Domestic Political Institutions and Alliance Politics

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Abstract

Military alliances are one of the most important tools states can use to counter international threats, exert influence over other countries, and accomplish broad foreign policy goals, including peace and stability in the international system. Alliance scholarship can provide valuable insights to policy-makers by answering questions such as which states are likely to ally, when alliances will be upheld, and whether they will be effective. Traditional alliance research focused on international considerations rather than domestic politics as drivers of alliance politics. More recently, however, scholars have shifted their attention to uncovering the ways in which domestic political institutions affect alliance behavior. The main questions underlying this research include: Are states with similar regime types, especially democracies, more likely to ally? Are democracies more reliable alliance partners? Do wartime coalitions involving democracies have a higher chance of victory? Do domestic institutional changes affect alliance maintenance? While the literature has provided conclusive answers to some of these questions, others are characterized by mixed findings. Recently published work has taken on unresolved issues and provided new and original insights. Future research should take these efforts further by unpacking the concepts of "domestic politics" and "alliance politics".

INTRODUCTION

The influence of domestic political institutions on alliance politics was long neglected by international relations scholars. Military alliances occupy a central role in realist theories of international politics, and the realist paradigm has traditionally emphasized the priority of international imperatives over domestic political considerations. Alliances are typically understood as resulting from the need to balance power (Waltz, 1979) or counter particular adversaries (Walt, 1987). Alternatively, alliances may be viewed as a way to increase a state's autonomy to pursue particular policies (Morrow, 1991) or to exert influence over an ally (Schroeder, 1976; Weitsman, 2004). While security, autonomy, and restraint motivations are certainly driving forces behind states' alliance choices, it is now well-understood that the consideration of

domestic politics, in addition to international imperatives, can advance our understanding of many aspects of alliance behavior. Since the early 1990s, there has been a proliferation of studies that examine whether states with similar regime type—especially democracies—are more likely to ally with one another, whether democracies make for more reliable alliance partners, whether democratic partners in war enhance the probability of victory, and how domestic political changes affect the maintenance of alliances. A report card for the research on domestic politics and military alliances would point to both bad news and good news. The bad news is that existing scholarship has not produced unequivocal answers. The good news is that these disagreements have prompted increasingly sophisticated research and suggest promising avenues for future contributions.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

It was the rise of the democratic peace research program that prompted scholars to explore how domestic political institutions might affect different aspects of alliance politics. If democracies show distinct patterns in their conflict behavior, they may also display distinct patterns in their security cooperation, including their alliances. Four particular areas of research emerged.

The first area of scholarship tackles the question of whether democracies are more likely to ally with one another. Siverson and Emmons (1991) propose that the lack of war between democracies may be the result of similar foreign policy preferences and that these shared interests should also be reflected in a greater propensity of democracies to ally militarily. They find that democratic states are indeed more likely to ally with other democracies, but that this pattern is observed mostly in the 1946–1965 period. Simon and Gartzke (1996) corroborate this finding, but suggest that this particular time period is anomalous and that democracies' incentives to ally during this period derived from the bipolar structure of the international system that pitted Western democracies against Eastern communist regimes. In line with this interpretation, Lai and Reiter (2000) determine that countries with similar political regimes generally have an increased propensity to be allied after 1945 and that democracies do not stand out. There is a positive effect of joint democracy on the likelihood of having a defense pact in Europe and the Americas post-1945, but this finding is driven by a small set of multilateral alliances. Interestingly, in a replication of Lai and Reiter's model using the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) data (Leeds, Ritter, Mitchell, & Long, 2002) rather than the Correlates of War (COW) alliance data (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004), Leeds *et al*. (2002) uncover a propensity for democracies to be allied in the earlier period of 1815–1944. However, Gibler

and Sarkees (2004) claim that this finding may also be the result of a small set of multilateral alliances. Taking a slightly different tack by examining overall alliance portfolios, that is, the total set of alliance partners a state has, rather than the likelihood that a pair of democracies allies, Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992) show that democracies do not display more similar foreign policy preferences than nondemocracies.

The democratic peace research program motivated not only research into whether democracies' shared interests may be reflected in an increased propensity to ally, but also informed another branch of alliance research by pointing to the distinctness and possible superiority of democratic institutions. Extending arguments from the conflict literature, scholars have argued that democracies may possess a "contracting advantage" as a result of the key features of leader accountability, policy-making constraint, and transparency (e.g., Fearon, 1994; Gaubatz, 1996; Leeds, 1999; Lipson, 2003). These features should enhance the credibility and steadfastness of democratic alliance commitments. A contrary view suggests that frequent leader replacement and ever-changing public opinion make democracies particularly unreliable (e.g., De Tocqueville, [1835] 1994; Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2004). In order to arbitrate between these conflicting arguments regarding democratic reliability scholars have looked both at the duration of alliances and the propensity of democracies to honor their alliance commitments in times of war. Findings regarding alliance duration almost uniformly show that alliances between democracies last longer than other alliances (Bennett, 1997; Gaubatz, 1996; Leeds & Savun, 2007; Reed, 1997). The findings regarding democratic reliability are less conclusive in studies of wartime behavior. Werner and Lemke (1997), Reiter and Stam (2002), and Smith (1996) find that democracies are not more likely to intervene on the side of their (democratic) allies in times of war. One concern with these studies is that they do not match what states do in war to what they promised to do in the alliance and so they may be overstating alliance nonfulfillment (Leeds, Long, & Mitchell, 2000). Many alliances specify conditions for when they can be invoked, including particular enemies, locations, number of adversaries, and actions of the partner. If a conflict falls outside these parameters then an ally's failure to act should not be seen as a violation of the alliance. Using ATOP data that allows her to determine whether the *casus foederis* was indeed met, Leeds (2003) finds that democracies were more likely to uphold their alliance commitments in the 1816–1944 period. Using a different research design, however, Gartzke and Gleditsch (2004) show that democracies were less likely than nondemocracies to honor their alliance commitments in the 1816–1991 period.

Scholars have considered not only the effect of static domestic political institutions, but also the effect of change in regime type on alliance duration and

wartime behavior. Siverson and Starr (1994) find that states reshuffle their alliance portfolios in reaction to regime changes. While Bennett (1997) cannot confirm that regime changes affect the duration of individual alliances, Leeds and Savun (2007) find clear evidence that regime changes are associated with alliance abrogation. Leeds (2003) also shows that regime changes after alliance formation increase the likelihood that a state will fail to honor its obligations in times of war (Leeds, 2003).

A final area of research on the relationship between domestic political institutions and alliance politics examines whether democratic allies are superior in their war-fighting effectiveness. Here findings are more conclusive. Studies show that states with democratic partners are indeed more likely to succeed in war (e.g., Choi, 2004; Pilster, 2011).

CURRENT RESEARCH

Scholars continue to provide new insights into some of the issues that earlier work has failed to resolve. Regarding the relationship between regime type and alliance formation, Gibler and Wolford (2006) and Gibler and Sewell (2006) point out that while democracies appear to be no more likely to ally, they are more likely to *be* allied. They suggest that the causal arrow is reversed: it is not democracy that leads to alliances but alliances that lead to democracy. This dynamic does not necessarily rely on specific policy efforts of the alliance organization or member states to encourage democratization, but results from the fact that alliances can remove territorial threats for states, which in turn facilitates democratization. In another fresh take on how domestic institutions affect alliance formation, Powell (2010) shows that similarity in domestic legal systems is positively related to state decisions to ally and also shapes alliance design choices.

On the question of democratic alliance reliability, scholars have pointed out that inferences based on whether a country upholds its alliance commitments in times of war are subject to selection bias (Smith, 1996). Owing to the transparency of the democratic political process, potential aggressors are better able to identify and target unreliable alliances involving democracies (e.g., Werner & Lemke, 1997). This means that the democratic alliances that are challenged are the ones that are likely to be unreliable and it is not surprising that these do not hold up in war. However, this does not mean that democratic alliances more generally are unreliable. Many of democratic alliances are so reliable that they will not be targeted in the first place. To overcome selection bias, Leeds and Savun (2007) and Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel (2009) consider alliance violations that occur in wartime *or* in times of peace when a member ends an alliance in violation of its terms. Both studies find that democracies are less likely to abrogate alliances prematurely. Leeds *et al*.

(2009) also examine more closely the argument that democracies may be less reliable owing to frequent leadership turnover. It turns out that not all leadership changes but only those that coincide with a change in the domestic groups the leader represents are associated with unlawful alliance termination; and this effect is observed only in nondemocracies.

Recent studies also move beyond the question of *whether* democracies are reliable to examining *how* and *when* reliability is achieved. Mattes (2012a) proposes that democratic leaders guard against instability associated with leadership changes by "precommitting" successor governments through careful alliance design. Domestic political considerations regarding whether it is necessary to bind successors to an ally can thus help explain the choice of specific alliance terms. Tago (2009) examines democratic withdrawals from the "Coalition of the Willing" He finds that leaders were more likely to desert the coalition before elections for fear of punishment by domestic audiences strongly opposed to the War in Iraq. Contrary to Tago, Kreps (2010) finds that democracies did not withdraw from the NATO Afghanistan mission even in the face of unfavorable public opinion. Leaders were able to stay the course because elite consensus surrounding the need to maintain international alliance commitments prevented opposition parties from embracing anti-mission platforms. The difference between Iraq and Afghanistan is of course that the former was not bolstered by a formal alliance, while the latter was. Taken together, these studies indicate that alliance commitments can have powerful effects on the domestic politics of democratic member countries, binding not only governments but also opposition parties.

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Recent scholarship on domestic political institutions and alliance politics has opened up interesting avenues for future research. Key in going forward will be a continued "unpacking" of the broad concepts of "domestic politics" and "alliance politics" and the specific mechanisms underlying observed relationships.

Much of the research to date has focused on contrasting democracies and non-democracies in their alliance formation behavior and their reliability. Insights on whether democracies have a distinct and superior record in these areas are important from a scholarly perspective and also for policy-makers that contemplate the value of spreading democracy. At the same time, this simple dichotomy obfuscates significant variation that exists within each regime type. For instance, regarding democracies, Cowhey (1993) suggests that presidential systems may be advantaged over parliamentary ones in their cooperation behavior; this may bear on alliance politics as well. Even more significant are likely the differences that exist among non-democratic

systems. A number of studies reveal distinct patterns of conflict behavior by different authoritarian regime types (e.g., Lai & Slater, 2006; Peceny, Beer, & Sanchez-Terry, 2002; Weeks, 2008, 2012). As is often the case, the literature on international cooperation has lagged behind international conflict research, but we are starting to see work on how different types of autocracies may differ in their cooperation aptitude (Chyzh, 2014; Mattes & Rodriguez, 2014). It will be interesting to investigate cooperation behavior of autocracies specifically in the area of military alliances and such research can provide useful information to policy-makers as to which authoritarian regimes may be especially prone to ally and to uphold or violate their alliance commitments. Differentiating among different types of non-democracies also addresses concerns that studies that treat nondemocracies as a homogenous group bias findings in favor of finding democratic similarity and distinctness in alliance behavior (Gartzke & Gleditsch, 2004). Once democracies are contrasted with distinct authoritarian regime types their alliance behavior may be found not to be all that different from that of some of these nondemocratic states.

A related, promising direction for future research would entail moving beyond a focus on domestic political *institutions* to an examination of how other aspects of the domestic political process affect alliance politics. Early work by Barnett and Levy (1991) suggests that alliance choices may be driven by domestic considerations such as the guns versus butter tradeoff (see also Morrow, 1993), a leader's incentive to obtain military and economic goods to secure her power, and the protection against domestic threats. More recently, Kimball (2010) tackled the guns versus butter trade-off and her large N study provides support for the notion that alliance formation may be driven by domestic demand for social policy over defense spending. Furthermore, Narizny (2003) suggests that British alignment choices 1905–1939 were heavily affected by which sectoral interests held political power and Leeds *et al*. (2009) provide evidence that a change in domestic groups with sway over the leader may affect alliance maintenance. Not only could the links between domestic preferences and alliance formation, partners, and maintenance be further explored, but the third area Barnett and Levy point to—that of alliances as a means to counter domestic threat—deserves additional investigation. Some alliance contracts explicitly refer to domestic threats and entail commitments to refrain from aiding domestic opponents or obligations to help against domestic enemies. The significance of this line of research lies in its recasting of alliance politics as driven not only, and maybe not even primarily, by traditional security threats by other state actors. Foreign policy preferences of different domestic groups, incentives to use military and economic aid tied to the alliance to pay off winning coalitions, domestic challenges to a leader's tenure, and possibly "new" international threats in the form of terrorism may play a large role in alliance

politics. More research on these dynamics can supplement our understanding of which alliances form when and with whom and how long they last. Such work can also illuminate the effects that alliances might have on the domestic politics of member states. From a policy-making perspective, it is important to determine not only whether alliances serve foreign policy goals but also whether they might have beneficial or adverse domestic political effects in partner countries.

In addition to broadening the conceptualization of domestic politics, scholars should also expand the scope of alliance behavior under investigation. Few studies have attempted to explain alliance institutional design, despite the fact that there is significant variation in the types of obligations, contingencies, expected duration, issue scope, and level of institutionalization of military alliances. As studies by Mattes (2012a; 2012b) and Powell (2010) show, domestic political institutions and government incentives might provide an inroad for tackling this understudied area of alliance politics. Such work ties nicely into the research program on the rational design of international institutions (Koremenos, Lipson, & Snidal, 2001) and a better scholarly understanding of why alliances are designed in particular ways can provide additional insight into what effects on state behavior we should expect from different types of alliances.

Fortunately, continued research into different aspect of countries' alliance choices is facilitated by readily available data on military alliances for the 1815–2003 period. The COW alliance data (Gibler & Sarkees, 2004) and especially the ATOP data (Leeds *et al.*, 2000; Leeds & Mattes, 2007), with its collection of dozens of variables regarding specific alliance provisions, are excellent resources going forward. One challenge that is evident from a review of past work is how one should deal with large multilateral alliances. Poast (2010) proposes an approach that allows scholars to consider multilateral and bilateral alliances together, while at the same time evading the problems associated with disaggregating multilateral events into separate dyadic ones. His approach thus minimizes the chance that findings are biased as the result of the inclusion of many observations stemming from a small number of large multilateral alliances.

Data on some aspects of domestic politics, such as democracy versus non-democracy coding (Marshall, Gurr, & Jaggers, 2013), leadership changes (Goemans, Gleditsch, & Chiozza, 2009), and changes in sources of leader support (Leeds *et al.*, 2009), are also readily available for a long time period. On the other hand, coding of different types of non-democratic regime types is restricted to the post-1945 period (e.g., Cheibub, Gandhi, & Vreeland, 2010; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2012; Svolik, 2012). Furthermore, a systematic investigation of other aspects of the domestic political process, such as the specific alliance preferences of different domestic groups, the

existence of elite consensus, and the presence of domestic threats may require a more original approach by researchers as well as new data collection. Qualitative work also has the potential to supplement quantitative assessments and help scholars identify more precisely the underlying causal mechanisms linking different aspects of the domestic political process to alliance politics.

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