alliance, or Russia, Turkey, and Syria coalesce, leaving the U.S. as the common enemy. The first configuration is discarded under the rapprochement between Russia and Turkey. The second one, a Russia-Turkey-Syria alliance targeting the U.S., generates a “three against one” configuration. Would the configuration evolve as the U.S. and Turkey become mutual friends again? This would require the end of the Russia-Turkey rapprochement. Otherwise, such an evolution would lead to an imbalance in the system, putting Turkey under strain as its two friends, the U.S. and Russia, are in conflict. Nevertheless, TFP does not face a consistency problem, because the U.S. holds to its objective of helping the Kurds in the region. In a sense, the U.S. foreign policy relieves Turkey from the burden of choosing between the U.S. and Russia as its friend.<sup>24</sup>

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24 Jonathan Marcus, “US-Turkey: The strained alliance,” <http://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-35882201>. See also Nick Cohen, “The Kurds should not be denied our support,” <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jan/16/west-must-back-kurds-independence-allies-against-isis>.

### Balance and Imbalance in Larger Systems

The inclusion of Iran into the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria system produces a five-state system of the U.S., Russia, Turkey, Syria, and Iran. The system generates ten triads: U.S.-Russia-Turkey; U.S.-Russia-Syria; U.S.-Russia-Iran; U.S.-Turkey-Syria; U.S.-Turkey-Iran; U.S.-Syria-Iran; Russia-Turkey-Syria; Russia-Turkey-Iran; Russia-Syria-Iran; and Turkey-Syria-Iran. The large number of triads might present analytic problems but the structural balance theorem eases our task of finding the balance condition in the system: either all states are mutual friends or they are partitioned in into two coalitions such that coalition members are mutual friends but are enemies of each member of the opposing coalition.<sup>25</sup> The two figures below respectively display imbalance and balance in the system of the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran.

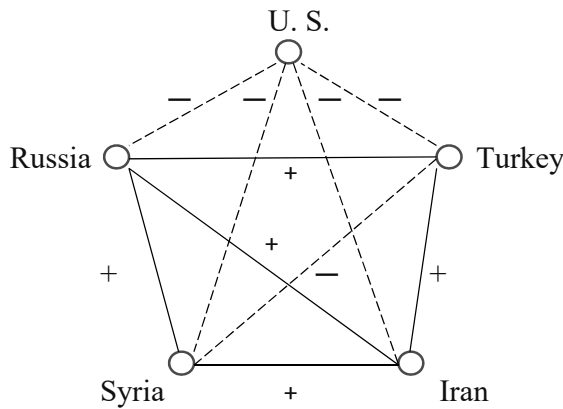


Figure 3: Imbalance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran System

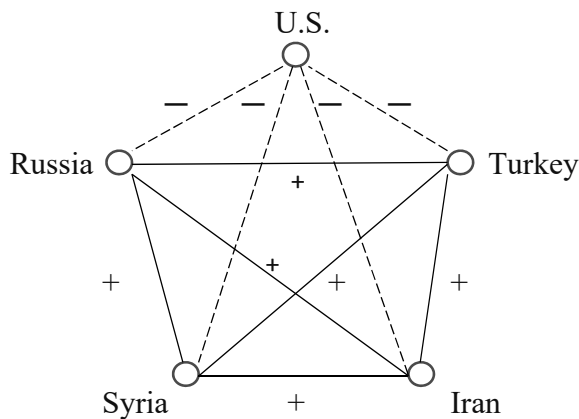


Figure 4: Balance in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran System

Turkey-Iran-Syria triad is imbalanced. While Iran-Syria relation is of a strong and stable friendship and Turkey-Iran relations are friendly, Turkey-Syria relations can be tilted to cooperation or continue to be conflictive as indicated. The U.S.-Russia, the U.S.-Turkey, and the U.S.-Iran relations

25 David Easley and Jon Kleinberg, *Networks, Crowds, and Markets: Reasoning about a Highly Connected World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 111.

are antagonistic. For a balance to be established, Turkey-Syria relations should become friendly. This change would result in a configuration of four against one, that is, the U.S. facing an alliance of Russia-Turkey-Iran-Syria.

Thus, one possible balance configuration is Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Syria opposing the U.S. Nevertheless, a fictive U.S.-Russian *modus vivendi* in Syria about Kurds can force Iran to enter the conflict with full force to protect its interests in the region or to align with Turkey. Such a development would not necessarily imply a very difficult U.S. task to concoct friendly relations with Iran unlike Russia. Russia, given its collaboration with the U.S. concerning Kurds, must find a way of easing Iranian concerns about independence of Kurds and its project of "Islamic Pipeline" transporting Iranian share of the natural gas from the Gulf to Western markets.<sup>26</sup> A development toward balance would then be cooperation between Turkey and Iran balancing the U.S. and Russia. However, the balance problem emerges this time for Syria. Syria cannot remain a friend of both Russia cooperating with the U.S. and Iran, a stable enemy of the U.S. Russian-Turkish rapprochement might last as long as the U.S. and Russia do not cooperate or the U.S. does not stop its support for the Syrian Kurds. The U.S. should figure out whether it is indispensable to lose Turkey as an ally because of its support to Kurds.

The Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu publicly declared their support for an independent Kurdish state that is ahead of a referendum in Northern Iraq.<sup>27</sup> Israeli position can be evaluated for balance and imbalance in a six-actor system of the U.S.-Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran-Israel. The Israeli support for an independent Kurdish state is aligned with the U.S. interests to control oil and gas flow. A Kurdish state can be evaluated as a natural ally of the Hebrew State, as Kurds are not Arabs; do not publicly support Palestinians' position with respect to the West Bank, Jerusalem, and Israeli constructions on the occupied territories. Kurds getting the U.S. backing can be friendly toward Israel that is the staunch ally of the U.S. This would conform to the principle of "the friend of my friend is my friend." Thus, the formation of a Kurdish state can only strengthen the hand of Israel, the archenemy of Iran which would therefore harbor higher incentives to cooperate with Turkey, Syria, and Russia. If the system of Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran is balanced with each being the friend of others, then the outcome will be a bipolarization and a balanced configuration of Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran bloc pitted against the U.S.-Israel alliance. Such a balance configuration would imply no inconsistent expectations, constraints foreign-policy choices should overcome, and, therefore, it would produce no tension.

The theory allows us to deal with even larger systems. After the inclusion of Israel, we can also think about Iraq, yet Iraq consists of two parts: the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the Central Government of Iraq (CGI). The addition of these two units generates a system of eight actors, namely, the system of the U.S., Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran, KRG, CGI, and Israel producing fifty-six triads as noted before. The analysis of the system by the help of the theorem instead of exploring balance conditions in each triad is more straightforward. Here, assuming a U.S.-Kurdish alignment of interest about the formation of an independent Kurdistan, we can propose that the system with bloc of friends of the U.S., KRG, and Israel facing the one composed by Russia, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and CGI is balanced. The balance is the product of friendship established among each member of the bloc while each is an enemy of each member of the opposed bloc. The U.S., Israel support KRG in its bid for

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26 The world's richest gas field called South Pars/North Dome lies beneath the Persian Gulf. A share of 1/3 of the field belongs to Iran and the remaining 2/3 to Qatar.

27 See, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-israel/israel-endorses-independent-kurdish-state-id-USKCN1BO0QZ>, (Accessed on 23 November 2017).

independence and therefore can be qualified as friends. Each must also be hostile to each member of the adverse coalition implying the U.S., the KRG, and Israel conducting hostile relations with Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran and the CGI. We can assert that the U.S. and Israel take position against the CGI as they support the KRG. They also are in conflict with Turkey by the same token. The U.S. and Israel conduct hostile relations with Iran. As to the opposite camp of Russia, Turkey, Iran, and the CGI, balance conditions imply that Russia, and Iran having friendly relations with Turkey should also side with the CGI. We know that Iran does not prefer the formation of a Kurdish state near to its borders similar to Turkey. Israel being an antagonist of Iran and Israel supports Kurds, Iran would not have an incentive to contribute to the emergence of a new Israeli ally but rather cooperate with Turkey. Iran becoming friendlier with Turkey, Syria would have higher incentives to start a dialogue with Turkey. TFP should not miss any such chance. Hence, Iran and Turkey remain friends and also side with the CGI against KRG. It follows that both Russia and Iran should be friends for balance, and this balance condition is satisfied as well. While Turkey had conflict with the CGI in the past concerning Turkish military presence in Bashiqa military base and cooperative relations with the KRG, a reversal of positions occurred with Turkey and CGI now opposing KRG together.<sup>28</sup> Russia and Iran should also continue to support Turkish-CGI friendship targeting KRG for balance to be established along with the proposed configuration. It is however impossible to talk about static, long-haul, unchanging relations among states. This remark pushes us to assert another feature of international systems.

There exists opposite forces of balance versus imbalance in international systems. The multiplicity of conditions generated for balance also implies increasing likelihoods of vanishing balance. The counterforce against the tendency of imbalance is that unbalanced triads cannot endure for a long time; sooner or later some imbalance in the system would again shift towards balance.<sup>29</sup> And, similarly, states would rather tend to spend efforts to decrease the degree of uncertainty in their relations encouraging them to establish balanced relations to eschew cognitive dissonance.

Consequently, one can expect different balances in the future without excluding an array of, for example, Russia, Iran, Syria pitted against the U.S., Turkey, and Israel front with CGI and KRG joining one of these alignments of friendship but with the latter always being in opposite formations. And as CGI and KRG join opposite alliances and possible hostility relations within reciprocal alignments emerge, balance would again be disturbed. The formation and the de-formation of balances can go on forever but at least we can take snapshots of the process to assess balance at a specific time as we do in this paper.

## Implications for Turkish Foreign Policy

We can safely indicate that the primary concern of TFP is actually to prevent the formation of an independent Kurdish state contiguous to its southern borders. Given the U.S. military help to the YPG and the Israeli support to KRG, Turkey cannot fully befriend each state. Russia, Iran, CGI, and perhaps even Saudi Arabia are friends Turkey can count on for the time being. As the U.S. and Russia cannot be genuine, stable friends, Russia surfaces as a valuable partner for Turkey. TFP should therefore continue to deepen Turkish-Russian cooperation and perhaps signal Russia that it is ready

28 See, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/turkeys-military-presence-in-iraq-a-complex-strategic-deterrent>, (Accessed on 5 March 2017).

29 Antal, Krapivsky, and Redner, "Social Balance on Networks", p.131.

to resume cooperative relations with Syria provided that Syria sides with Turkey against the YPG. Similarly, Russia would encourage Syria to start cooperation with Turkey. Hence, the Turkish signal and Russian efforts to reach the objective of cooperative Turkey-Syria relations would help the Russia-Turkey-Syria triad to reach balance.

TFP toward Iran should aim at the objective of attracting Iran as a friend against the KRG and also YPG. Iran also could efforts to help Turkey-Syria relations back on a cooperative path. The CGI should welcome Turkish and Iranian friendship unless it is convinced by the U.S. or Israel or both on the formation of a Kurdish state in its northern territories. Iran and Turkey backing the CGI, Baghdad can stand on a firmer ground toward the KRG without forgetting Russian and Syrian efforts in the same vein. All these moves can lead to balance by bolstering friendship within the larger alliance of Russia, Turkey, Syria, Iran and CGI.

As noted before, the Kurdish issue determines the character of U.S.-Turkish relations (with the Gülen issue coming next). A U.S. adoption of a pro-Turkish position would make Turkey uneasy under Russian-Turkey friendship. This is a result of the balancing principles: Turkey cannot become a pivot by cooperating with Russia and the U.S. simultaneously. It must lean on the one or to the other side sooner or later, because it is difficult for Turkey to satisfy both Russian and American conditions of friendship. One of the sources of the difficulty originates from the global energy game where the U.S. and Russia have diametrically opposed interests and this difficulty seems that it is not likely to go away any time soon. As to Kurds, Kurdish allegiance to the U.S. would further antagonize Russia. Russia needing Turkish support can strengthen Turkish position enabling TFP to adopt a wider and more effective range of choices. It now seems as TFP would favor Russia over the U.S. due to the U.S. help and assistance to the YPG. Consequently, the U.S. military moves supporting Kurds in Syria facilitates TFP rationale to continue to befriend Russia.

TFP can take bolder steps toward U.S.-helped military groups in both Syria and Iraq. The future of the Northern Iraq is uncertain while the referendum did not pave the way to an independent Kurdistan for the time being. Therefore, TFP should reduce the U.S. help to the YPG and also oppose Israel in its revealed preference with respect to the formation of an independent Kurdish state. Thus, Turkey needs a firmer and rapid collaboration with CGI, Iran, and Russia targeting the U.S. and Israel. The principle for TFP remains constant while observed moves vary daily: Turkish preferences must especially adapt to changing relations between the U.S. and Russia so as to avoid problems of consistency.

TFP should in general aim at the enlargement of the number of friends competing with adversaries in the messy environment of Syria war, Kurds' attempts to declare independence, and the U.S.-Russia global energy competition. Syria-Turkey relations appear important for the balance to form with Russia-Turkey-Syria-Iran-KRG coalition opposing that of containing the U.S.-Israel-KRG. The U.S. efforts to mend its relations with Turkey should not be in the form of diplomatic declarations but in the form concrete actions to stop aid to the YPG. TFP would face considerable problems if the U.S. takes actions in such a direction. TFP must then care about the Kurdish issue first under inconsistent demands coming from both sides. Turkey cannot endure a pivotal position in the U.S.-Russia-Turkey triad at a long haul. Finally, in all system configurations discussed so far we noted that Turkey-Syrian relations are of strategic value of balance and imbalance in the Syrian conflict. Consequently, to mend Turkey-Syria relations remains as a principal task for TFP.

## Conclusions

It is also possible to add non-state actors in the analysis and dimensions of polarization, interdependence, and the effects of international institutions in the analysis. If one examines balance and imbalance across such dimensions, one ends up in descriptions of a high complexity. The use of statistics and the collection and construction of data sets then become critical. Yet the aim of this paper is not the conduct of a large-n study to explain or describe or both the empirical world. Instead, we aim at exploring patterns of balance and imbalance using few variables and interpretations. We simplify to explain.

The analysis reveals how friendship and enmity relations produce stability or instability in Syria under the presumption that the transport of natural gas from the Persian Gulf to Europe is tied to the control of Syrian territory. An independent Kurdish state covering Northern Syria under control of the U.S. or Russia would benefit either major power in their global energy competition. The presumption succinctly summarizes how multiple issues are connected and makes cooperative and defective moves among involved actors meaningful. It offers a political perspective where Syria constitutes nothing but a theater of proxy war for the world energy distribution.

The paper can be extended in multiple directions. Structural balance theory disregards power differences in networks of enmity and friendship. Each actor is equally important for balance and imbalance assessments. What matters is not power but the foreign policy conduct of friendship and enmity. Yet we can weigh the degree of balance in systems by the ratio of the number of friendship relations to the total number of relations.<sup>30</sup> By the same token, we can also measure the degree of imbalance by dividing the number of enmity relations by the total number of connections. To incorporate power differences in these balance-imbalance assessments, one can differentiate enmity (or friendship) among major and minor actors. For example, if one holds that the U.S. and Russia are the major actors, then the enmity between the U.S. and Russia would weigh more than the one of, for example, between Turkey and Syria or Turkey and Iran. Nevertheless, the conflict between of the U.S. and Russia is a constant. Thus, any other hostile relation in a system would not add to the degree of imbalance as much as the one between the U.S. and Russia does. Think about, for instance, the hostility between the KRG and CGI. Does it make sense that it is a more destabilizing factor than relations between the U.S. and Russia? If the answer is positive, then there must be a power concept behind it. As a result, if the U.S.-Russia relation transforms into friendship, “lesser” actors’ mutual relations can be assessed as less important for balance and imbalance. Thus, such an extension of the theory can be fruitful conceptually and empirically. Mathematically inclined readers can consult two works to think about alternative extensions of the SB principles. One can consider systems larger than triads driven by nonlinear differential equations.<sup>31</sup> The other possibility is to investigate how states’ reputations as shaped by states’ cultural similarities and involvement in different conflicts affect friendship and hostility in alternative international systems.<sup>32</sup>

30 Cartwright and Harary, “Structural Balance”, p.288.

31 S. C. Lee, R. G. Muncaster, D. A. Zinnes, “‘The Friend of My Enemy is My Enemy’: Modeling Triadic International Relationships,” *Synthese*, Vol.100, No.3, 1994, p.333-358.

32 Mark J. C. Czenczi, “Reputation and Interstate Conflict,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol.51, No.2, 2007, p.382-396.

Balance can be also evaluated as weak states would not align with the powerful ones for the fear of being controlled or exploited within the alliance.<sup>33</sup> There is no such motive assumed here. The actors composing the system might or not deliberately search for an alliance according to possible asymmetries inside alliances; only balance principles constrain states' choices of friends and foes. However, if one thinks that such concerns of intra alliance exploitation matter, balance and imbalance assessments would become more complex.

The SB theory does not establish stability in terms of more than two alliances. Whether two or more than two blocs produce balanced systems is not our concern.<sup>34</sup> Instead, balance and therefore stability derive from bipolarization of the system under the absence of cognitive dissonance problems. The polarization the structural balance theorem implies is "tight" in terms of Kaplan's taxonomy of international systems.<sup>35</sup> The tightness follows the theorem under two conditions. First, if two blocs arise, blocs are involved in mutual enmity and there is no intra-alliance conflict but only friendship. Second, there are no states left outside blocs. Therefore, all states are involved in friendship and hostility relations according to balance principles. Any deviation from the principles would upset the balance and the system would tend to approach to another balance perhaps on the basis of alternative friendship and hostility relations.

The paper demonstrates that balance and imbalance in Syria can be assessed by simple rules while the conflict evolves each day. One can easily evaluate the consequences of new policies and involvement of additional actors in the system. The most important lesson to draw from the analysis is that the situation in Syria is stable as long as one group of states together opposes another one. The theory of SB spawns indeed a rigorous but a simple method to deal with the empirical complexity of the international conflict ravaging Syria.

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33 There exists a large social-psychological literature on coalition formation on such asymmetry of power. For the connection between the literature and balance-of-power theory in IR, see Dina A. Zinnes, "Coalition theories and the Balance of Power," in Sven Groennings, Edward W. Kelley, and Michael Leiserson (eds.) *The Study of Coalition Behavior*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970, p.351-369. Bandwagoning versus balancing constitute a large IR literature as well, see, for example, Stephen Walt, *The Origin of Alliances*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1990; Serdar Güner, "An Evolutionary Game Analysis of Balancing and Bandwagoning in Unipolar Systems," *Journal of Game Theory*, Vol.6, No.2, 2017, p.21-37.

34 System polarity as connected with system stability is one of the core exchanges in the discipline: Kenneth N. Waltz, "The Stability of a Bipolar World," *Daedalus*, Vol.93, No.3, 1964, p.881-909; Karl W. Deutsch and J. D. Singer, "Multipolar Power Systems and International Stability," *World Politics*, Vol.16, No.3, 1964, p.390-406.

35 Morton Kaplan, *System and Process in International Politics*, New York, John Wiley, 1957, p.117.