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Minor Powers, Alliances, And Armed Conflict: Some Preliminary Patterns¹

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review research on formal alliances, with a focus on alliance policies of so-called “minor powers,” often also referred to as “small states.” Specifically, we will address the following two questions: First, what are some sources of minor-power alliance commitments? Or, what are some benefits minor powers can expect from formal alliance ties? Second, what are some consequences of minor-power alliance commitments in terms of armed conflict? Or, are minor powers with formal alliance connections more or less likely than those without such bonds to become involved in militarized disputes and wars? Before dealing with these particular questions, we will first define minor powers and alliances by distinguishing the former from major powers and the latter from alignments and coalitions. Here we will also differentiate briefly between collective defense and collective security.

Definitions

Minor Powers

Following scholarly consensus, Small and Singer (1982) distinguish among major and minor powers by referring to the following states as major powers: Austria-Hungary from 1816 to 1918; China from 1950 on; France from 1816 to 1940 and from 1944 on; Germany or Prussia from 1816 to 1918, from 1925 to 1945, and from 1990 on; Italy or Sardinia from 1860 to 1943; Japan from 1895 to 1945 and from 1990 on; Russia or the USSR from 1816 to 1917 and from 1922 on; the United Kingdom from 1816 on; the United States from 1899 on. Minor powers are all those states that are not on this list for the given years.

Although the operational definition of major and minor powers could be more specific beyond intercoder reliability, the major powers identified by Small and Singer make up an oligarchy of quite interdependent states that, during the aforementioned periods, tend to have interests and capabilities extending far beyond their borders. Besides, the Correlates of War project’s data on national material capabilities reveal for the 1816-1990 era that the average military personnel, military expenditures, energy consumption, iron and steel production, total population, and urban population of major powers exceed those of minor powers by ratios of respectively about 12:1, 23:1, 16:1, 14:1, 6:1, and 8:1. Both scholarly agreement and empirical evidence suggest that minor powers can be defined as states whose diplomatic and material resources are so limited that their leaders focus mostly on the protection of their territorial integrity rather than on the pursuit of more far-reaching global objectives.

1 The authors gratefully acknowledge the research assistance of Michael Gerard, Alex Gomez, and Susumu Suzuki.

Alliances

According to several scholars of international politics, one of the major drawbacks of the existing alliance literature is the absence of any overall consistent theoretical framework (e.g., Burgess and Moore, 1972; Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan, 1973). As Bueno de Mesquita and Singer (1973) as well as Ward (1982) note, a key impediment to theory building in alliance research is the lack of clarity about what constitutes an alliance. These authors suggest that one way of achieving greater conceptual clarity is to point out how alliances are distinct from such alternative forms of international bonds as alignments and coalitions. Drawing mostly on Bueno de Mesquita and Singer as well as on Ward, let us briefly differentiate among alignments, coalitions, and alliances involving sovereign states.

An alignment is usually understood as any general commitment to cooperation or collaboration. By implication, its objectives tend to be broad and vague rather than narrow and explicit. Since alignments may involve different states across a variety of military, economic, political, and cultural issues, their memberships are likely to be overlapping and crosscutting. An example of an alignment is any voting bloc within the General Assembly of the United Nations.

A coalition is characterized by the commitment of two or more states to coordinate their behavior and policies in order to perform particular functions or pursue specific goals. Unlike alignments, coalitions tend to focus on a single military or non-military issue, which implies that states cannot be in overlapping or crosscutting coalitions across different issues or concerns. An example of a coalition is that among the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union during World War Two.

An alliance is based on a written, mostly voluntary, formal agreement, treaty, or convention among states pledging to coordinate their behavior and policies in the contingency of military conflict. The more aggressive an external enemy, or the more serious a military threat, the more cohesive a formal alliance (Liska, 1962). Unlike either alignments or coalitions, alliances are concerned primarily with issues limited to military security affairs. The degree of overlapping and crosscutting in alliance bonds depends largely on whether military security encompasses a variety of not only military aspects but also such non-military concerns as trade or human rights. The predominant goal of alliances is to guarantee each signatory's integrity and security on the basis of collective military defense.

According to Small and Singer (1969), there are three basic types of formal military alliances. First is a defense pact, which requires its signatories to intervene with military force on behalf of any alliance partner(s) engaged in armed hostilities. Second is a non-aggression/neutralty treaty, in which the signatories pledge not to resort to military action against any alliance partner(s). Third is an entente, where the signatories merely agree to consult one another in the event of military interactions. Probably the most frequently cited example of a defense pact is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949. An infamous example of a non-aggression/neutralty treaty is the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939. A good example of an entente is the British-French Entente Cordiale of 1904.

As Small and Singer point out, several general commitments are not considered formal military alliances. First are the charters of global or quasi-global international governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, or their affiliated specialized agencies. To these, we could add the charters of regional IGOs such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Second are treaties of guarantee which are agreed to by all states concerned with a particular issue. An example here is the 1960 Greek-Turkish guarantee of Cyprus. Third are agreements or conventions laying out general rules of international conduct or state behavior, such as the Geneva Conventions.

Fourth are arrangements for "mutual security," like the Spanish-American Treaty, which deal exclusively with bases, financial aid, and training programs. Fifth are unilateral and asymmetric security guarantees, such as the 1951 Japanese-American security treaty, in which only one party expresses its commitment to protect the other.

Collective Defense and Collective Security

A formal military alliance usually has the purpose of collective defense, which means that its members pool their capabilities and attempt to make a collective effort to protect one another against possible military aggression by a clearly specified adversary outside the alliance. Very often, however, an alliance offers not only collective defense but also serves the function of collective security. Under collective security, allies protect one another against possible military aggression by any one potential adversary within the same alliance. The differentiation between collective defense and collective security may be illustrated by the example of NATO. During the Cold War, NATO was mostly associated with collective defense against possible military aggression led by the Soviet Union, a clearly specified adversary outside the North Atlantic alliance. It should also be noted, though, that NATO also provided, and still provides, collective security against possible military aggression by any one potential adversary among its signatories. Given that German armed aggression has culminated in two world wars, NATO has played a critical role in protecting its signatories against the possibility of renewed German militarism while at the same time protecting the security interests of its member Germany.

Having defined minor powers and alliances as well as collective defense and collective security, let us now turn to our review of alliance research. This review will be divided into seven sections. Each section starts with a summary of conjectures and/or empirical evidence and then derives a brief implication with respect to minor-power alliance policies.

Sources and Consequences of Minor-Power Alliance Commitments

Domestic Welfare, Military Preparedness, and Alliance Commitments

Summary: One of the most critical functions of sovereign states is to secure their territories and populations against foreign military aggression. To this end, states have usually relied on some combination of their own armaments and alliance commitments promising military assistance from outside their boundaries. States that are unable to mobilize significant resources and political support for military preparedness and/or that value domestic welfare over foreign policy autonomy or independence may have a strong incentive to entrust their security with promises of allied support (Altfeld, 1984; Morrow, 1993; Sorokin, 1994).

Implication: Minor powers are likely to fall into the latter category because their rather limited capability pools – limited at least in comparison with major powers – often do not allow them to divert significant resources from domestic welfare to military preparedness.

Security-Autonomy Tradeoffs and Alliance Commitments

Summary: According to Morrow (1991), alliances are often based on a tradeoff or exchange between "security," or the ability to preserve the status quo, and "autonomy," or the opportunity to bring about status quo change. It is such a tradeoff that helps to account more for asymmetric alliance ties, involving states of different power status, than for symmetric alliance bonds, involving states of the same power status. Power status here is based on the

Correlates of War project's identification of major and minor powers, with the United States and the Soviet Union classified as superpowers since 1945. An asymmetric alliance is a contract in which a major power, or superpower, takes on the responsibility for a minor power's security by pledging to support it (or at least not to assist its adversaries) in the contingency of military conflict. In return, the major power, or superpower, gains autonomy or influence over the minor power's foreign policy decision-making process. Both Morrow and Bennett (1997) provide evidence in support of the security-autonomy tradeoff model.

Implication: Minor powers may seek alliances in order to increase their security on the basis of major power guarantees to protect their territories and populations against military aggression. By contrast, major powers, or superpowers, may be interested in alliances with minor powers not so much to defend their own territories and populations but to expand their military and foreign policy influence or deny such influence to other states.

Nonmilitary Alliance Benefits

Summary: Following Olson's (1965) perspective on public goods and collective action, Olson and Zeckhauser (1966) argue that the more powerful a state the greater its burden within an alliance. Put differently, major powers contribute disproportionately more to an alliance than their minor-power allies, meaning that the latter benefit from opportunities of free riding on the alliance shares committed by their major-power partners. This argument rests on at least two assumptions. First, alliance-based military security is a public good that is (1) available to all alliance members if it is offered to any one ally and (2) cannot be withheld from any one alliance signatory. Second, the more powerful a state, the greater its influence within an alliance and, hence, the greater its value for an alliance, as reflected in a willingness to make disproportionate contributions.

As Rothstein (1968) suggests, for minor powers, alliances have increasingly become means not only to acquire essential military benefits but also to achieve various nonmilitary objectives, and, indeed, there is empirical evidence that an important nonmilitary alliance benefit is increased trade among allies (Gowa and Mansfield, 1993; Gowa, 1994).

Implication: After the end of the Cold War, minor powers such as Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary may have sought membership in NATO to strengthen their newly democratic regimes and to increase their trade with states in North America and Western Europe. Besides, NATO membership for Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary may be a first step towards admission to the European Union.

Alliance Aggregation and the Loss of Diplomatic Flexibility

Summary: Singer and Small (1968) as well as Wayman (1984) point out that, in the twentieth century, increased alliance aggregation and bipolarity are associated with an increased amount of war. This may be due to reductions in interaction opportunities and reinforcements of existing hostilities with further animosity, improvements in attention allocation and decisional certainty, as well as increases in structural clarity (Deutsch and Singer, 1964; Singer, 1989).

Implication: Participation in alliances may decrease minor powers' diplomatic flexibility to deal with foreign policy crises without escalation to all-out warfare.

Alliance Reliability

Summary: In his examination of wartime alliance reliability, Sabrosky (1980) finds that, although members of alliances are more likely to fight alongside than against their alliance partners, they are most likely to remain aloof when one of their partners becomes involved in an inter-state war. Specifically, formal allies fight alongside one another, remain neutral, and fight against each other in respectively 27%, 61%, and 12% of all war-performance opportunities. Members of defense pacts are more likely to assist their allies than members of ententes while members of non-aggression treaties are least likely to honor their alliance commitments, and even tend to fight more often against than in support of their alliance partners. In the critical event of an inter-state war, all-minor power alliances are as likely or even more likely to be honored than all-major power ones while alliances including both major and minor powers are least likely to be honored in such an event. According to Siverson and King (1980), a state is most likely to join its allies in an inter-state war when its alliances are defense pacts, many of the state's allies are at war, the belligerent allies are minor powers, and the state has many alliances with only few alliance partners.

In the absence of concrete complementary agreements on military bases and combat troops, military logistics and training personnel, as well as military equipment and technology, formal alliance ties may be nothing more than empty promises without further substantiation. Hence, it would not be surprising that alliance commitments are honored in little more than one fourth of all war-performance opportunities. Furthermore, states may find it easier to justify and mobilize both domestic and international political support for allies victimized as targets of armed aggression than for allies responsible for themselves initiating military action. In other words, the impact of alliances and other international security guarantees on support for states in military conflict may depend on a previous selection of those states as armed conflict targets or initiators. According to Bueno de Mesquita (2000), a serious selection problem is that the most reliable alliances may not be observed and tested because they succeed in preventing military aggression. Potential aggressors may decide not to attack potential targets because they are certain that the targets' allies will honor their alliance commitments (see also Smith, 1995). Hence, observing and testing alliance reliability may be as problematic as observing and testing the success of deterrence.

Implication: Alliance reliability seems to be a "mixed bag," meaning that minor powers cannot be certain that allies will honor their alliance commitments in the event of armed conflict or war.

Territorial Settlement Treaties

Summary: Gibler (1996) shows that territorial settlement treaties, i.e., alliances that help to end territorial disputes among their signatories, are more likely than all other alliances to reduce the incidence of war. Furthermore, Gibler (1997) presents results leading to the conclusion that territorial settlement treaties help rival states to manage military conflict by resolving disputes over territorial issues.

Implication: The impact of territorial settlement treaties on armed conflict management, reduction, and even prevention may be particularly relevant to minor powers because they are more likely than major powers to have disputes over territories. This is so because the territorial borders of minor powers have often been drawn arbitrarily by major powers either following a war or as a consequence of de-colonization. An example of the former is the creation of new states in Central and Eastern Europe by the Treaty of Versailles following World War One. An example of the latter is the creation of new states in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia as a consequence of the dissolution of the British, French, and other colonial

empires. After the end of the Cold War, territorial settlement treaties may help to prevent armed conflict over territory between such minor powers as Hungary and Slovakia or Hungary and Romania.

Bilateral and Multilateral Alliance Commitments; Defense Pacts, Non-Aggression/Neutrality Treaties, and Ententes

Summary: Krause (Work in Progress) finds that major powers are more likely to initiate militarized disputes against bilateral allies than against states to which they have no alliance ties. By contrast, major powers are less likely to initiate militarized disputes against multilateral allies than against states to which they have no alliance bonds. Apparently, multilateral alliance commitments are more conducive to collective security than bilateral ones.

Krause notes further that major powers are more likely to initiate militarized disputes against allies in non-aggression/neutrality treaties than against states to which they have no alliance ties. By contrast, major powers are less likely to initiate militarized disputes against allies in ententes than against states to which they have no alliance bonds. Major powers are only insignificantly less likely to initiate militarized disputes against allies in defense pacts than against states to which they have no alliance commitments. Apparently, ententes are more conducive to collective security than defense pacts and non-aggression/neutrality treaties.

Implication: It seems that minor powers can expect collective security to be most successful in terms of armed conflict prevention if it is based on multilateral ententes. An advantage of multilateral over bilateral alliance commitments is that they may help to increase the security of minor powers while allowing them to maintain a certain degree of foreign policy flexibility. This is so because minor powers in multilateral alliances can form intra-alliance coalitions with third alliance partners and are thus not entirely dependent on any one particular ally. An advantage of ententes over defense pacts and non-aggression/neutrality treaties is that they allow minor powers to maintain a certain degree of foreign policy flexibility while providing them with opportunities to consult with allies in the event of military interactions. This is so for at least two reasons. First, unlike defense pacts, ententes do not require their signatories to intervene with military force on behalf of any alliance partner(s) engaged in armed hostilities. Second, unlike non-aggression/neutrality treaties, ententes do not require their signatories to refrain from military action against any alliance partner(s).

Conclusion

Given their rather limited capabilities, minor powers may have a strong interest in alliance commitments not only to enhance their military security but also to obtain a variety of nonmilitary benefits, such as increased trade or support for domestic political regimes. One of the problems with alliance bonds is, however, that allied support often requires minor powers to make significant autonomy concessions, allowing allies, most notably major-power allies, to gain influence over their minor-power alliance partners. Additionally, alliance ties may reduce minor powers' diplomatic flexibility to prevent foreign policy crises from escalating to all-out warfare while leaving it uncertain whether allies will honor their pledges of military support in the event of armed conflict or war.

According to the alliance research reviewed in this article, alliances resting on territorial settlement treaties help to decrease the incidence of war by resolving disputes over territorial issues. Furthermore, the loss of autonomy and diplomatic flexibility may be minimized with multilateral ententes due to the possible formation of intra-alliance coalitions and the lack of specific and rigid alliance requirements.

An organization that has been involved in attempts at territorial dispute settlement and that may turn into a multilateral entente is the OSCE. Until the OSCE evolves into such an alliance, however, a multilateral defense pact like NATO may still be the most effective collective security organization to manage international relations with the goal of preventing armed conflict and war in Europe. Further research might explore the extent to which regional organizations for security and cooperation, similar to the OSCE, may provide multilateral and consultative frameworks for peace in many other parts of the world.

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