

Explaining burden sharing in international security alliances.

Introduction

It is a bit of a challenge for me to find a ‘theorem’ that is relevant to my areas of interest – IR, international security politics. Most of the scholarship is based on verbal arguments. I tried to find one that purports to answer a question that has plagued security studies for many years: why governments form and maintain international security alliances.

I couldn’t find a ‘theorem’ that answers this question satisfactorily, although there are lots of broader ‘theoretical’ analyses that try to predict when states will form alliances, mostly based on observations of NATO during the Cold War and since.

However, I did find a couple of nice articles that develop two interrelated theoretical arguments that almost qualify as ‘theorem’. These advance hypotheses explaining the problem of burden sharing within an alliance – i.e. why some members of an alliance contribute proportionately more resources than others, and why some members appear to ‘free ride’ on the contributions of others.

Alliance

‘A formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more states and involving mutual expectations of some degree of policy coordination on security issues under certain conditions in the future’ (Barnett and Levy 1991, p. 370).

The Theory of Collective Action: Security as a Pure Public Good (Mancur Olsen 1971; Oneal and Diehl 1994)

Early political economy analyses of international security politics and alliance building characterised defence against external threats as a ‘non-rival and non-excludable public good’. This assumes that defence cannot be withheld from a member of an alliance once provided, while one unit of security can be ‘enjoyed’ by one ally without detracting from the security of the other allies. [Countries not in the alliance are excluded, making this a ‘club good’ but these articles don’t deal with this.]

The theory of collective action puts forward two main hypotheses that appear to contradict each other. First, defence burdens can be expected to be shared unevenly among allies. Large, wealthy allies will pay more, small allies less. This creates the likelihood of what Olsen termed ‘the exploitation of the great by the small’ as smaller allies opt for a free rider strategy. In security alliances larger allies put up with free riders if they can still provide the good profitably.

Second, there should be no limits to the size of an alliance, because costs are shared by a larger number of allies but benefits are not diminished for existing allies. Nevertheless, as group size increases, free riding and suboptimal allocation of defence resources also increase.

The Joint Product Model: (Sandler 1993)

NATO’s early years aside, the empirical record did not appear to support the pure public good model. Sandler’s Joint Product Model argued that defence alliances jointly generate private and impure as well as pure public benefits for their members. An alliance fulfils

three goals: deterrence (which may be a pure public good); damage limitation or protection of territory (a mixed or impure public good); and private or nation-specific goals (defence industries, military modernisation and other benefits to governments).

The main hypothesis of the Joint Product Model is that burdens of providing security are expected to be shared in accordance with the benefits received. Small allies that receive substantial excludable benefits may assume a large burden despite their wealth position.

Observations and implications for alliance building:

The provision of security (defence spending) generates 'private benefits' that accrue to some allies and not others. Moreover, the actions taken by some alliance members in seeking private benefits may be interpreted as reducing the public benefits of others (e.g. US plans for a missile shield based in Poland and Czech; hypothetical German or Japanese re-armament for neighbouring countries).

Domestic political and economic constraints can limit a government's ability to mobilise national resources for external security without adversely affecting the domestic political interests of the elite in power. This creates an added incentive to 'free ride' on the security provision of other governments. Governments may prefer to rely on other governments to provide for their defence, so long as this does not exceed costs to their autonomy.

Internal threats provide additional incentives for governments to seek external alliances for they may secure material and political resources for deployment against internal threats. This means that governments that perceive a high level of domestic threat will seek alliances as a means of obtaining arms and diplomatic legitimacy, or in dealing with a transnational threat such as international terrorism. This would appear to be an interesting hypothesis to test, as some governments that exhibit high degrees of sensitivity to domestic opposition are also the world's most isolated (e.g. Iran, Burma and Cuba) while some of the world's most open countries are members of security alliances (e.g. the European NATO members).

The key problem remains unexplained: when will governments prefer external alignments to internal mobilisation as a strategy for providing defence against external threats?

References

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