Military Alliances and Public Support for War

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1. Introduction

Do military alliances matter and, if so, when and why? These questions have long been debated in both academic and policy circles. Skeptics of international agreements argue that, under anarchy, military alliances are merely “scraps of paper” that countries can disregard when it suits them. Indeed, studies show that countries honor their formal alliance commitments only 50–75% of the time.¹ According to the skeptics, alliances place minimal constraints on state behavior, including decisions to use military force.

Others take for granted the idea that alliances are consequential. For centuries, American statesmen have warned that decisions to enter alliances should not be taken lightly. Thomas Jefferson railed against “entangling” alliances and George Washington warned against “permanent” ones. As historian David Fromkin wrote in an essay criticizing U.S. alliances during the Cold War, “any advance commitment to take future action—especially the most extreme type of national action, going to war—should be contracted only with the utmost reluctance and only where there is an overwhelming necessity for doing so.”² According to this view, alliances shape behavior because making and breaking them have consequences.

Despite the immense importance of knowing whether and when alliances matter, isolating the effect of alliances is remarkably difficult. Countries do not choose their allies randomly, so it is hard to say whether intervention in any given conflict was a consequence of having made an alliance commitment, or whether other factors would have produced the same outcome absent an alliance. Moreover, alliance obligations are invoked only rarely, giving observers few data points from which to draw conclusions. Further, strategic selection hampers our ability to assess how alliances shape behavior: reliable alliances will rarely be tested, while unreliable alliances will be tried disproportionately.³ These challenges to inference are difficult, if not impossible, to overcome using historical data.

In this paper we take an experimental approach; we use survey experiments, fielded on the mass public in the United States, to shed light on whether alliances constrain state behavior. Many scholars have argued that public opinion affects leaders’ decisions about foreign policy, particularly about whether to use military force. Gartzke and Gleditsch (2004, 782), for example, claim that domestic audiences are “pivotal in the choice to intervene” on behalf of an ally. By studying how and why alliances affect the preferences of the mass public in the United States, we can learn much about the conditions under which leaders keep or break alliances.

Participants in our survey read a vignette in which one country attacked another and attempted to seize some of its territory. We randomized whether the United States has signed a formal defense pact, had made a verbal commitment, or had not made any pledge to defend the invaded country. We also varied several contextual features, including the costs of intervention, the stakes for the United States, the political regime of the invaded country, and the geographic region where it was located. After describing the situation, we measured whether—and why—respondents would support or oppose using the U.S. military to defend the country that had been attacked.

Our experiments shed light on four fundamental questions. First, to what extent do military alliances change public preferences about the use of force? Second, through what

³ Smith 1996; see also Schultz 2001.
mechanisms do alliances exert an effect? Third, how do contextual variables moderate the effect of alliances? And finally, under what conditions are alliances most reliable?

Our data show that alliance commitments powerfully influence mass preferences about whether to intervene abroad. Both written and unwritten alliances had massive effects on support for sending U.S. forces. Three mechanisms drove these effects: concerns about being perceived as a faithful alliance partner, fears of reputation spillover into nonmilitary arenas, and concerns about the morality of leaving an ally hanging. We also investigated whether contextual variables moderated the effect of alliances, and found that alliances were most consequential when the stakes of intervention were low. Finally, our experiments shed light on the conditions under which alliances are most reliable. We found that Americans were more willing to honor existing alliances when the costs of intervention were low, and when the partner was a democracy.

2. Why should alliances matter?

Previous studies show that countries honor their formal alliance commitments only 50–75% of the time. This poor record of keeping their promises has led skeptics to wonder whether alliances are merely “marriages of convenience” that countries can set aside when needed. Why would the existence of alliance agreements constrain a country’s behavior, including weighty choices about using military force?

Many scholars have argued that public opinion is crucial in the decision to go to war. Leaders of democracies, in particular, rarely go to war without public backing (Reiter and Stam 2002). Perhaps alliances are consequential partly because they shape public opinion about whether to fight on behalf of other countries (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004). Little is known, however, about whether and why alliances affect public preferences about using military force.

A first reason that an alliance commitment could affect public support for military intervention is concern about international reputation. Countries that fail to defend their allies could take a reputational hit if other states conclude that the country will not uphold other alliance commitments in the future. A reputation for reneging, in turn, could undermine a country’s ability to attract military cooperation down the road (Miller 2003, Gibler 2008, Crescenzi et al. 2012, Miller 2012, Mattes 2012). Just as citizens might disapprove of backing down from threats because of reputational concerns (Fearon 1994), they might recoil against breaking alliances out of fear that others would view them as unreliable military partners.

In practice, though, citizens might not think that breaking an alliance would carry serious reputational costs. As Morrow (2000, 71-72) notes, “every decision to intervene is unique, and the interests and values that drive decisions to intervene vary from case to case.” Others have added that cognitive biases affect how actors interpret behavior, distorting how past actions translate into reputation (Mercer 1996). Observers might view any particular act of betrayal as sui generis, rather than evidence of a general proclivity to break promises and abandon allies. If

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4 Similarly, in his study of the credibility of threats, Press 2005 argues that past behavior plays little role in shaping foreign leaders’ beliefs about whether a country will stand firm. Leaders instead look to situational factors such as power and interests. See also Hopf 1994. See also Snyder and Diesing 1978 on how leaders often misinterpret historical information during crises, and Reiter 1996 on how countries use history in their decisions to form alliances in the first place.
countries can escape reputational damage simply by arguing that “this time is different”—or if citizens think this kind of excuse would succeed—then the mere existence of an alliance agreement might not affect domestic calculations about war.

Second, the public could worry that forsaking an ally could tarnish the country’s reputation in other domains, a phenomenon known as “reputation spillover.” Jervis (1989), for example, argues that countries can form a “signaling reputation,” or a general reputation for keeping their word. This could be valuable not only in future alliance negotiations, but also in recruiting foreign partners for cooperation in non-military contexts such as trade, finance, immigration, and the environment. Cole and Kehoe (1998), exploring reputation in the domain of sovereign debt, suggest that a reputation in one arena can affect how a government is viewed in others. If observers draw broad conclusions about a country’s reliability from its treatment of its allies, neglecting an alliance could hurt the country’s ability to find willing partners for cooperation in other areas.

On the other hand, Downs and Jones (2002) assert that the reputational consequences of breaking a given international agreement are usually limited to similar agreements. If the public thinks similarly, they may not worry about potential reputational spillovers from alliances to other domains.

A third potential mechanism involves morality. Perhaps citizens think it to be morally wrong to break a promise, even in the absence of reputational consequences. This idea is curiously absent from the existing literature on alliances, but a growing body of scholarship has argued that moral concerns affect how the public thinks about foreign policy. Moral beliefs appear to shape individual preferences about using military force (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, Liberman 2006, Stein 2012), and individuals often cite morality when explaining their own views on military intervention (Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; see also Reifler et al. 2014). Moral concerns also affect how countries fight wars, including decisions about using biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons (Price 1995, Price and Tannenwald 1996, Tannenwald 1999) or engaging in torture (Nincic and Ramos 2011).

Kertzer et al. (2014) take these ideas a step further, arguing that moral values affect foreign policy preferences by not only shaping attitudes about the appropriateness of specific actions, but also by affecting perceptions of what constitutes the U.S. national interest. All of this research suggests a potentially important causal mechanism: alliances could alter preferences about war by triggering a sense of moral obligation to help the other country. Failing to keep one’s word could be seen as unfair/unjust or contrary to religious code. If so, the public should

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5 For a recent treatment on reliability and international cooperation, see Mattes and Rodrigues 2014.

6 A fourth possibility, which we do not test here, is that alliances could affect preferences about war by changing a country’s calculations about the likelihood of winning (Morrow 2000). For example, in many alliances, countries pledge not only to defend one another but also coordinate war plans, conduct military exercises together, and share sensitive intelligence. This is a valuable area for future research.


8 See also Dolan 2013 on conflicting norms.

9 See also Lake and Lindsey 2014.
be more likely to intervene on behalf of an ally than to fight for a country it had not promised to defend.

A question raised by this discussion is whether verbal promises to stand by a country have similar effects as formal alliances. Most of the existing literature on alliances focuses on formal agreements that are signed, and when necessary, ratified, by all parties (e.g. Singer and Small 1996, Snyder 1997, Leeds 2003, Choi 2012). These formal alliances are thought to signal a greater commitment than verbal promises because they are costly to negotiate, ratify, and implement. Only states that genuinely intend to fulfill their promises would be willing to absorb these costs (Fearon 1997, Morrow 2000). But how consequential are verbal commitments? This intriguing question has received little attention, perhaps because existing datasets do not include comprehensive information about verbal promises of military aid.

In this paper we examine the effects of verbal promises as well as written ones. We hypothesize that breaking a verbal promise, like reneging on a written commitment, should raise the specter of reputational damage (Fearon 1994). We anticipate, however, that domestic and foreign observers will attach more reputational weight to written agreements than unwritten ones. Citizens should, therefore, be less fearful of reputational consequences when the agreement was not written, signed, and ratified. We also expect verbal commitments to generate significant moral concerns. We predict, however, that people will feel fewer moral qualms about backtracking on verbal promises, because partners probably do not place as much reliance on verbal promises as on written ones.

3. When are alliances most consequential?

In addition to studying whether alliances affect preferences for war, we investigate the conditions under which alliances are most consequential. In other words, under what conditions do alliances have the greatest effect on willingness to use force? Several contextual variables could either strengthen or weaken the effect of alliances on support for military intervention.

A first potential moderator is regime type. Previous research has shown that democratic publics are more supportive of intervention on behalf of a fellow democracy than a dictatorship (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999). The question remains, however, whether alliances have a more profound effect on public opinion when the country in question is democratic. The literature on the democratic peace suggests that citizens should anticipate more significant reputational and moral costs from breaking an alliance with a fellow democracy; in that case, democracy could amplify the effects of alliances on preferences.

Two other potential moderators are costs and stakes. We predict that alliances will be least consequential when the costs are low and the stakes are high. Given low costs and high stakes, many citizens will support intervention regardless of whether the invaded country is an ally. Alliances should matter more when costs are high and/or the stakes are low. In those cases, the existence of an alliance commitment could help overcome public reluctance to get involved.

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10 For a different prediction, see Clare 2013.
4. When are alliances most reliable?

A final question is under what conditions alliances are most reliable. Once an alliance has been concluded, under what conditions is the public willing to follow through on the commitment? A significant empirical literature has used observational data to investigate this question, but studying compliance with alliance agreements is remarkably difficult. One reason is that alliance obligations are seldom invoked. This problem is especially acute for defense pacts, in which a country promises to help an ally if it is the target of an armed attack. Defense pacts are tried only when war breaks out, meaning that scholars have few data points upon which to draw. A second factor, strategic selection, also plagues our ability to study compliance with alliances. Reliable alliances will rarely be tested, while unreliable alliances will be tried disproportionately. 11

We revisit this question in an experimental context, asking how the three factors outlined above—regime type, costs, and stakes—affect willingness to intervene conditional on an alliance having already been concluded.

First, are democratic publics more willing to come to the aid of an ally if the ally is democratic? A large literature on the democratic peace has found that democracies are more sympathetic toward other democracies. Some researchers have found that alliances between democracies last longer (Gaubatz 1996, Bennett 1997, Reed 1997) and that alliances involving a greater number of democracies are less likely to terminate in a violation (Leeds and Savun 2007). But no one appears to have studied whether democracies are more likely to honor alliances with fellow democracies than with nondemocracies, all else equal. We address this question using the results of our experiments.

Another question is whether the public is more likely to defend an ally when the human and financial costs of military action would be low, and when the strategic and economic stakes are high. 12 We expect alliances to be most reliable when the U.S. could dislodge the invader at low cost, and when inaction would hurt U.S. military security and the U.S. economy.

Our discussion has highlighted three reasons why alliances could be consequential. Alliances could shape behavior because citizens believe that reneging would hurt the country’s reputation for being a faithful ally; because they fear the specter of reputational damage in nonmilitary arenas; or because alliances give rise to feelings of moral obligation. We predicted that all types of alliances would exert these effects, but the mechanisms would be somewhat stronger for written commitments than for verbal ones.

We also identified several factors that could moderate the effects of alliances. Alliances should matter to a greater or lesser degree depending on the regime type of the ally, the stakes of intervening, and the costs of getting involved. Finally, we conjectured that public support for honoring an existing alliance depends on the context, including costs, stakes, and regime type. In the next section we describe an experiment to shed light on these questions.

11 Smith 1996; see also Schultz 2001.
5. Experimental design

We conducted a large-scale experiment to study how alliances affect public support for military intervention. Our experiment, embedded in a public opinion poll, presented respondents with a hypothetical situation in which one country invaded another and attempted to seize some of its territory. We randomized information about whether the United States had an alliance with the country that had been attacked, as well as information about several contextual factors that could make alliances more or less consequential. After describing each pair of countries, we asked whether the respondent would support a U.S. military intervention to drive out the invader. This design allowed us to estimate the separate and interactive effects of our randomized treatments, while avoiding problems of endogeneity, spurious correlation, and collinearity that often hamper observational research.

Our experiment was also designed to shed light on causal mechanisms. We measured how the treatment variables affected perceptions of three mediating variables: how U.S. actions would affect its reputation for upholding alliance agreements; how U.S. behavior would affect its reputation in the nonmilitary realm; and whether the United States had a moral duty to intervene. Having measured these perceptions, we could study why alliance commitments shift (or do not shift) public preferences about intervention.

Our experiment, embedded in a public opinion poll, was fielded in January 2015 to a sample of 950 U.S. citizens using Amazon Mechanical Turk. (The full text of the experiment appears in the appendix.) The experiment began by telling respondents, “There’s a lot of talk these days about U.S. relations with other countries in the world. We’d like to get your thoughts about a situation our country could face in the future. The situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about a policy option.”

We then presented respondents with a scenario in which the leader of a country wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country and take part of that country’s territory. We told all respondents that the attacking country was non-democratic, that it did not share many interests with the U.S., and that it did not have a military alliance with the U.S. We also told all respondents that the country that had been attacked shared many interests with the U.S.

To investigate the effects of alliances, we randomized whether the United States had made an alliance commitment with the country that was attacked, and, if so, whether the commitment was a written treaty or a verbal pledge. One third of the respondents read that the country “Does not have a military alliance” with the country that was attacked. Another third were told that “the country that was attacked has a written military alliance with the U.S. The agreement, which was signed and ratified three years ago, says: ‘If one member of the alliance is attacked, the other member will take all necessary actions, including the use of armed force, to defend its ally.’” The remaining third read that “the country that was attacked has an unwritten military alliance with the U.S. The agreement, which was made verbally three years ago, says: ‘If one member of the alliance is attacked, the other member will take all necessary actions, including the use of armed force, to defend its ally.’ The agreement was not written or signed.”

We also randomized several contextual variables that could moderate the effects of alliances. To vary the stakes for the United States, we told half the sample that “If the attacker succeeds in taking part of the other country, this would weaken U.S. military security and hurt
the economy.” The other half of the sample read that a victory by the attacking country would “neither weaken U.S. military security nor hurt the U.S. economy.” We manipulated a second contextual variable, costs, by randomizing whether the military operation would or would not be “very costly for the United States.” For the third contextual variable, regime type, we randomized whether the country under attack was a democracy, or not a democracy.

Finally, we varied the region in which the dispute took place, not only to make the vignette more concrete, but also to make sure that our results are not driven by specific country examples that respondents could be calling to mind. Respondents were randomly told that the two countries were located in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America.

After exposing respondents to this information, we asked them whether they favored or opposed sending the U.S. military to stop the invasion. There were five response options, ranging from “Favor strongly” to “Oppose strongly.” To simplify the analysis and presentation, we dichotomized the dependent variable: respondents were coded as 100 if they favored military intervention strongly or somewhat, and coded 0 otherwise. This scaling allows us to interpret all effects as changes in the percentage of respondents who favored military intervention. All findings are robust to other coding schemes, though, including the full five-point scale.

6. Results

Evidence about the Main Effect of Alliances

Figure 1 shows the estimated effect of each treatment, averaging over the values of all other treatment conditions. The first row displays the impact of a written alliance. Other factors equal, having a written alliance increased public support for intervention by 30 percentage points, relative to an otherwise identical situation in which the United States had not committed to defend the country. The 95 percent confidence interval around this estimate ranged from 23 to 37 percentage points. Thus, we can be quite certain that written alliances alter public opinion about war.
Figure 1: Effect of Alliances and other Treatments on Support for Intervention

The second row of Figure 1 plots the average effect of an unwritten alliance. In our experiment, verbal commitments raised popular enthusiasm for intervention by 28 percentage points, relative to baseline scenarios in which the United States had not committed. Interestingly, unwritten alliances proved nearly as potent as written alliances. The effects differed by only two percentage points, a gap that was not only substantively small but also statistically insignificant.

The remaining rows of Figure 1 present the average effects of the other randomized treatments. Ceteris paribus, public support for intervention was 11 points higher when the expected costs of action were low than when the expected costs were high. Likewise, intervention was nine points more popular when the stakes were high, meaning that inaction would weaken the safety and economy of United States, than when the stakes were low. Figure 1 further reveals a public preference for defending democracies. Even after holding alliances and contextual variables constant, the public was six points more willing to intervene on behalf of democratic victims than on behalf of nondemocratic ones.

The bottom portion of Figure 1 displays the effects of geographic location. We designated South America as the reference region and plotted geographic effects relative to that baseline. On average, citizens were slightly less willing to intervene in Africa and Eastern Europe than to intervene in South America, but slightly more willing to engage in Asia. These regional differences were fairly small, however, and not statistically distinguishable from zero.

Overall, Figure 1 provides strong confirmation for our hypothesis that alliance commitments shape public support for war, even after controlling for the costs of intervention, the economic and strategic interests of the United States, the political system of the country that was invaded, and the region in which the country was located. Moreover, the impact of alliances
was three times larger than the effect of any other treatment in our experiment. These findings suggest that citizens attach high importance to honoring military alliances, and are willing to send American forces into battle in order to uphold prior commitments.

**Evidence about Causal Mechanisms**

To deepen the analysis, we next investigated three mechanisms through which alliances might drive public support for war. The first mechanism concerned America's reputation for honoring alliance commitments. After presenting the scenario, we asked whether people agreed or disagreed with the statement, “If the U.S. does not send its military, other counties will doubt America’s willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future.” We used the answers to construct a scale with five levels: disagree strongly (0), disagree somewhat (25), neither agree nor disagree (50), agree somewhat (75), or agree strongly (100).

As Figure 2 shows, respondents felt that reneging on this particular alliance commitment would undermine America’s military reputation with other nations by signaling that the U.S. could not be trusted to defend its allies in the future. Figure 2 further reveals that citizens expected even larger reputational effects from breaking written alliances (solid dot) than from breaking purely verbal commitments (hollow square). The difference in our study was six points, a statistically significant gap.

**Figure 2: Effect of Alliances on Mediators**
ur study also uncovered concerns about reputational spillovers. We asked whether inaction would undermine America’s reputation for honoring nonmilitary agreements in areas such as trade and the environment. Concerns about spillovers were 20 points higher when the U.S. had previously made a written or verbal alliance commitment than when it had not made such a pledge. In general, however, citizens felt that breaking alliances was more likely to undermine America’s military reputation than to hurt its nonmilitary reputation. This pattern is consistent with the hypothesis that reneging causes more reputational damage within the immediate issue area than across issue areas.

Finally, we investigated the connection between alliances and feelings of moral obligation. Our survey asked whether the United States had a moral obligation to defend the country that was attacked. As Figure 2 shows, the existence of a written alliance increased feelings of moral obligation by 33 points (on a 100-point scale), relative to an otherwise identical situation in which the United States had not committed. The effect of unwritten alliances was nearly as large (29 points) and not statistically different at conventional confidence levels. Overall, then, Figure 2 confirms that both written and unwritten alliances affected perceptions of all three mediators: military reputation, nonmilitary reputation, and moral obligation.

Moving down the causal chain, how did these the mediators affect support for military intervention? To find out, we regressed support for intervention on the three mediators, which we rescaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. Our regression model included a battery of demographic variables. Specifically, we controlled for whether the respondent was male, white, the respondent’s age in decades, and level of education. Finally, we controlled for three attitudinal variables: militarism, internationalism, and nationalism, each measured from 0 to 1. The appendix contains the exact wording of questions used to construct these indices.

Beyond these demographic variables, we included indicators for all 96 combinations of the randomized treatments. That is, we inserted dummies for written and unwritten alliances, the expected costs of the operation, the stakes for the U.S., and the regime type and geographic region of the invaded country, as well as interactions among along these treatments. Thus, the regression was designed to isolate how beliefs about military reputation, nonmilitary reputation, and moral obligation affect attitudes toward intervention, after adjusting for individual and situational features that could confound the relationship between the mediators and the outcome.

As Table 1 shows, all three mediators substantially affected support for intervention. Other factors equal, willingness to intervene was 25 percentage points higher among people who thought that inaction would undermine America’s reputation for honoring military alliances (military reputation = 1) than among people who did not expect this kind of reputational damage (military reputation = 0). Likewise, intervention was 12 percentage points more popular among respondents who anticipated that inaction would trigger reputational spillovers (nonmilitary reputation = 1) than among people who did expect reputational spillovers (nonmilitary reputation = 0). Finally, independent of any reputational concerns, citizens who thought the United States had a moral duty to get involved were nearly 62 percent more supportive of intervention than citizens who did not perceive a moral duty.
Table 1: Effect of Mediators on Support for U.S. Intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mediators</th>
<th>Coefficient</th>
<th>Std Error</th>
<th>t-stat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Military reputation</td>
<td>25.32</td>
<td>6.39</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonmilitary reputation</td>
<td>12.10</td>
<td>5.38</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral obligation</td>
<td>61.67</td>
<td>5.40</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Controls</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Treatments (not shown)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Militarism</td>
<td>15.76</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internationalism</td>
<td>11.63</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>0.96</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>-1.13</td>
<td>1.03</td>
<td>-1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The table gives the estimated coefficients, robust standard errors, and t-statistics from a linear regression. The dependent variable is coded 100 if the respondent supported U.S. intervention and coded 0 otherwise. In addition to the demographic controls that are listed in the table, the model included dummy variables for each of the 96 possible combinations of the treatment variables. Those treatment variables are not shown to save space. Sample size was 950.

Using the information in Figure 2 and Table 1, we estimated the importance of each causal mechanism. Recall that written alliances increased public support for intervention by 30.1 points. Approximately 39% of this effect flowed from concerns about military reputation. To see why, note that the expected damage to America’s military reputation was 0.46 higher (on a 0–1 scale) in scenarios with a written alliance than in scenarios without an alliance. Moreover, a one-unit change in expected damage to the country’s military reputation was associated with a 25.32 point surge in support for intervention. Putting these estimates together, we get $0.46 \times 25.32 = 11.7$, representing $11.7 \div 30.1 = 39\%$ of the total effect. Using a similar procedure, we calculated that fears of reputational spillovers mediated 8% of the total effect. These estimates are reported in Table 2.
The most important mechanism in our study was moral obligation. Written alliances, we found, generated a sense of moral duty, which strongly influenced attitudes about intervention. In total, moral obligation mediated 68% of the total treatment effect. Finally, our analyses suggest the existence of unmeasured mechanisms that partially counteracted the reputational and moral pathways by reducing support for intervention by 4.3 points. Overall, though, formal alliances drove public opinion primarily if not entirely by changing perceptions of reputation and morality.

The right half of Table 2 shows analogous estimates for unwritten alliances. Here, too, we find that all three mediators played important roles, with morality taking pride of place (63% of the total treatment effect), followed by military reputation (36% of the total) and nonmilitary reputation (8% of the total). Once again, residual mechanisms played only a small role. In summary, then, written and unwritten alliances not only exerted similar effects in the aggregate, but they also shaped opinion through similar causal mechanisms. From this point forward, therefore, we will simplify the analysis by pooling data from both types of alliances, instead of reporting the two types separately.

**What Moderates the Effect of Alliances?**

Earlier in the paper, we hypothesized that alliances would be more consequential in some conditions than in others. Specifically, we expected alliances to have a larger effect on public opinion when the costs of intervention were high, when the stakes for the United States were low, and when the country was a democracy. Our evidence supported some of these hypotheses while disconfirming others.

Figure 3 plots the estimated effect of alliances by context and region. Each dot shows how alliances affected support for intervention under the stated conditions, relative to an otherwise identical situation in which the U.S. had not made an alliance commitment. The first row, for example, summarizes how alliances shaped opinion in scenarios where military intervention would be very costly to the United States. Under those conditions, support for intervention was 30 points higher with an alliance than without one. (We obtained this estimate by averaging over the other randomized treatments: stakes, regime type, and geographic region.)
The second entry shows how alliances moved opinion when the operation would not entail high costs for the United States. Surprisingly, the average effect of alliances was 29 points, nearly the same as in the first row. Thus, contrary to our initial expectations, the impact of alliances did not vary with the expected costs of military action. It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Americans are insensitive to costs. As we show later in the paper, the costs of military action do weigh heavily on citizens, even though they do not moderate the size of the difference between having an alliance and not having one.

The effects of alliances did not depend on costs, but they did vary sharply with the strategic and economic stakes for the United States. When the stakes were high—giving Americans compelling reasons to intervene even in the absence of an alliance—adding an alliance increased public support for war by only 15 points. When the stakes were low, by contrast, the marginal effect of alliances proved enormous. Under those circumstances, citizens were 44 points more willing to intervene in the presence of an alliance than in the absence of one. This finding lends support to fears of entrapment, by showing how alliances can draw the United States into conflict even when the economic and security interests of the country might not warrant intervention.

The next pair of entries in Figure 3 tests whether alliances were more powerful in galvanizing public opinion when the partner was democratic than when the partner was autocratic. We found no evidence for this distinction. The average causal effect of alliances was 30 points when the partner was a democracy, versus 29 points when the partner was not a democracy.
Finally, we investigated whether alliances were more likely to pull the United States into wars in some regions than in others. In our data, alliances made the biggest difference for conflicts in Asia. Other factors equal, citizens were 38 percentage points more willing to send forces to defend an Asian ally, than to defend a similar Asian country that was not a U.S. ally. The impact of alliances was notably weaker for conflicts in Africa (29 points), Eastern Europe (25 points), and South America (26 points). Future research could examine why alliances seem to make a bigger difference in Asia than in other theaters.

*When Are Alliances Reliable?*

The previous figures and tables summarized how alliances affected public opinion, compared to otherwise equivalent scenarios in which the United States had not pledged support. In this section we examine a related but distinct question: under what conditions would the U.S. fulfil alliances that already exist? In other words, what makes some alliances more reliable than others?

If Americans were always willing to defend ally X, we would classify the commitment to X as perfectly reliable. If, on the other hand, Americans would never defend ally X regardless of the circumstances, we would code the pledge to X as completely unreliable. Most alliances presumably fall between those extremes. To investigate the causes of reliability, we analyzed how contextual and regional variables affected public support for intervention when alliances were already in place.

**Figure 4: Support for Intervention, With and Without Alliances**
The solid dots in Figure 4 show what percentage of respondents favored intervention on behalf of an ally. The figure indicates that in all of the contexts we manipulated, a strong majority of our respondents supported intervention to help an ally. The first two rows compare scenarios in which intervention would entail high versus low costs for the United States. When the expected costs were high, less than 70 percent of Americans were willing to help the ally. When the expected costs were low, by contrast, willingness to intervene soared above 80 percent. To complete the picture, Figure 4 also summarizes public support for defending non-allies (the hollow squares). Here, too, we find that citizens were less enthusiastic about intervention when the costs were high (40%) than when the costs were low (51%).

Several conclusions follow. First, Americans are indeed sensitive to costs, a finding that reinforces a growing literature about the casualty-aversion of the mass public. Second, Americans are significantly less willing to honor alliance commitments when compliance would be inconvenient. This finding contributes to the alliance reliability literature by identifying conditions under which allies might not be able to count on the United States. Third, even though costs mattered, they did not moderate the effect of having versus not having an alliance. When costs were high, 69.6 percent of respondents wanted to defend an ally, whereas 40.1 percent wanted to defend a non-ally, for a difference of 69.6 – 40.1 = 29.5 points. When costs were low, both components of the equation increased by similar amounts, resulting in the same gap: 80.2 – 51.3 = 28.9. Thus, costs affected public opinion without moderating the total effect of making a commitment.

The next two rows in Figure 4 compare situations with high versus low stakes. Here, too, the pattern intriguing. In our data, citizens were just as willing to defend an ally when the stakes were low as when the stakes were high. Based purely on this graph, one might jump to the erroneous conclusion that stakes didn’t matter. On the contrary, stakes had a huge effect on public opinion, but only when the United States had not made an alliance commitment. In those scenarios, 60% of respondents favored intervention when stakes were high, versus 32% when the stakes were low.

What lessons can we draw? First, stakes—as manipulated in our experiment—mattered even more than costs. Citizens expressed a much stronger impulse to intervene when victory by the invading country would weaken U.S. military security and the U.S. economy, than when victory by the invader would not have these adverse effects. Second, alliances washed out this difference by making citizens just as willing to intervene in low-stakes situations as in high-stakes ones. Thus, Figure 4 helps explain our earlier finding that alliances contribute to entrapment. In our study, alliances contributed to entrapment by causing citizens to ignore the fundamental distinction between wars that directly serve the national interest and wars that do not.

Figure 4 also shows the effects of democracy. As expected, Americans were more willing to defend democratic allies (78%) than to defend autocratic ones (72%). However, a similar gap appeared in scenarios without alliances. There, support for intervention was 49% when the country was democratic, but only 43% when the country was not. Thus, regime type performed similar to costs: it affected public support for intervention without moderating the difference between having an alliance and not having one.

The bottom portion of Figure 4 compares support for intervention by geographic region. In our study, respondents were more willing to honor alliances with Asian countries than to honor similar alliances with partners in other regions of the world. This pattern may reflect favorable attitudes toward longstanding Asian allies, including Japan, South Korea, and the
Philippines. Future research could investigate why Americans attach special importance to upholding alliances in Asia.

7. Conclusion

When and why do military alliances matter? Previous observational studies about the effects of alliances have been hampered by selection bias and low sample size. We therefore designed an experiment in which we presented U.S. citizens with a situation in which one country had invaded another. We randomized whether the country under attack had an alliance with the U.S., as well as contextual factors including costs, stakes, regime type, and geographic region.

We found that having a military alliance profoundly influenced support for intervention. These effects were slightly larger when the alliance was written, but nearly as substantial when the alliance consisted of a verbal pledge. We also found strong evidence in favor of each of our three hypothesized mechanisms. Alliance commitments shaped public opinion about war by raising concerns about reputational in both military and nonmilitary arenas, and because individuals think we have a moral obligation to honor alliance commitments.

We also investigated whether contextual variables moderate the effect of alliances. Our research showed that alliances have the largest effect when the stakes of intervention are low. Finally, our experiments shed light on the conditions under which alliances are most reliable. Other factors equal, citizens were more likely to honor existing alliances when the costs of fidelity were low, and when the alliance partner was democratic. These findings shed on why countries respect some alliance commitments while violating others.

This experiment presents only the first step in a much broader research program. In addition to replicating our experiments on other samples—including citizens of other countries and perhaps foreign policy elites—we will ask additional questions about when and how alliances shape public opinion.

One set of studies will investigate how the design of alliance agreements affects decisions about war. Does the agreement contain escape clauses? How specific and complete are the terms of the agreement? Does the agreement contain nonsecurity provisions such as promises of economic cooperation, etc.? By randomizing not only the existence but also the content of alliance agreements, we can see whether some types of alliance agreements are more consequential than others.

Another set of studies will investigate responses to changing circumstances. In international law the principle that treaties must be kept (pacta sunt servanda) sits uncomfortably with the idea that fundamental changes in circumstances can render treaties invalid (rebus sic stantibus). Are domestic audiences more willing to abrogate agreements when circumstances have changed fundamentally since the alliance was formed? For example, does it matter whether the alliance was signed when the ally was more strategically important, had a different type of political regime, or had different policy preferences? Are citizens less willing to uphold older

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treaties, or treaties signed by a different leader, even if other circumstances have not shifted appreciably?  

We also plan to vary the origins and nature of conflict the two countries. In the experiment we conducted, one country attacked another in order to gain more power and resources. Future experiments could portray other motives for attacking. The country could, for example, attack because of a longstanding historical feud; because it was provoked by the other country; or because it felt threatened by the military power of the target and its allies. We could then test how the effects of alliance agreements vary across different types of military conflicts. Finally, we hope to vary other features of the warring parties. Here, we randomized whether the country that was attacked was a democracy, but consistently portrayed the attacker as an autocracy. In a follow-up study, we could vary the regime type of the attacker and see whether this moderates American willingness to aid an ally. For additional insight we could randomize other characteristics of the disputants, including their human rights practices, ethnic or cultural composition, level of military power, and history of cooperation or conflict with the United States. Taken together, these studies should offer new insight into the fundamental questions of when and why alliances matter in international relations.

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14 Such experiments could complement existing work on leader-specific reputations to assess whether citizens believe that other countries will penalize them for abrogating an agreement made by a previous leader (Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2015; Brutger and Kertz 2015). See also Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009 on leadership change and alliance termination.
Works Cited


APPENDIX: SURVEY INSTRUMENT
RANDOM VARIABLES

We randomized five features of the scenario.

Alliance:

- *alliance*: Does not have a military alliance with the U.S.  
  *alliance_text*: blank

  --OR--

- *alliance*: Has a written military alliance agreement with the U.S.  
  *alliance_text*: As noted, the country that was attacked has a written military alliance with the U.S. The agreement, which was signed and ratified three years ago, says: “If one member of the alliance is attacked, the other member will take all necessary actions, including the use of armed force, to defend its ally.”

  --OR--

- *alliance*: Has an unwritten military alliance agreement with the U.S.  
  *alliance_text*: As noted, the country that was attacked has an unwritten military alliance with the U.S. The agreement, which was made verbally three years ago, says: “If one member of the alliance is attacked, the other member will take all necessary actions, including the use of armed force, to defend its ally.”

Interests:

- If the attacker succeeds in taking part of the other country, this would weaken U.S. military security and hurt the U.S. economy. --OR--
- If the attacker succeeds in taking part of the other country, this would neither weaken U.S. military security nor hurt the U.S. economy.

Costs:

- The U.S. military could stop the invasion, but the military operation would be very costly to the United States. --OR--
- The U.S. military could stop the invasion, and the military operation would not be very costly to the United States.

Regime: Democracy --OR-- Not a democracy

Region: Africa --OR-- Asia --OR-- Eastern Europe --OR-- South America
TEXT OF THE EXPERIMENT

There’s a lot of talk these days about U.S. relations with other countries in the world. We’d like to get your thoughts about a situation our country could face in the future. The situation is general, and is not about a specific country in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about a policy option.

—new page—

The leader of a country in [region] wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country in [region] and take part of that country's territory. Here are some facts about the two countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The country that attacked</th>
<th>The country that was attacked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of government</strong></td>
<td>Not a democracy</td>
<td>[regime]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared interests?</strong></td>
<td>Does not share many interests with the U.S.</td>
<td>Shares many interests with the U.S.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alliance with the U.S.?</strong></td>
<td>Does not have a military alliance with the U.S.</td>
<td>[alliance]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

☐ Click here after you have read this page carefully.

—new page—
Just to review... The leader of a country in [region] wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country in [region] and take part of that country's territory. Here are some additional facts about the countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of government</th>
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<th>The country that was attacked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>[alliance]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[alliance_text] [interests] [costs]

Do you favor or oppose sending the U.S. military to stop the invasion?
- Favor strongly
- Favor somewhat
- Neither favor nor oppose
- Oppose somewhat
- Oppose strongly

Please type a few sentences about why you gave that answer.

—new page—
Here is the situation again, for your reference. The leader of a country in [region] wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country in [region] and take part of that country's territory.

Here are some additional facts.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>The country that was attacked</th>
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<td>[alliance]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[alliance_text] [interests] [costs]

We would like your opinions about what might happen if the U.S. does not send its military to stop the invasion. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

If the U.S. does not send its military, the attacker will succeed in taking over part of the other country.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly

If the U.S. does not send its military, U.S. national security will suffer.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly
If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America's willingness to stop international aggression in the future.

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America's willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future.

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America's willingness to honor non-military agreements in areas such as trade or the environment.

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will be less willing to help the U.S. in the future.

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

—new page—
Here is the situation again, for your reference. The leader of a country in [region] wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country in [region] and take part of that country's territory.

Here are some additional facts.

<table>
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<td>Does not have a military alliance with the U.S.</td>
<td>[alliance]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[alliance_text] [interests] [costs]

Now we would like your opinions about what might happen if the U.S. does send its military to stop the invasion. Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

If the U.S. sends its military, the U.S. will succeed in stopping the attacking country.
- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

If the U.S. sends its military, the U.S. military will suffer many military casualties.
- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

If the U.S. sends its military, the operation will cost the U.S. a lot of money.
- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly
If the U.S. sends its military, other countries will assist the U.S. with the military operation.
- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

—new page—

Here is the situation one last time, for your reference. The leader of a country in [region] wanted more power and resources, so he sent his military to attack another country in [region] and take part of that country's territory.

Here are some additional facts.

<table>
<thead>
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<td>Does not have a military alliance with the U.S.</td>
<td>[alliance]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

[alliance_text] [interests] [costs]
Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.

The U.S. has a moral obligation to defend the country that was attacked.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly

The U.S. president should give a speech condemning the attacking country.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly

The U.S. should cut off all economic relations with the attacking country.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly

The U.S. should send money and weapons to help the country defend itself against the attacker.
☐ Agree strongly
☐ Agree somewhat
☐ Neither agree nor disagree
☐ Disagree somewhat
☐ Disagree strongly
DEMOGRAPHIC AND ATTITUDINAL CONTROLS

Measured before experiment:

Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with these statements:

“The use of military force only makes problems worse.”
○ Agree strongly
○ Agree somewhat
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree somewhat
○ Disagree strongly

“The United States needs to play an active role in solving conflicts around the world.”
○ Agree strongly
○ Agree somewhat
○ Neither agree nor disagree
○ Disagree somewhat
○ Disagree strongly

Measured after experiment:

Finally, we would like to ask a few questions about your background.

Are you male or female?
○ Male
○ Female

What racial or ethnic group best describes you?
○ White
○ Black or African American
○ Hispanic or Latino
○ Asian or Asian American
○ Native American
○ Middle Eastern
○ Mixed Race
○ Some other race – Type in race ____________________
Please enter your age on your last birthday. Please remember that your responses are kept confidential.
[select from 18-99+]

What is the highest level of school you have completed?
- No formal education
- 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th grade
- 5th or 6th grade
- 7th or 8th grade
- 9th grade
- 10th grade
- 11th grade
- 12th grade, no diploma
- High school graduate – high school diploma or the equivalent (GED)
- Some college, no degree
- Associate degree
- Bachelor’s degree
- Master’s degree
- Professional or Doctorate degree

How important is religion in your life?
- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not too important
- Not at all important

What is your religion?
- Baptist - any denomination
- Protestant (e.g., Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal)
- Catholic
- Mormon
- Jewish
- Muslim
- Hindu
- Buddhist
- Pentecostal
- Eastern Orthodox
- Other Christian
- Other non-Christian
- None
Would you describe yourself as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian?

- Yes
- No

Please tell us how much you agree or disagree with these statements:

"In the United States, our people are not perfect, but our culture is superior to others."

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

"I would rather be a citizen of America than of any other country in the world."

- Agree strongly
- Agree somewhat
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree somewhat
- Disagree strongly

In general, do you think of yourself as...

- Extremely liberal
- Liberal
- Slightly liberal
- Moderate, middle of the road
- Slightly conservative
- Conservative
- Extremely conservative

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a...

- Republican
- Democrat
- Independent
- Another party, please specify ______________________
- No preference

If selected Republican or Democrat:

Would you call yourself a ...

- Strong [Republican/Democrat]
- Not very strong [Republican/Democrat]
If selected neither Republican nor Democrat:

Do you think of yourself as closer to the . . .
☐ Republican Party
☐ Democratic Party
☐ Neither party

Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs...?
☐ Most of the time
☐ Some of the time
☐ Only now and then
☐ Hardly at all
☐ Don't know

Did you vote in the 2012 general election?
☐ No
☐ I usually vote, but did not in 2012
☐ I am not sure
☐ Yes. I definitely voted.

During the past year did you ... (Please check all that apply)
☐ Attend local political meetings (such as school board or city council)
☐ Put up a political sign (such as a lawn sign or a bumper sticker)
☐ Work for a candidate or campaign
☐ Donate money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization
☐ Donate blood
☐ None of these

In what state do you currently reside?
[drop-down]