

# The Role and Implications of Buffer States in Great Power Relations

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*December 18, 2017*

*65.481 characters*

## **Abstract:**

This project considers the role and implications of buffer states in Great Power relations. It reviews the underlying theory behind both the core concepts, highlighting the debates in the literature and mapping out the current state of the art. A methodology review considers the ways that scholars have arrived at conclusions related to the topic. The paper concludes with three primary recommendations for future research. These include suggestions to update the literature on buffers in light of a changing geopolitical situation; to expand the theoretical frameworks employed by researchers to include frameworks beyond realism; and to reconsider the fundamental definition of a buffer by focusing on the ways buffers are utilised and operationalised by Great Powers.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Review of Theoretical Landscape .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>General Definitions of Great Powers.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Conceptualisations and Definitions of Buffers .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Role and Implications of Buffers for Great Powers .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Review of Methodologies Deployed in Literature .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Theory-building .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Qualitative Methods.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Quantitative Methods .....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Additional Methods Deployed.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Gaps and Unanswered Questions.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The Change in the Roles of Great Powers - Quo Vadis Buffer State? .....</b>	<b>18</b>
Why is this relevant? .....	19
How can the gap be filled in? .....	19
<b>Research Dominated by Realist Perspectives .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Why is this relevant? .....	21
How can the gap be filled in? .....	21
<b>Definitional Disagreement on Buffers.....</b>	<b>22</b>
Why is this relevant? .....	22
How can the gap be filled in? .....	23
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Reference List .....</b>	<b>i</b>

## Introduction

In world affairs, a small handful of powerful states – termed Great Powers by academics - have received an enormous amount of attention and research. Within the discipline, the topic of Great Power relations specifically has been the subject of significant scholarship. Yet between and among these Great Powers are many other states. Indeed, the vast majority of states on the international system do not fall into the category of Great Powers. In this paper, we focus on the particular concept of buffers: "[...] regions or zones situated between conflicting spheres of influence, and whose primary function is to separate the conflicting sides and thus reduce the likelihood of physical (military) contact"(Chay and Ross 1986, 2). As will be discussed below, the buffer concept has existed for quite some time in a purely military context, applied first to Afghanistan's position between the British and Russian empires in 1883 (Chay and Ross 1986, 1). The end of World War II and the emergence of nuclear weapons changed the fundamental logic of conflict. Although it reduced the importance of geography for direct conflict between nuclear powers, it did not eliminate the importance of geographical buffers (Ingalls 1986). In particular, states along the so-called "Iron Curtain" provided a buffer zone which allowed a securitisation of the borders between the USSR and the American-led NATO, avoiding the dangers of direct military clashes. Although the fierce opposition between the two blocs was reduced dramatically with the end of the Cold War, the idea of making use of neighbouring small states for securitisation purposes remains relevant: Russian military action in Georgia and on the Crimean Peninsula are just two examples of the contemporary relevance of buffer zones or states.

Given that the geopolitical and military situation has changed over the past decades since the concept of the "buffer state" was introduced, this paper aims at providing a comprehensive literature review of the theoretical understanding of buffers and their implications for Great Power policies. In this paper, we take it as a given that Great Powers are still relevant today. This can be demonstrated by the amount of scholarship dedicated to Great Powers and, to use a real-world example, in the context of the UN, where the structure of the Security Council privileges certain states over others. Most authors reviewed are drawing on realist theoretical frameworks - either explicitly or

implicitly - hence, states are understood to be the primary actors in an anarchical international system. In realist fashion, these states are constantly trying to gain power relative to their rivals.

The paper is structured as follows: the first part of the paper presents an overview of the existing literature on Great Powers and how they are generally defined. We continue to elaborate the definitional debate on buffers, especially focusing on the geographical location of buffers and the arguments over the necessity of buffers' neutrality. Drawing on these definitions and conceptualisation, we elaborate on the role buffers play in Great Power behaviour and politics, both historically and today. The aim is to lay out the main theoretical debate on the role and implications of buffer states within Great Power politics.

The second part of the paper discusses the methodologies deployed by the various authors writing on the topic. Theory building, qualitative, and quantitative methods are all utilised, however we identify an emphasis on case study based qualitative methodology in the literature. The purpose of this section is to identify how the existing literature has arrived at its conclusions.

In the third part, we argue for three main gaps identified in the preceding review of theory and methodology in the field. First, we suggest that more contemporary research is required due to the changing roles of Great Powers, in particular the US and Russia. Second, we identify a strong emphasis on realist theories among the authors writing on the topic and suggest that other theoretical lenses may provide important insights. Finally, we argue that relying on inherent characteristics of a state or region in defining buffers can be limiting and propose new research to define buffers based on utility and operationalisation by Great powers. This section also provides suggestions for further research as to how these gaps could potentially be closed. We conclude this paper with a summary of our findings.

## **Review of Theoretical Landscape**

This first section aims at providing a review of the theoretical aspects of the bodies of literature salient to the role and implication of buffer states for Great Powers. We begin by providing a basic overview of how academics have defined Great Powers, highlighting

some of the debates between major thinkers. It is important to note that we do not go into as much depth on the topic of Great Powers; the focus of this paper is not on Great Powers themselves, but buffers or buffer states in that context. We proceed to provide an overview of the different - and at times contradictory – definitions and uses of buffers laid out by authors in the field.

### **General Definitions of Great Powers**

The idea that certain states in the international system possess a special status is not a new concept. Specifically separating out particular states as “Great Powers”, however, dates to the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 (Berridge and Young 1988). There are a number of dimensions to the Great Power framework and different authors have used different criteria to define what a Great Power is; one basic assumption is the “existence of a collection of sovereign territorial states interacting with considerable frequency in an anarchic international environment” (Levy 1983, 19). Therefore, many of the authors writing on Great Powers are drawing on the realist tradition, in different forms. For the most part, the literature points to a single defining characteristic of a Great Power: military power. For some authors, military power is the only dimension needed to define a Great Power. (14). This view remains relevant in the modern day as well, with Mearsheimer (2001) writing that “[t]o qualify as a great power, a state must have sufficient military assets to put up a serious fight in an all-out conventional war against the most powerful state in the world”(3). Other scholars critique this view as being too simplistic, arguing that there are multiple dimensions which should be used to rank states to determine Great Power status. Waltz (1979) articulated the following five key metrics: “size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence”(131). An additional thread running through the literature is the argument that key to possessing Great Power status is formal or informal recognition. While military strength remains the fundamental dimension to define a Great Power, Levy (1983) writes that “equal perception and treatment of one another are among the most important criteria of Great Power rank, for perceptions determine behaviour” (17). The formal recognition of some Great Powers at the Congress of Vienna in 1814-1815 established a pattern continuing today of recognizing the Great

Powers by membership in conferences or international institutions (Berridge and Young 1988, 224–25).

## Conceptualisations and Definitions of Buffers

The buffer concept has been used in various manners in research since the first usage of the term buffer state in 1883 to describe Afghanistan (Chay and Ross 1986, 1). To guide the reader in this paper, we start off by providing features that most researchers base their individual definitions of the concept on - a most basic description is provided by Chay and Ross (1986), the editors of the first seminal collection of works on buffers: “[B]uffer refers to regions or zones situated between conflicting spheres of influence and whose primary function is to separate the conflicting sides and thus reduce the likelihood of physical (military) contact” (2). This definition can be applied to a state as well as any other geographical entity, e.g. numerous states or a portion of a state serving as a buffer. Mathisen (1971) states that buffers are “political fender serving to reduce the danger of conflict between its greater neighbours” (107). Others agree that their role or even existence is largely determined by the Great Powers surrounding them and without whose acceptance the buffer would not be able to serve this function (Fazal 2004, 2007; Jenkins 1986; Knudsen 1986; Maila 1986; Ziring 1986; Park 2016; Turmanidze 2009).

Partem (1983) acknowledges that “buffer state” is the most commonly used term, although he favours the term “buffer system”, as it implies the subordinate role of the buffer state in relation to the surrounding larger powers (4). Moreover, he defines buffer systems on three parameters; geography, capability distribution, and foreign policy orientation – which he later shows can be empirically verified in order to identify a given system as a buffer system (16).

The geography aspect of buffers is elaborated by a number of scholars. Although, Ross (1986) as a geographer stands out with his analysis of buffers regarding their physical conditions, others agree with the importance of topographical conditions (Fazal 2004; Kelly 1986). Ross (1986) establishes that most buffers in the 20th century share rugged territorial conditions while hosting transportation routes important to the surrounding rival powers and their population is often characterised by cultural heterogeneity (23). Regardless of the geographical makeup of a buffer, other scholars

disagree on the geographical location of buffers and Great Powers. Fazal (2004) strictly defines that buffers are “geographically located between two other states engaged in a rivalry, unless the rivals are separated by an ocean” (312), even if they are not immediate neighbours. This is helpful in analysing buffer states that are part of a larger buffer system. However, Ross’ (1986) definition seems to suggest that buffers should border Great Powers when he states that transportation routes important to them often pass the buffer (23). Other scholars have been blurrier in this part of the discussion, which might we see connected to Fazal’s (2004) argument that by siding with either the border or no border argument, the rate of excluded possible cases is high (321).

Next to geography, other characteristics of buffers have been pointed out; for a buffer state specifically, Chay and Ross (1986) define three crucial elements, namely that the respective state is small both in population and territory, at least two rival Great Power interests are at stake, and that the small state is geographically located between those Great Powers (2). Chay (1986) refines this concept by adding six more characteristics: the historical factor or psycho-cultural dimension; the form of neutrality the buffer possesses, the balance of power between the buffer and the rival powers; the independence of the buffer, related to its military power; how the buffer uses its limited choices of foreign policy and, related to the choice, the function the buffer fulfils: either being a barrier to conflict or a facilitator of war (193–97).

Mathisen (1971) provided a first distinction in the political status of buffers as neutral(ised) or allied/controlled buffers. While his categorisation lacks specific definitions, Kelly (1986) names shatterbelts, spheres of influence and neutral or independent political zones as the three possibilities of relations between the buffer and the rival powers (1986, 68). Maila (1986) offers a categorisation of neutrality from the viewpoint of the buffer’s level of sovereignty; his four dimensions include neutralisation, pragmatic neutrality, neutralism and non-alignment (33–34), of which the first one depends on the Great Powers instead of the buffers’ decision. The three other dimensions are differentiated by their legal status respectively.

Park (2016) reviews what buffers are and cites various authors (Mathisen 1971; Partem 1983; Spykman 1942) to portray a definitional discourse in the field and concludes that “strategic buffer space/states” are zones that are not natural barriers and thus easily accessible by sea or land (Park 2016, 5). Further, he draws in Cohen’s “shatterbelt” - which

is a “strategically oriented regions that are both deeply divided internally and caught up in the competition between great powers” (Cohen 2015 in Park 2016, 8). Knudsen (1986) does not concentrate on the characteristics of a buffer but on the buffer effect, which he defines as “degree of “resistance” of such smaller states to encroachments from the great powers”(87). Importantly, he focuses on both the buffer’s as well as the Great Powers’ actions by analysing the degree of symmetry of the Great Powers as well as their relationship with the buffer.

Turmanidze (2009) provides a lexical and scholarly review of different perspectives on what he terms the buffer concept (1–12). From that literature review, he establishes a point of definitional disagreement between scholars; while many authors (Spykman 1942; Chay and Ross 1986; Partem 1983; De Spiegeleire 1994; Rondeli 2003) define buffer states as necessarily independent and neutral, he contrasts with authors (Wight 1978; Mathisen 1971) that leave room for buffer states being satellites for a Great Power (7). Further, he argues that small/weak states “almost never make important foreign policy decisions without taking into account interests of great powers” (7). He suggests to distinguish buffers - which aim at preventing an escalation of conflicts - and quasi-buffers - which are one-sided and safeguard only one of the Great Powers involved (7–8).

Further, Katz (2017) from the vantage point of international law, takes out to provide a conceptual framework to classify different modes of buffer zones and hence to attempt to find a common ground for international relations and international law (1381–82). Others focus on analysing the effectiveness of the buffer in separating Great Powers (Jenkins 1986; Ziring 1986), and Beehner & Meibauer (2016) update the concept by viewing buffer zones as a tool of international conflict management; they draw on 20th and 21st century examples and conduct a case analysis of the present conflict in Syria and the buffer inside Syria called for by Turkey (255–65). They state that both definition and application of buffers can take many different forms, supporting their argument of versatility and ambiguity being a core of understanding the concept (253). Where Menon & Snyder (2017) are concerned with buffer zones and the conditions under which these succeed or fail in being a stabilizing factor of regions, Graham et al. (2017) are focusing more specifically on possible use of the buffer concept in the case of Ukraine in the present situation, seen from a US or western perspective; they use a basic definition of buffer



zones as areas separating more powerful states without being aligned with or controlled by them (Graham, Menon, and Snyder 2017, 108), and that buffers arise where all strong flanking powers assume the military and economic costs of conquering the buffer will most likely exceed the benefits (Menon and Snyder 2017, 966). In his analysis, Segbers (2016) adds two new layers - societal structure and actors, individual decision makers - to the classic realist structure of international anarchy, international organisations and sovereign nation states (Segbers 2016, 1). By adding global flows of capital and people he broadens the theoretical lens, e.g. institutionalism and neoclassical realism and tackles the lack of explanatory power he identifies in the state-centred approaches (4).

### **Role and Implications of Buffers for Great Powers**

Knudsen (1986) provides an overview of both the buffers' and the Great Powers' role in a buffer's effectiveness; the relationship between the Great Powers involved is important to maintaining a buffer: degree of Great Power power parity; extent to which the buffer region is equally valuable to both; likelihood of both powers to resist the other's attack on the buffer; and the cost involved for each Great Power to subdue the buffer (89–91). Two other variables concerning the relation between the Great Powers and the buffer contribute to the buffer effect: the degree of power disparity between the powers and the buffer and the buffer's commitment to its independence as well as its leadership's desire for freedom from Great Power interference (91). Part of Partem's (1983) interpretation of the buffer system backs up Knudsen's, but he also underlines the "deadly irony" the buffer finds itself in (10), similar to Fazal's (2007) "buffer states are born to lose" (95). The logic of the buffer system entails that neither of the rival Great Powers are capable of dominating the buffer system, but at the same time, the "added strategic utility" gained by a Great Power allying with the buffer state is still not sufficient to push the scales significantly in favour of one Great Power (Partem 1983, 10). In an all-out conflict, neither of the Great Powers would be able to afford it if the other were to take control of the buffer.

Great Powers have to account for the policies of the buffer itself, as Knudsen's (1986) variables imply and Tulchin (1986) confirms in his study of Uruguay as an active buffer state determining and supporting its fate as buffer (224). Some authors (Ziring 1986; Jenkins 1986; Partem 1983) disagree and underline that Great Powers eventually

are the reason for the buffer's existence and establish its purpose. Regardless, Maila (1986) and Kelly (1986) show that the influence of the Great Powers in the buffer's affairs depend on the level of its sovereignty and its status of neutrality: while compromised buffer sovereignty invites Great Power action on the buffer's ground, it can lead to different political outcomes. Great Powers exert most influence when they can neutralize a buffer (Maila 1986, 34) or establish the buffer as being a part of their sphere of influence (Kelly 1986, 68). The Great Power's influence decreases if the status of neutrality is legally established and neither Great Power manages to dominate the buffer (Maila 1986, 34). Adding to the debate, Park (2016) proposes four key variables which are relevant regarding conflicts within or over buffers: 1) balance of power among great powers, 2) relative stability of the contested buffer space, 3) (non-)existence of a credible third-party guarantor of security, and 4) prevailing ideologies (3). In contrast to Knudsen (1986), his focus is not on the maintenance of buffers but to uncover what determines the course of conflicts over and within buffers (Park 2016, 1–3). Furthermore, he elaborates on the role of strategic buffer space from a power and security perspective, stating that “[h]aving a strategic buffer means that an invading army has to march for a longer period before reaching a great power's core territory [...]” (6). Park applies his findings to advise U.S. policymaking by dissecting two contemporary strategic buffer zones in Great Power relations - Ukraine and Syria/Iraq (45–52). He continues to analyse possible future conflict escalations within strategic buffers of Korea and the Southern Caucasus (53–62).

Turmanidze (2009) concludes that buffer power cannot be measured by formula (26) and that the buffer status of a state is “perceptive and subjective phenomenon, determined by the personal attitude of an observer” (27). He draws on discussion on state and power definitions (27–28) and points to authors (De Spiegeleire 1994; Knudsen 1986) detailing different concepts, also in regards to Small States in Great Powers (Rothstein 1968; Keohane 1969; Handel 1990), in order to show (Turmanidze 2009, 29) factors that in his view can improve or diminish (conflict) buffer capacity (29–31). In regards to the implication of buffers for Great Powers, he states that a “weak area between two power poles can theoretically lead to one of the following outcomes” (35) - true buffer or division, partitioning into spheres of influence which is in line with his proposed typology of quasi-buffers (36).

Both Mouritzen & Wivel (2012) and Korolev (2015) disagree with the classical realist claim that the system level is the most helpful way to explain phenomena. They argue that the interstate level and the spatial dimension are perhaps more important, and should not be excluded from the analysis (Korolev 2015, 5). Mouritzen and Wivel (2012) describe Russia as a land power surrounded by a belt of buffer states (106), which, in the light of overwhelming US military power in the 2008 Russo-Georgian conflict, gives strength to the view that power is rooted in the spatial nature of the world itself and relates strongly to the territory it occupies, controls or influences (Korolev 2015, 7).

Korolev (2015) brings up Belarus, Kazakhstan and Moldova as examples of how former Soviet republics in the present-day world can be seen as buffer states in line with the Georgian example (6). Adding that Russia's "new frontiers" is an under-researched area, even inside Russia (p. 8). Graham et al. (2017) propose that when the conditions that favour establishing buffer zones or states are absent or no longer present, Great Powers need to consider alternatives to maintain their influence (114). These alternative pathways can resemble a buffer solution, but can also consist of other and more radical options by one or both sides (114–17).

This section introduced the concept of Great Powers as well as buffers and proceeded to elaborate the role and implications of buffers on Great Powers. The focus of this paper is on the latter, and we have shown that there are several points of debate when it comes to defining buffers and how scholars perceive their implications. As demonstrated above, their geographical location as well as the degree of neutrality are such disagreements. The debate on geographical location seems to have only two sides, namely that the buffer either must be bordering both Great Power rivals or not. The discussion on neutrality of buffers is more complex, as buffers could be completely neutral, partly neutral but independent, influenced by one Great Power or both and their degree of sovereignty could vary accordingly. As for the role and implication for Great Powers, it seems likely that the rival Great Powers cannot ignore the buffer's goals or foreign policy entirely if they want it to function as a buffer. They need to take into consideration not only their rival's action but also what the buffer might do if actions by one Great Power are seen undesirable - which is not in line with traditional realist fashion. If the buffer is strong enough to stand up against one power, the system might break down. Finally, beyond a simple definitional debate, some scholars argue that the entire

purpose of a buffer is to reduce conflict between Great Powers while others disagree. Even within the literature suggesting that buffers exist for that purpose, there is debate related to how effective buffers are in reducing conflict and increasing regional stability.

## **Review of Methodologies Deployed in Literature**

The following section elaborates on different methods used by scholars to research buffer states. Three methodological strands have been identified; the first one being theory-building research which relies on various examples, the second one being case studies of specific buffers, and the third being a small body of literature based on quantitative methodology. We start off by presenting work aimed at theory-building from which specific investigations of cases can depart. Secondly, we focus on different methods used in case studies as these present the vast bulk of literature reviewed. Lastly, we briefly treat the topic of quantitative case studies and other methodologies found.

### **Theory-building**

Underlying theory-building related to Great Powers comes primarily from the realist tradition (Mearsheimer 2001; Morgenthau 1948; Waltz 1979). Despite some differences between these various realist sub-disciplines, they broadly agree about the definition of what constitutes a great power. Given how fundamental the notion of Great Powers is to the realist tradition, any criticism or discussion of the concept is in some ways a discussion of realism as a whole – a project outside the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, there are certain basic logics underpinning the idea of a Great Power, the most salient of which are the assumptions that the state is the primary actor within this system and that the distribution of capabilities (military capacity being the key metric here) between states is the primary factor in state decision making.

With regard to theories related to buffer zones, Ross (1986) provides a geographer's approach in using historical statistics of buffers. He compares their physiography, to then extract the geographical conditions buffers often possess. Next to a statistical enumeration of states that have been buffers during the 20th century, he uses specific historical examples to underline his theory. Maila (1986), from a political scientist's view, examines the implications of being a buffer for a state's sovereignty: he

provides a conceptual analysis of neutrality in buffers and provides different categories thereof, while using Poland and Lebanon's history to confirm his theory.

While Fazal (2007) - not unlike many other authors - draws on realism by testing the balancing argument, she also considers the social constructivist claim about the relationship between state survival and international legitimacy. Drawing on constructivism, which argues that states and state actors socially construct their world so that certain actions are deemed acceptable and others not, Fazal (2007) argues that "states confer degrees of international legitimacy on other (aspiring) state actors" (4). This is also congruent with the norm against conquest in the post-1945 era (59).

Katz (2017) in an attempt to integrate theory from international relations and international law divides his work into two parts, concerning jus in buffer zones (legal rules inside) and jus ad buffer zones (legal justifications for) respectively. The findings crystallise into a new typology linked to this definition of buffer zones:

"a buffer zone is a region in which the territorial sovereign has, willingly or unwillingly, forfeited aspects of its autonomy due to external pressure or humanitarian intervention." (1378)

## Qualitative Methods

While theory-building work in the field remains general, and is not focused on buffers within specific regions or their respective relation to Great Powers, further methodologies deployed in the form of (historical) case studies present opportunities to trace the specific situation of individual buffer states as well as their respective involvement in Great Power relations and rivalries; e.g. between the US and its allies and Russia. These case analyses have different research goals which are briefly contrasted in the following; from a methodological stand-point there are three main approaches for case study methods: co-variational analyses – trying to find out if a specific causal factor and outcome co-vary – causal-process tracing – aimed at establishing the process of how causal factors lead to a specific outcome – and congruence analysis – mainly used for testing theories in the sense of how well they explain crucial cases. We provide examples of each case study approach utilised, though we did not identify work which was aimed specifically at theory-testing (congruence analysis). We aim to use this typology of case study methods to distinguish the methodologies found in the field, and based on this draw

conclusion on the respective (main) research goals formulated by researchers in relation to work on buffer states. As for combining case study methods, there is several options of doing so and each is aimed at supporting distinct (methodologic) research aims, such as increasing internal or external validity.

One commonly found research goal within the reviewed body of literature is that of typology-building (Kelly 1986; Chay 1986; Knudsen 1986; Partem 1983; Turmanidze 2009; Katz 2017; Park 2016; Fazal 2007, 2004). In the following, several examples have been chosen to illustrate how authors go about creating typologies and conceptualising buffers. e.g. Kelly (1986) establishes a categorisation of different forms of influence of the surrounding Great Powers on buffers. He uses these terms: shatterbelt, where Great Powers compete for control; sphere of influence, where one Great Power exercises control; and neutral or independent political zones, where the buffer is largely left alone by Great Power rivals (68). This typology enables a distinction in Great Power-buffer relations based on power and influence and in doing so aims at providing a common terminology or typology for scholars in the field to base on,

Chay's (1986) typology of nine characteristics of a buffer enables him to draw a broader picture as his typology goes beyond Great Power behaviour or relations to buffers. He includes both structural factors - e.g. a buffer's topography, location, the balance of power surrounding it- as well as functional factors-a buffer's foreign policy pattern and function. His goal is to move beyond a predominant focus on military power and capability of Great Powers on buffers as exemplarily demonstrated in Kelly's (1986) typology and to broaden the buffer conceptualisation and Great Power influence. He does so by including cultural capabilities of buffers in his analysis (Chay 1986, 193–95) Knudsen (1986) deviates from the Great Power focused view and provides a categorisation of different relations between buffers and Great Powers. His research goal is to measure the buffer effect of different constellation of power. In order to measure the buffer effect, Knudsen uses two types of variables. First, he uses variables related to symmetries between the Great Powers. These variables are the degree of power parity between the Great Powers; the degree of equality of salience of the buffer area to both; the probability that each Great Power would resist an attempt by the other to attack or intervene in the buffer area; and the apparent cost of subduing the buffer to each Great Power. The second set of variables relates to the control factor over the small state and

the strength of the small state and includes the degree of power disparity between the Great Powers and the small state as well as the buffer's leadership commitment to remaining independent (91).

Partem (1983), while mainly focused with defining and applying a general framework for identifying buffer systems, also employs Bueno de Mesquita's expected utility theory in order to show why and where a state would want/be able to initiate a conflict, thus further highlighting the buffer's dependency on the actions of its greater, rivalling neighbours (6–10).

Turmanidze (2009) draws on many of the predating works, as indicated before, and sets out to find a definition of buffer (state, zone, area) relating to his claim in the that the semantics of buffers remain unclear (1-4). His approach is at first a lexical, semantic and linguistic review of definitions across various dictionary and encyclopaedias (1-5); he then provides an excursion into natural sciences in respect to the term buffer and continues with a literature review of social science research publications on buffer state/zone and maps out definitions from the 1930s onwards (5–11).

Further, there are many authors in the field that are conducting case studies based on a buffer state, e.g. Tosches (1986), Jenkins (1986), Ziring (1986) and McColl (1986) present historical case studies on Albania, Afghanistan and Lebanon respectively, reconstructing the circumstances and events that lead to these states turning into buffers as defined in a majority of works and used in this review (a small state between big rival powers, preventing their direct contact). All authors use causal process tracing, they share the research goal of how the specific outcome, formation or creation of a buffer between Great Powers, in the specific cases was made possible. The findings are not to be generalised, as they do not increase external validity of a proposed storyline of buffer creation. Johns' (1986) investigation of South Africa is a special case of process tracing not fitting the mainstream concept of buffers. He counts South Africa as a regional power, which surrounds itself with a number of buffers against an enemy which is not another state but (militant) black nationalism (43–44). By analysing the South African case in detail, he demonstrates how the buffer concept can be adapted to a case which does not fit the initial basic criteria. Tosches, Jenkins and McColl present a detailed account of how their cases turned into buffer states as in the original concept, and they prove that the outcome for the buffer can be distinct: Albanians developed a strong sense of national

identity (Tosches 1986), whereas Lebanon to today experiences sectarian politics (McColl 1986). Johns, on the other hand, does not apply the given concept of buffer but widens it by using a special case without two rival states. He further uses the concept both internally and externally to South Africa, which confirms Knudsen's analysis that a buffer can be worked by just one Great Power. Turmanidze (2009) takes on the case of Georgia first from a historical point of view and then in contemporary times, closing with a scenario analysis of its possible future geopolitical role from Georgian, Russian and US perspectives (19–23). The historical approach serves the purpose of applying his proposed distinction of buffer and quasi-buffers in relation to the concept of neutrality he deems a necessary condition (19–21). His approach to studying Georgia as a case relates more to an interpretive causal process tracing; he takes into account the motives for different actors and the respective perspectives of Georgia, Russia and more broadly the West and not a rational case study methodology. Yet, is not rigorous in terms of building process chains and remains on an interpretive level.

While combining methods is not outside the earlier proposed methodologic typology for qualitative research, we will in the following point out examples from the reviewed works that combine different methodologies and relate back to how this is benefitting research in the field. Park (2016) sets out to analyse critical historical cases of conflicts within strategic buffers in different times and regions of the world - his selection is argued for with providing temporal and spatial variety to increase generalisability of his findings and conclusion (2–3). There are four such cases he delves into and analyses four factors he claims to be relevant for conflict dynamic in strategic buffers - the case of Belgium in 1830-31 represents an outlier from the general trend of conflict escalation he recognises throughout history. The remaining historical cases provide further insight of how his proposed factors play a role in conflict escalation (41). Park suggests action along the four dimensions that he had established and found relevant in his historical case studies. His findings in that regard are then applied to contemporary cases and related to U.S. policymaking - within the aforementioned case study framework, Park's research would fall under a combination of a (simplified) X-based covariational analysis - does a factor  $X_{1,2,3,4}$  play a role in bringing about Y - together with process-tracing - how specifically did all factors  $X_{1,2,3,4}$  lead to Y - in respect to reconstructing the historical cases.



Menon and Snyder (2017) aim to understand 1) when buffers fail/succeed the stabilisation goal, 2) what buffer management requires and 3) other solutions might be better - and lastly put all their findings to use when analysing the events in Ukraine post-2014 conflicts; they base their work on historic case studies (963). Their research design presents a multi-case/cross-case study with many independent variables for which they establish control (absence/presence) and then cluster the cases (964). Further, they establish a two-dimensional framework of “cohesion and capacity of buffer” and “offensive/defensive capacity of flanking powers” to cluster cases (965) - this falls into the methodologic approach of covariational analysis. They proceed to lay foundation for their discussion of Ukraine as a buffer by contributing to the buffer state and sphere of influence discussion (966–68) and elaborate on the factors related to buffer states achieving the goal of stabilisation (968–72). All this is done in a historical analysis of events and the focus on storylines - the findings from the covariational approach are then applied into causal process tracing. This combination relates back to the original research goal proposed; generating an understanding of causal relations of buffer success and failure. With the scope of case studies presented, the results could be taken up for generalisation in similar cases - and control variables to find such are provided, too.

Beehner & Meibauer (2016) employ a combination of a single case study with a more general conceptualisation drawing on a main case as well as from a number of examples. The case study is analysing Turkey’s role in establishing a buffer zone in the context of the civil war in Syria, and in specific the option of utilising the buffer in a more offensive manner than in the conventional understanding (249). Adding to the main case, a broad array of historical examples on the use and implications of buffers are employed in concluding that the success of buffer zones is uneven, from both a strategic and a humanitarian perspective (255). Mouritzen & Wivel (2012) are using a similar methodology, pivoting from the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 as the main case, but drawing in an extensive number of examples from contemporary Europe to substantiate the main argument of the necessity of employing a conceptual plurality in order to understand international relations (190).

## Quantitative Methods

While the general choice of methodology for authors concerned with buffer states deploy qualitative research methods, a small number of authors have used quantitative methods in their research. Quantitative methods permit the author to uncover patterns and test correlations, such as whether geography truly is the key determinant in defining a buffer state. However, the main weaknesses come to show when working with topics that are often harder to define. First of all, not all variables are easily quantifiable. For example, how does one measure the degree of nationalism in a given state? Secondly, while showing correlations, they often do not uncover the causal processes themselves, but rather hint at them. Quantitative analysis should therefore be seen as a supplement to the qualitative methods.

One author employing statistical analysis is Fazal (2007), she uses event history analysis to argue that buffer states, drawing on Partem's definition, are significantly (145%) more likely to die than non-buffer states (81; Partem 1983, 16). By coding historical data on buffer states as variables, such as alliances and capabilities, Fazal is able to use qualitative data, more precisely inferential statistics, and turn it into empirical predictions, which she later follows up with two case studies to further strengthen her argument (69–96).

## Additional Methods Deployed

Partem (1983), while mainly focused with defining and applying a general framework for identifying buffer systems, also employs Bueno de Mesquita's expected utility theory in order to show why and where a state would want/be able to initiate a conflict, thus further highlighting the buffer's dependency on the actions of its greater, rivalling neighbours (6–10). By adopting this approach, Partem is one of the few to utilise mathematical modelling to attempt to determine the probability of success in buffer conflicts - Turmanidze (2009) draws on these findings in his coverage of the buffer system. Dziubinski, et. al. (2017) utilize a game theory approach to model conflict outcomes within a network of nodes representing states. By formulating the network such that two 'powerful' states can only reach one another via a buffer state, the modelling was able to predict the impact of buffer states on conflict likelihoods and outcomes (1). This

simplified model yielded the conclusion that if a particular state represents the only route for conquest, it can contribute to peace if the conflict cost for an invader exceeds a certain threshold (24–25). The authors acknowledge that the model is “highly stylized”, but suggest that “this simplicity allows us to develop ... results based on the interplay between resources, technology, and the patterns of connections” (28). Overall, this methodology departs into a different direction as most works in the field - the *mathematical approach* provides authors with another way to conceptualise and test theories related to the political and military environment, providing insight into probability of conflict and the behaviour of actors within a given system.

## Gaps and Unanswered Questions

This section will elaborate on gaps in the literature we have reviewed. Overall, our reading of this literature has found a diverse profusion of approaches, theoretical frameworks, definitions, and typologies. As one might expect in such a varied body of work, we have identified multiple gaps which merit further research. We focus on three primary gaps, which will be elucidated in greater detail below. Following is presented a brief list of other potential directions for future research which we do not expand on further in this paper: first, there are many disagreements related to what characteristics of states are fundamental to the concept of being a buffer - one debate in particular regarding the necessity of buffers being neutral (Turmanidze 2009; Wight 1978; Maila 1986); second, there is a dearth of research dealing with the cultural and ideological aspects of buffers with respect to great powers (Park 2016; Johns 1986; Chay 1986); and finally, theory-building and qualitative methods (primarily historical case studies) comprise the significant majority the methodological approaches taken by researchers, suggesting a need to enhance external validity through the use of quantitative or further qualitative (e.g. least-likely cases) methodology.

We identify three primary research gaps. Our structure lays out the nature of the gap, explains why it is relevant, and proposes future research to “fill” the gap in question. The gaps in summary: first, the fact that much of the research on buffers has a temporal bias towards historical analysis without significantly treating more contemporary events such as the changing roles of post-Cold War Great Powers. A second gap we have

identified is the predominance of realist perspective among researchers in the field (Chay and Ross 1986; Fazal 2007, 2004; Turmanidze 2009). Finally, an almost universal preference among researchers is to identify buffers based on inherent qualities of the state, yet very few of these definitions are universally applicable; we therefore suggest a new approach to defining buffer states based on the way that they are operationalised by other powers.

### **The Change in the Roles of Great Powers - Quo Vadis Buffer State?**

Although the international status of Great Powers has remained relatively unchanged since the end of the Cold War (except for China's move towards more influence), in light of events of the past decade and the recent election of Donald Trump as president of the United States of America, some have suggested that American interventionism and US hegemony more broadly are in decline (Graham, Menon, and Snyder 2017; Menon and Snyder 2017). What this will mean with regards to global governance remains to be seen, as will the degree to which the US will retreat from its current position of primacy in the global hierarchy which is often attributed to it (Graham, Menon, and Snyder 2017). Simultaneously, recent events in Ukraine suggest an escalation of the long-simmering tension between the US and Russia, arguably ushering in a renewal of power politics. In the words of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, this seems "so twentieth century" (Menon and Snyder 2017, p.962). This has led to a revival of the discussion of whether it is feasible or desirable to establish and make use of (new) buffers between the two Great Powers and their spheres of influence respectively. One prominent example of this discussion revolves around the idea of turning Ukraine a buffer state, which has been debated both in the press (Drezner 2015; Valeriano 2015; Mearsheimer 2014) and in academic works (Menon and Snyder 2017; Park 2016; Segbers 2016). Some of the latter do not believe Ukraine would serve as a stable buffer, pointing to the unfavourable characteristics of the country (Menon and Snyder 2017, 966; Segbers 2016, 4–5). Korolev (2015) underlines the unstable and often complex nature of the post-Soviet space as a hindrance to geopolitical stability as well as a topic for further scholarly research (12). Yet, Park (2016) for example argues for an implementation of the Minsk II agreement, respectively turning Eastern Ukraine into a buffer zone and ensuring

neutrality in the long run - meaning no further eastern expansion of NATO and military alliances (46–48).

### Why is this relevant?

Given research suggesting that buffer states are highly impacted by and dependent upon decisions made by involved Great Powers (Partem 1983, 10), a change in the roles and relative power of Great Powers therefore potentially carries implications; not just for already existing buffer states, but also for states that do not currently hold buffer status (Menon and Snyder 2017; Partem 1983). As noted by MacDonald and Parent:

*“[G]reat powers whose economic and military capacities decline often retrench leaving space for the emergence of buffer states”* (MacDonald and Parent 2011 quoted in Menon and Snyder 2017, 967)

In turn, this could lead to a greater chance of state death for those states, as seen in Fazal’s (2007) quantitative analysis (86). Furthermore, even discounting the higher risk of state death for buffer states, buffer status has implications for foreign and domestic policy of the states involved (Chay 1986; Maila 1986; Turmanidze 2009). In more contemporary literature, scholars are starting to look into a change in the roles and configurations of the Great Powers as a point of departure for analysis in a buffer context (Beehner and Meibauer 2016; Katz 2017; Park 2016).

The consequences of a change in existing Great Power relations for buffer states, as well as the prospect for the creation of more buffer states, should be addressed by contemporary scholars. Given the recent events within the international political landscape - the possible retrenchment of a global hegemon like the United States; the prospect of further NATO expansion; the increasing integration of European defence policy as evidenced by the recent implementation of the “permanent structured cooperation” policy; and given Russian assertiveness as evidenced by its actions in Abkhazia, Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine - the situation of (potential) buffers should be addressed as part of further studies. As these changes roil the field, so theories and ideas need to be revisited and checked for their validity in this new context.

### How can the gap be filled in?

Up-to-date research on the roles and implications of buffer states should be instigated, as well as on alternatives to creating buffers as a tool of geopolitical stability.

Particularly the West/Russian rivalry should be targeted as a topic for future research, given its contemporary nature as well as the peculiar state of the buffer area (post-Soviet states) (Korolev 2015; Menon and Snyder 2017). With first scholars embarking on research projects regarding this issue - researchers from Columbia University are currently working on a research project "Rimlands, Buffer Zones, and Great Power Rivalry" - more comprehensive work should be conducted to determine potential future buffers based on the changing roles of Great Powers. Given that much of the literature identifies buffers "after the fact", having insight into where buffers will likely emerge in the future has important policy implications. Further, more attention should be paid specifically to the role and implications of buffers in Great Power relations so that potential future buffers have a better toolkit for dealing with their new status.

### **Research Dominated by Realist Perspectives**

As we have seen throughout the literature review, most scholars see buffer states through the lenses of realist and neorealist theoretical approaches, be it purposefully or not. Realist scholars operate using certain basic assumptions: the world is anarchic, every state wishes to promote their own position in the world, states are rational actors, and military power and capabilities are the single strongest indicator of a state's position in the world. Moreover, most of the approaches to measure and analyse buffer states tools and possibilities in Great Power rivalry are internal and usually limited to the buffer system as a whole, such as the balancing argument, neutrality, leaning to one side, economic development, and level of democracy. Although a number of texts are not explicit about employing realist theoretical framework, it often comes across as the dominating theoretical assumption anyhow, due to using Great Powers as central building blocks.

However, as Fazal's analysis (2007) - to her own surprise - finds that international legitimacy is the biggest factor for buffer states to avoid state death, indicating that soft power may play a bigger role in the buffer system than realist frameworks would anticipate (83). After all, a fundamental precondition for a buffer to function is its survival as a sovereign state. Fazal encourages further research into the hypothesis that more legitimate states are more likely to survive, particularly as an independent variable, as

that could also address the problem that recognition might be more likely to be granted to states that Great Powers have no intention of conquering (95). Segbers (2016) also touches upon the limitations of using a realist framework in working with the concept of a buffer state. While realism is helpful in understanding state-to-state relations, he believes it falls short in explaining global power flows as well as domestic dynamics in the societies involved in a rivalry (3), thus underscoring the need for other theoretical lenses than realism. Among the recent authors included, a more or less implicit adaptation of a realist theoretical platform is seen. Segbers therefore proposes analysing the concept of buffers through a broader lens than realism by viewing the state as just one aspect of the equation (3–4). Mouritzen & Wivel (2012) in their research of the Russo-Georgian conflict, like Segbers, suggest expanding the analysis beyond realism. They argue that Waltzian neorealism suffers from a certain "spatial blindness" (7), and that a focus on the "systemic level" misses nuances which an inter-state or even intra-state analysis would reveal (191).

#### *Why is this relevant?*

This gap is relevant for the debate for two main reasons. First of all, it seems that the physical and political landscape in which buffer states operate are under change. The role of soft power and legitimacy in securing the sovereignty of buffer states seems to be more vital than ever before. Actively learning how to maintain a stable buffer system in the 21st century through somewhat untraditional means (e.g. soft power) could have implications for how we observe Great Power rivalry today. Secondly, given that Fazal (2007) has identified the salience of state legitimacy to buffer survival rates, it seems likely that other variables which are not considered by realists may have explanatory power in relation to understanding buffers. A reliance on traditional realist assumptions and measurements may cause scholars to miss important pieces of the puzzle.

#### *How can the gap be filled in?*

The debate on the role and implications of buffer states in great power rivalry could arguably benefit from further considerations of the way that factors beyond simple realist dimensions - institutions, organisations and cultures, for example - interact with the buffers as well as in the context of Great Power rivalry. What we therefore propose are studies conducted from different theoretical perspectives which would seek to establish a

comparative view of non-realist variables on for example the formation and maintenance of buffers and their relevance from a non-realist perspective. Furthermore, research should also be conducted from a social-constructivist point of view, taking into consideration the ways in which the buffer itself constructs its role and the agency it has to determine its position.

### **Definitional Disagreement on Buffers**

The review of the many definitions and conceptualisations of what are buffers, buffer states/zones and again what roles and implications they have for Great Powers earlier in this paper shows an ongoing debate amongst scholars in this field. We argue that because there have been so many states, regions, systems, and zones identified as buffers, no clear definition has emerged which can account for the multiple and varied types of buffers. The absence of a grand theory, paired with the many competing typologies which claim universal applicability, further fuels this debate.

Much of the disagreement is on their geographical location (Johns 1986; Fazal 2004) and degree of neutrality (Kelly 1986; Maila 1986; Mathisen 1971) as well as the necessity of neutrality (Wight 2005; Turmanidze 2009). While these definitions do not provide us with a general starting point on analysing buffers in a consistent way, they share that they pose the question of definition from the buffers' viewpoint. By choosing this perspective, the predetermination of analysis *ex ante* excludes certain cases: e.g., by using a geographical definition such as Ross', buffers that do not possess a rugged landscape; a heterogeneous culture and do not host important transportation routes might not be classified as buffers although they serve buffer functions. By defining buffers based on a certain type of inherent characteristic within the buffer and thereby excluding any cases falling outside of that narrow definition, scholars limit their own ability to analyse and understand how buffers function and what role they play.

#### *Why is this relevant?*

Changing the angle of defining buffers can help scholars move beyond this decade-old debate to embark on more research that deals with current events and focuses more on outcome-explaining and possibly policymaking advice. If the definition was built from the viewpoint of the Great Powers and how buffers fulfil functions for them and their



interests, research would have a different starting point than with what currently seems to be the approach: instead of looking at the buffer itself and explaining the phenomenon, a far more useful way of defining buffers would be to focus on the function that buffers serve.

*How can the gap be filled in?*

We do not see a benefit in finding a one-fits-all definition of buffers based solely on characteristics - as previously pointed out, the variety and complexity of cases would demand a compromised generalised definition and would disregard many of the fine details of the respective settings within the cases. However, as buffers serve a function to Great Powers, scholars argue that Great Powers eventually determine buffers' purposes (Knudsen 1986; Tulchin 1986; Ziring 1986), a definition from neither a Great Power perspective nor from a buffer's perspective but one focused on the utility of the buffer for Great Powers might be a beneficial solution; and typologies derived from such a definition would then not be subject to the above described limitations of what is a buffer and what is not. Our proposal thus is, that scholars from different backgrounds join forces to commence such a utility- or function-based definition of buffers to establish a definition based on the same.

To summarise, the gaps identified are of a theoretical and temporal nature respectively. The first gap identified was of a temporal nature, as it relates to the contemporary change in Great Power relationships precipitated by both American and Russian policy shifts. Further research into contemporary role, implications, and future of buffer states in Great Power Rivalry, and particularly in the Eurasian region, should prove feasible in explaining the geopolitical scene today.

A second gap was a more theoretical bias towards realism in research on buffers. This has in many ways led to neglecting research in the role of attributes often called soft powers. Legitimacy, for instance, has shown to be greater factor in buffer systems than previously anticipated in the general discourse on buffer states. Further research in this area should be conducted from different theoretical perspectives, applying concepts beyond realism and attempting to determine other factors impacting buffers.

A final gap identified was related to the fundamental approach to defining buffers. Rather than basing definitions on inherent characteristics of buffers, we propose research to define buffers based on their utility to Great Powers and the function they serve. This would allow new typologies to be developed which do not unnecessarily exclude buffers from analysis based on arbitrary characteristics.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we set out to review the literature related to the role and implications of buffers in the context of Great Power relations. In the first section, we laid out both the foundational theories related to what constitutes a Great Power and the body of writing related to buffers, finishing with a review of the literature that specifically discusses the interaction between the two concepts and the conclusions which have been drawn by the authors. In our second section, we provided an overview of the methodologies deployed by these authors and identified three primary categories of methodological approach, including basic theory-building, a variety of qualitative approaches, and a small body of work based on quantitative methods. Finally, we concluded with a discussion of the possible future avenues of research based on our review of the literature.

Our first task was to define what constitutes a Great Power. At its core, Levy states that Great Powers are “a collection of sovereign territorial states interacting with considerable frequency in an anarchic international environment” (Levy 1983). Military power is frequently understood to constitute the most important characteristic of a Great Power (Mearsheimer 2001), though other major scholars critique that as being too simplistic a view (Waltz 1979). A final important element in constituting a Great Power has to do with questions of international recognition (Levy 1983).

The review of literature on buffers yielded a large and diverse group of ideas. A first major discussion within the literature is geographical: many authors argue that buffers must be physically located between - and usually bordering - rival Great Powers (Chay and Ross 1986; Fazal 2004; Partem 1983). Treating the topic of geography slightly differently, it has been suggested that the state or region itself must have particular geographical features such as mountainous topography in order to qualify as a buffer (Kelly 1986; Ross 1986). Some also consider the existence of a Great Power rivalry with

competing strategic interests to be of primary importance in determining what should be considered a buffer (Chay and Ross 1986; Segbers 2016).

Yet even among authors who agree on certain criteria there is disagreement on others. Restricting the definition of buffers to 'states' is a fairly common thread within the literature (Chay and Ross 1986; Fazal 2004), but others conceptualise of the idea in a larger sense, suggesting such terms as a 'buffer system' (Partem 1983), or buffer 'zones' (Menon and Snyder 2017), with slightly different meanings and connotations. A number of authors consider the idea of neutrality to be key in defining a buffer (Maila 1986; Segbers 2016), but Turmanidze (2009) argues that the degree of neutrality is an insufficient criterion to define buffers and Mathisen (1971) allows for the concept of a neutral buffer as well as an aligned buffer.

From the perspective of the role and implications of buffers for Great Powers, some scholars view buffers as being tools to increase security for neighbouring Great Powers (Park 2016; Partem 1983) - or at the very least to reduce the risk of conflict between them (Beehner and Meibauer 2016; Chay and Ross 1986; Menon and Snyder 2017). Several authors make note of the topic of buffer foreign policy autonomy, with certain scholars characterizing the range of options as very limited due to the influence of the relevant Great Powers (Chay 1986; Partem 1983) while others view buffers as having a larger role in determining their own fates (Knudsen 1986; Tulchin 1986). Maila (1986) and Kelly (1986) take this conversation further by arguing that the degree of influence which a Great Power has on buffers depends primarily on the level of sovereignty and neutrality enjoyed by the buffer. We conclude the theory review by highlighting what Turmanidze (2009) noted, namely that the buffer status of a state is really quite subjective.

Within the literature discussed above, a number of methodological approaches are taken by the authors to draw conclusions. Certain authors are focused primarily on building basic theory, in particular the application of realist thinking to the concept of buffers (Chay and Ross 1986; Park 2016; Turmanidze 2009). While realism is the main underlying theory informing later discussions of buffers, Fazal (2007) also draws in constructivist ideas related to international legitimacy for her discussion of buffers. Many authors have applied themselves to the work of typology building in an attempt to map out the different types of buffers (Chay 1986; Fazal 2007; Knudson 1986).

Qualitative methodologies, deployed in case studies, were found to be the most common approach. Some authors utilize causal process tracing techniques to examine single cases of buffers throughout history and determine how those cases came to have buffer status (Jenkins 1986, McColl 1986, Tosches 1986, Ziring 1986). Other authors utilise a covariational analysis for the purpose of determining if a causal factor and expected outcome differ (Menon and Snyder 2017; Park 2016). These studies draw upon a larger number of cases and attempt to establish patterns of expected outcomes based on the specific circumstances in the various buffer cases they identify.

Far fewer authors utilized strictly quantitative methodology during studies of buffers. The only study we found which falls in this category is Fazal's (2007), which utilizes extensive data coded from qualitative sources and the use of event history analysis (a type of inferential statistics) to argue that buffers are significantly more likely than non-buffers to suffer "state death" (81). Some few authors utilized mathematical modelling and game theory to gain a deeper insight into buffers (Dziubinski 2017; Partem 1983), but it was not a sizeable selection of the literature.

Based on the above review of theory and methodology, we identified three primary gaps in the literature which could prove fruitful avenues for future research. First, we identify a lack of recent discussion of buffers in light of the changing roles of post-Cold War great powers, in particular the United States (Menon and Snyder 2017; Segbers 2016). Moving from an essentially hegemonic system to one with a larger number of poles requires that old assumptions be re-examined, and that new research take place. A second gap we identified is related to the predominance of realism in the body of literature on buffers. While we do not disagree that such a tradition can be useful in understanding and discussing buffers, there is an opportunity to consider other dimensions than military power and state-centric balancing, as Fazal (2007) did briefly. Finally, there is a strong preference among researchers to base the definition of the buffer concept in inherent qualities of a state, yet few of these definitions have been found to be universally applicable. Given the profusion both of definition as well as the lack of a definitive list of buffers, we suggest a new approach to defining buffer states, based on the way that they are operationalised by other powers around them.

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\*Page count: 1.248