

Critical Dialogue

Allies of Convenience: A Theory of Bargaining in U.S.

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“If Hitler invaded Hell I would make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons” (Winston Churchill, *The Grand Alliance* [1950] 2010, p. 331). While this famous quote by Churchill is not found in the book (a variant by Kenneth Waltz is used as an opening epigraph), it perfectly captures the main idea of Evan Resnick’s *Allies of Convenience*. Britain and the United States allying with the Soviet Union during World War II is just one example of a broader phenomenon: a state aligning with a partner with which it has ongoing national security conflicts (such as both seeking control over the same region) and divergent political ideologies (such as a liberal democracy and an illiberal autocracy). Resnick labels these pacts “alliances of convenience.”

For such pacts to exist, it is critical for a third party to pose a threat to both states. This is unsurprising, as George Liska (*Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence*, 1962, pp. 12–13) taught us long ago that “alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something.” In the case of Britain and the United States aligning with the Soviet Union, the shared threat was Nazi Germany. The shared threat can also change, as has been the case for the long-standing alliance between the United States, a democracy, and Saudi Arabia, a nondemocratic monarchy. For these allies, the shared threat ran from Nazi Germany, to the Soviet Union, to Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and then to Iran under the Ayatollah. Because of these shared threats, the United States has tolerated Saudi Arabia’s pursuit of policies that are viewed as against US interests, such as the Obama administration’s reluctant support for Saudi forces in Yemen, and the Trump administration’s willingness to look the other way after the Saudis’ state-sponsored murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

Resnick’s goal is to understand why the United States fails to properly manage these allies. More precisely, while the United States has formed a number of “alliances of convenience” since World War II (a useful table is found on p. 22 of the text), Resnick observes that it nearly always

makes big concessions to the other state, even when these concessions run counter to US national security interests or adherence to democratic norms. These concessions reflect a weak position of the United States within these alliances. For Resnick, this is puzzling from the standpoint of two main theoretical approaches to alliances: what he terms “neorealism alliance theory” and “Tying Hands theory.” Both theories predict that the United States, with a favorable balance of power and constrained executive, should secure the better end of a bargain when negotiating to form an “alliance of convenience.” The former theory builds on the work of Glenn Snyder and Kenneth Waltz. It holds that bargaining outcomes between allies will largely be determined by the relative power of the parties. The latter theory builds on classic bargaining theory, as found in Thomas Schelling’s classic *Strategy of Conflict* (1960) and Bob Putnam’s “two-level bargaining” models of international negotiations (“Diplomacy and Domestic Politics: The Logic of Two-Level Games,” *International Organization*, 42 [3], 1988). This theory argues that a state whose leader is constrained domestically will be able to secure a good deal from a foreign government.

Because neither theory offers insights into the United States’ weak bargaining position within “alliances of convenience,” Resnick draws on ideas from neoclassical realism to put forward an alternative argument. Key to his argument is that the foreign policy executive must appease domestic groups who oppose the alliance. This entails portraying the prospective ally in a positive light: think of Joseph Stalin being referred to as “Uncle Joe” in the United States during World War II. Because this strategy necessarily involves minimizing the geopolitical and ideological differences between the two countries, portraying the ally positively complicates the foreign policy executive’s ability to demand fundamental policy changes from the ally.

Resnick’s explanation is sensible, but it also raises a couple of questions. First, why can’t the foreign policy executive put on a “happy face” to domestic audiences, but drive a hard bargain at the negotiating table? Is it because the prospective ally knows that there is no way for the foreign policy executive to “name and shame” its unwillingness to make concessions? Second, aren’t there more straightforward alternative explanations? In particular, is the strong state’s weak bargaining position vis-à-vis

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“allies of convenience” simply because the prospective allies are, well, *convenient*? In other words, could it be that the strong state’s weak position occurs because there are few (if any) alternative allies? The strong state likely aligned with the ally because the ally was engaged in military hostilities with a bigger threat or was one of the few states in a particular region willing to stand up to a bigger threat.

Consider some key US allies in the Middle East region. The United States has tolerated behavior by Saudi Arabia that goes against US interests in the region and against US democratic values. Is this because the United States is facing strong domestic opposition against Saudi Arabia, or is it because the US government has few viable alternatives to countering larger threats to the region? Consider also Israel and Turkey, two other US allies in the region. While not listed as “allies of convenience” in Resnick’s table (though one wonders if Turkey should be on that list), both leverage their unique positions in the region to gain US acquiescence to policies that may otherwise run counter to US regional interests.

Another straightforward alternative is suggested in a second new book on alliances, Marina Henke’s *Constructing Allied Cooperation: Diplomacy, Payments, and Power in Multilateral Military Coalitions* (2019). For Henke, the United States must overcome *international* reluctance to a questionable foreign policy action. Like Resnick, Henke also focuses on US bargaining with prospective allies. But unlike Resnick, Henke is interested in understanding the bargaining tactics used by the United States to form military coalitions, such as the US-led United Nations Coalition in the Korean War or the coalition that invaded Iraq. For Henke, a key bargaining tactic of the United States is the offering of side payments, which can literally be monetary aid (what was once cynically referred to as the “coalition of the billing” with respect to Iraq). Because some countries are reluctant to join the United States on a potentially misguided foreign policy adventure (or might wish to bandwagon with a threat), the United States must buy allies to create its coalition. While this underscores Resnick’s point that the United States was in a weak bargaining position, the mechanism explaining that weak bargaining position is different. One wonders what Resnick makes of these alternative explanations for how “allies of convenience” are created and how they comport with his own description of this phenomenon.

In the book, Resnick evaluates his preferred explanation by applying process tracing to three case studies: the alliance with the People’s Republic of China against the Soviet Union (1971–89), the alliance with Pakistan against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (1981–88), and the alliance with Iraq against Iran (1982–88). Though the cases are well chosen to control for common domestic characteristics, such as Republican presidents with strong foreign policy credentials, Resnick expresses concern about

selection bias; namely, that he is selecting on the dependent variable by only studying alliances of convenience. I am less concerned about this problem. If Resnick wished to explain why states form alliances of convenience, then variation on the dependent variable would be important. But Resnick’s study seeks to identify the plausibility of a process: he seeks to know the mechanism explaining why the US position within such alliances is relatively weak. We know that the United States has a weak position within its alliances of convenience, and we also know that, for each of these alliances, the United States has had notable and vocal domestic critics. Hence, the question is whether the need to appease domestic opponents or some alternative process (such as those listed earlier) explains the US’s weak position in its alliances of convenience.

Resnick’s book nicely builds on the tradition of Jeremy Pressmen’s *Warring Friends: Alliance Restraint in International Politics* (2011) and Patricia Weitsman’s *Dangerous Alliances: Proponents of Peace, Weapons of War* (2004). It does so by making plain that one must not confuse “allies” with “friends” or even “partners.” Allies exist for reasons of war fighting and balance of power; alliances can often be temporary marriages that bring together states with otherwise opposing views. In this sense, Resnick’s book hearkens back to the famous phrase by Lord Palmerston that “there are no permanent friends or permanent enemies, only permanent interests.”

Response to Paul Poast’s Review of *Allies of Convenience: A Theory of Bargaining in U.S. Foreign Policy*

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— Evan N. Resnick

I am grateful to Paul Poast for his careful reading of *Allies of Convenience*. I will address his three incisive questions in turn. First, Poast inquires whether US leaders might have circumvented domestic opposition to alliances of convenience by striking a hard line in intra-alliance negotiations while putting on a “happy face” regarding those allies to domestic audiences. As I discuss in the book’s conclusion, the only viable strategy to effectively manage an ally of convenience is one in which the foreign policy executive mirrors domestic sentiment by publicly adopting a hard-line position toward the ally while engaging in clandestine cooperation with it, as the George W. Bush administration did with Gaddafi’s Libya after 9/11 (pp. 217–22). The inescapable problem in pursuing the reverse strategy proposed by Poast is that the openness and transparency of the US political system permit the ally to both observe and bolster the conciliatory domestic dimension of the strategy, thereby undercutting the credibility of the tough position adopted by US officials at the bargaining table.

Second, Poast suggests that the United States' appeasement of post-1945 allies of convenience might be explained by the unavailability of alternative security partners or by the need to attract those allies with side payments. Both explanations are improbable, however, because all of those allies needed the United States far more than the United States needed them. This was especially the case with the three allies of convenience I discuss at length in the book. China, Pakistan, and Iraq were underdeveloped states that were not only exponentially weaker than their US partner, but were also more gravely and immediately endangered by the overarching third-party threats that precipitated the alliances. In addition, the type and magnitude of material assistance that the three states sought from Washington could not be obtained from any other prospective patron. Moreover, the United States lacked an inherent interest in its allies' fates, as underscored by its refusal to formalize its security relationship with any of them.

Finally, Poast discounts my concern about selection bias, claiming that it does not bear on the question of whether my theory or another explanation best explains anemic US bargaining with allies of convenience. I included a fourth case study in the book, which assessed US bargaining with the United Kingdom during the Korean War, to demonstrate my neoclassical realist theory's explanatory power and range. In line with the theory's expectations, the case shows that the United States will bargain aggressively and successfully with smaller and more endangered allies that are friendly democracies (i.e., "special relationship" allies), because in contrast to alliances of convenience, those relationships generate minimal domestic opposition. As a result, US officials will be more inclined to exploit the United States' favorable international systemic position to squeeze concessions from such allies. Thus, although the book is primarily concerned with the United States' (mis)management of its most unsavory and dangerous autocratic allies, the generic theory I advance therein can explain the dynamics of US alliances with a wide range of security partners.

Arguing about Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Negotiations. By Paul Poast. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019. 244p. \$49.95 cloth.
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The trajectory of twentieth-century history could have been radically altered if either of two high-stakes military alliance negotiations, the first conducted in 1901 and the other in 1939, had resulted in success rather than failure. Had Britain and Germany struck an alliance in 1901, Europe's great powers might not have subsequently

plunged into World War I. Had Britain, France, and the Soviet Union reached agreement four decades later, they might have forestalled the outbreak of World War II. In *Arguing about Alliances*, Paul Poast contributes significantly to the study of alliances by remedying the glaring lack of attention that international relations (IR) scholars have paid to these and many other incipient alliances that were negotiated but never ultimately concluded, a crucial international security analog to Sherlock Holmes's "dog that didn't bark."

Poast's theory of alliance negotiations posits that agreement hinges primarily on the compatibility of the negotiating parties' war plans and secondarily on the parties' ability to pursue alternative security strategies. If the states possess compatible war plans, meaning that they agree both on the principal threat against which an alliance should be directed (i.e., strategic compatibility) and whether that threat should be countered via an offensive or defensive military doctrine (i.e., operational compatibility), then the theory predicts that they will successfully ally. Conversely, if their plans are incompatible, the existence of attractive outside options—construed as a state's ability to secure itself via unilateral action, buck-passing, or striking an alliance with different partners—becomes salient. If all of the parties possess such an option, then they should fail to reach an alliance, but if only some do, the outcome of negotiations will be indeterminate.

Poast employs multiple methods to test the two hypotheses that war plan compatibility will be substantially more likely than incompatibility to result in alliance agreement, and that the availability of outside options will be more salient to the outcome of negotiations when war plans are incompatible. He pits these propositions against the alternative explanations that agreement hinges on the degree to which the parties either fear becoming entrapped in war by prospective partners or believe that prospective partners are insufficiently powerful or reliable. A series of statistical analyses of 197 alliance treaty negotiations among European states spanning the years 1815–1945 provides robust support for both propositions: Poast's fully developed model predicts the outcome of alliance negotiations in 74% of the cases.

These findings are complemented by the author's examination of two signal historical cases, the aborted alliance negotiations between Britain and Germany in 1901 and the successful multilateral discussions that produced the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in 1948–49. In the Anglo-German case, although both states feared Russia, London perceived the Russian threat to be most acute in Asia, whereas Berlin perceived it to be most worrisome in Europe, and Britain alone possessed outside options; namely, the pursuit of "splendid isolation" in Europe and establishment of an anti-Russian alliance in Asia with Japan. Poast demonstrates that British leaders abandoned the negotiations for these reasons and

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not because they harbored concerns about Germany's reliability. Transatlantic alliance discussions in the late 1940s were similarly characterized by war plan incompatibility: the United States and United Kingdom were most concerned about the Soviet threat to northern Europe, whereas France was preoccupied by the Soviet danger to southern Europe, as well as by the availability to the United States of the outside option of containing the Soviets unilaterally. Poast similarly shows that these factors, not US entrapment concerns or worries about its European counterparts' reliability, played the dominant role in influencing the course of the talks.

Arguing about Alliances distinguishes itself from a flood of recent contributions to the literature on alliances not only by dint of its unique focus on alliance negotiations, but also because of its exceptionally sophisticated research design. Poast devotes the book's entire second chapter to explaining his meticulous coding of the central concepts of alliance negotiations, alliance negotiation outcomes, strategic compatibility, and operational compatibility. Next, he subjects the first hypothesis linking war plan compatibility with alliance negotiation outcomes to cross-tabulation analysis, followed by a series of five increasingly complex statistical models, which layer on 11 control variables. He proceeds to conduct additional regressions that add more control variables into the mix and introduces alternative measures of control variables employed in the previous models. He then subjects these results to a battery of sensitivity tests to show that they are not compromised by deviations from the assumptions that he employed in creating his original dataset of 91 failed European alliance negotiations between 1815 and 1945. This is followed by Poast's use of both cross-tabulations and propensity-score matching to demonstrate that the existence of an outside option, in the form of a state's membership in an extant alliance, is likely to affect the outcome of negotiations only when the parties' war plans are incompatible. Finally, he carefully process-traces the Anglo-German and NATO cases to both illuminate the causal pathways by which his independent variables produced the outcome of alliance negotiations and to rule out alternative explanations.

The most impressive works in social science generate at least as many questions as they answer, and *Arguing about Alliances* is no exception. First, the book begs the question of where alliance war plans come from. Although its chief contention that states will be most likely to conclude alliances if they agree on the threat at issue and how best to confront it is strongly validated, this finding is hardly shocking and inevitably directs attention to the preceding link in the causal chain. The theory would be even more compelling if it could identify the most important international systemic, domestic political, or individual-level variable(s) involved in the construction of national war plans. Presumably, this task would necessitate anchoring

Poast's free-floating theory to a larger research program in IR.

Consideration of the determinants of war plans would also help explain the extent to which political leaders can modify them to facilitate alliance agreement. Revealingly, Poast indicates that, in both of his case studies, the diplomatic acumen of the alliance negotiators proved central to the outcome, and he thereby insinuates that they enjoyed extremely wide leverage in being able to adjust their war plans. Whereas he notes that Germany "did not moderate its plans" (p. 133) in 1901 because its leaders stubbornly clung to the erroneous belief that Britain lacked outside options, the success of the 1948–49 transatlantic negotiations was attributable to "the negotiating creativity of the participants" (p. 168). In light of Poast's apparent privileging of decision-making variables over international systemic ones in the alliance-building process, it is odd that he refrains from advancing any concrete policy implications in the book's conclusion.

A second question also pertains to the possible extension of Poast's theory, but on the other end of the causal chain: Can his theory of alliance formation also explain alliance dissolution? It is plausible that the same factors that Poast introduces to explain why alliances are created in the first place also account for the manner in which they end. Conceivably, some alliances die a natural death by persevering through to the fulfillment of their strategic objective, whereas others expire prematurely. The unnatural deaths suffered by some alliances may well be because members' previously compatible war plans began to diverge even as some or all of their members held viable outside options. The early twentieth-century alliance between Britain and Japan (1902–21) and the Cold War-era US Mutual Security Treaty with Taiwan, the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization, and the Central Treaty Organization represent potentially instructive cases on this score.

A third question addresses the logic underpinning the theory: Why must compatible war plans always trump outside options? If the war plans of states X and Y are identical but X has the alternative option of passing the buck to Y (and possibly others), a rational X will almost certainly prefer to buck-pass and thereby avoid the costs of countering the shared enemy than conclude an alliance and share those costs. For example, although Poast refers to the joint global war plan secretly agreed to by high-level US and British military officers in March 1941 as an example of war plan compatibility leading to alliance agreement (pp. 34–36), he refrains from noting that, after March 1941, the Roosevelt administration continued passing the buck to London and, after Germany's invasion of the USSR in June, to Moscow as well. It did not conclude a formal alliance with both countries until January 1942, a month after the attack on Pearl Harbor and Hitler's declaration of war against the United States.

This behavior appears to cast at least some doubt on the theory's contention that the viability of outside options only "comes into play" (p. 170) when the compatibility of parties' war plans is low.

In sum, *Arguing about Alliances* is an innovative and breathtakingly rigorous work that adds considerably to scholars' understanding of alliances, even as it helpfully generates a range of questions to guide future research on the subject.

Response to Evan N. Resnick's Review of *Arguing about Alliances: The Art of Agreement in Military-Pact Negotiations*

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— Paul Poast

With the rise of irregular warfare and the onset of the global war on terror, the study of alliance politics became almost passé; theorizing about alliances was, like NATO, a Cold War relic. No more. From questions over America's continued commitment to the North Atlantic Treaty, to concerns over US support for Saudi Arabia's military campaign in Yemen, to the central role of alliance relations (via military aid to Ukraine) in the impeachment of President Donald Trump, the concepts of allies and alliances are more salient than ever. As a result, it is vital that scholars think critically about the meaning and purpose of alliances. The current state of international affairs shows that there remains much for us to learn about relations between allies and that doing so requires serious scholarly engagement.

That is why I am grateful to Evan Resnick for writing his book and for taking the time to thoroughly review my own book. I am pleased (thrilled, actually) that Resnick acknowledges the book's relevance and labels it "innovative and breathtakingly rigorous." But he does raise three important questions about the book, especially regarding the theory.

First, Resnick asks about the determinants of a state's war plans: From where do they come? My theory holds that since joint war planning is a central feature of alliance treaty negotiations, such negotiations are more likely to end in agreement if the states have highly compatible ideal

war plans. I treat a state's ideal war plan as a given. I did not thoroughly discuss the origins of individual state war plans, because I wished to focus on the mechanics of the negotiations themselves. But Resnick rightly wonders about their origins: Could studying the international systemic, domestic political, or individual-level variable(s) involved in the construction of national war plans produce further insights into which states are likely to ally? I believe the answer is yes, and as Resnick points out, such work would be a useful extension on my theory.

Second, Resnick wonders why I privilege "war plan compatibility" over "outside options." In particular, he notes how the United States continued to buck-pass to the British (and later, the Soviets) after military officers reached a secret global war plan in March 1941. I think this is simply a matter of timing, something that my theory is too coarse to explain. My theory holds that since the United States and British had compatible ideal war plans, they were highly likely to reach agreement (which they did). Moreover, I maintain that both the United States and British did not have attractive outside options. This should also have contributed to agreement (indeed, the combination of ideal war plan compatibility and lack of attractive outside options is why I label this a "Same Page" negotiation). Although it is true that the United States did not formally enter the war for another nine months, the British and Americans did sign the Atlantic Charter in August 1941, and US military aid to the British and Soviets, via Lend-Lease, expanded throughout the year.

Third, I completely agree that my theory could have implications for understanding the dissolution of alliances. Although I intentionally tabled postsigning considerations—such as ally commitments to the alliance or the eventual dissolution of the alliance—my theory would hold that divergence in ideal war plans (perhaps through the emergence of a new threat to one alliance member that is not shared by the other) or the appearance of a previously unavailable outside option (perhaps a technological innovation that now enables a state to take unilateral action) could, at minimum, prompt renegotiation of the alliance's terms. At maximum, such changes could lead to the full collapse of the alliance. I hint at this possibility in the conclusion, but it is again an item worthy of future work.