Military Alliances and Public Support for War

Michael Tomz  
Department of Political Science  
Stanford University  
Encina Hall West, Room 310  
Stanford, CA 94305-6044  
tomz@stanford.edu

Jessica L. P. Weeks  
Department of Political Science  
University of Wisconsin  
110 North Hall  
Madison, WI 53706  
jweeks@wisc.edu

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Abstract: How do military alliances affect public support for war? We offer the first experimental evidence on this fundamental question. Our experiments revealed that alliance commitments greatly increased the American public’s willingness to intervene abroad. Alliances shaped public opinion by increasing public fears about the reputational costs of nonintervention, and by heightening the perceived moral obligation to intervene out of fairness and loyalty. Finally, although alliances swayed public opinion across a wide range of circumstances, they made the biggest difference when the costs of intervention were high, stakes of intervention were low, and the country needing aid was not a democracy. Thus, alliances can create pressure for war even when honoring the commitment would be extremely inconvenient, helping to explain why leaders carefully weigh which alliances to form. These findings shed new light on debates about the effects of alliances on domestic and international politics.

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1. Introduction.

Do military alliances matter and, if so, when and why? These questions have long been debated in academic and policy circles. Some argue that military alliances are merely “scraps of paper” that countries can disregard when it suits them. Indeed, studies show that countries honor formal alliance commitments only 50–75% of the time (Leeds, Long, and Mitchell 2000; Berkemeier and Fuhrmann 2018). According to skeptics, alliances place minimal constraints on state behavior, including decisions to use military force.

Others take for granted 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. In this view, alliances shape behavior because breaking them would have consequences.

In this article, we examine one important piece of the alliance puzzle: how alliances affect public support for war. Many scholars argue that public opinion is crucial to decisions about the use of military force. Leaders of democracies, in particular, rarely go to war without public backing (Reiter and Stam 2002). Leaders expect to be penalized domestically for fighting wars the public opposes, and for failing to fight wars the public supports (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2019). For these reasons, domestic audiences can be “pivotal in the choice to intervene” on behalf of an ally (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004, 782; Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015).

To date, however, scholars have not investigated whether and how alliances shape public opinion about military intervention.¹ In this article we develop three hypotheses. First, citizens

¹ Scholars have begun using survey experiments to study how the public reacts to other treaty commitments, e.g. Wallace 2013; Chaudoin 2014; Chilton and Tingley 2014.
should be more supportive of military intervention on behalf of formal ally, than on behalf of an otherwise similar country that is not a formal ally. Second, alliances should exert this effect through two main mechanisms: increasing public fears about the reputational costs of nonintervention, and heightening the perceived moral obligation to intervene. Finally, alliances can create pressure for war even when honoring the commitment would be extremely inconvenient, underscoring why leaders must take great care in deciding which alliances to form.

We tested these hypotheses by conducting survey experiments in the U.S. Participants read a vignette in which one country attacked another in an attempt to seize territory. We randomized whether the U.S. had signed a formal defense pact or had not made any pledge to defend the invaded country. To estimate the potential effects of alliances across a wide range of circumstances, including ones in which actual alliances might be more or less common and intervention might seem more or less attractive, we also varied four contextual features: the costs of intervention, the stakes for the U.S., the political regime of the invaded country, and the location of the conflict. We then measured whether and why respondents would support or oppose using the U.S. military to defend the invaded country.

Our experiments yielded several important findings. First, military alliances substantially changed public preferences about war. Participants were, on average, 33 percentage points more supportive of intervention to help an ally than to help an otherwise equivalent country to whom the U.S. had not made such a pledge. Thus, in cases where the public has influence, alliances can raise the probability of intervention and potentially contribute to the credibility of deterrence (Leeds 2003a; Johnson and Leeds 2011).

Second, the effects arose through two mechanisms: reputation and morality. Alliances increased public support for war by raising concerns that inaction would hurt America’s
reputation for reliability and violate ethical norms such as fairness and loyalty. These findings have broader implications for international relations, by revealing the criteria citizens use when thinking about compliance with international commitments.

Finally, although alliances swayed public opinion across a wide range of circumstances, they made the biggest difference when the costs of intervention were high, the stakes of intervention were low, and the country needing aid was not a democracy. In precisely those situations, alliances turned public skepticism about intervention into majority support for war. Thus, our experiments suggest that alliances are not mere scraps of paper that countries can dismiss when it suits them. Instead, alliances are weighty commitments that can increase domestic support for war, even when intervention would otherwise seem inadvisable. These findings help explain why leaders should—and typically do—take great care when deciding which alliances to form in the first place.

2. Hypotheses about Alliances and Public Opinion

In recent years, a large body of scholarship has turned to public opinion as a way to understand the foreign policies of democratic states. Studies have shown that voters tend to elect leaders who share their views about the use of military force, and that leaders, once in office, respond to public opinion when making decisions about war. Leaders pay close attention to


public opinion (Reiter and Stam 2002) because they expect serious domestic political costs if they fight wars the public opposes or abstain from wars the public wants (Tomz, Weeks, and Yarhi-Milo 2020). Although elites may be able to shape public opinion to some extent, understanding how the public responds to information about military crises is clearly important for explaining and predicting when democracies use military force.

Accordingly, scholars have increasingly studied the factors that affect public support for war. Research has shown, for example, that voters are sensitive to the human and economic costs of conflict (Mueller 1973), and are more willing to support conflicts involving low casualties and financial expenditures (Gartner and Segura 1998; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009; Flores-Macias and Kreps 2017). Citizens also weigh the stakes of a conflict, becoming more likely to support military intervention when they believe that U.S. interests are on the line. Finally, democratic publics are more supportive of intervention to help democracies than to help dictatorships (Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999).

To date, however, scholars have overlooked a potentially important factor influencing public support for war: military alliances. Moreover, scholars have not studied how alliances interact with other key drivers of public opinion, including costs, stakes, and regime type. We hypothesize that alliances could affect public support for war through three potentially complementary mechanisms: military reputation, nonmilitary reputation, and morality. We also hypothesize about the circumstances under which alliances might be most potent.

4 We discuss the role of elite cues and leader rhetoric later in the article.

5 Future research could explore other mechanisms, such as whether an alliance with the victim of an attack increases confidence that intervention will succeed (Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015).
**Reputation for Military Reliability**

First, alliance commitments could affect public support for war by raising concerns about the country’s reputation as a reliable military partner. A country that reneges on the terms of an alliance could develop a reputation as an unreliable ally, with various negative effects. For one, a poor reputation could undermine the ability to attract military cooperation down the road, because states only form alliances when “they believe there is a reasonable probability of successful cooperation” (Crescenzi, Kathman, Kleinberg, and Wood 2012, 263). Other countries might respond by demanding costly terms or refusing to form an alliance at all. Moreover, the perception that a country will disregard alliance commitments could embolden aggressors. Thus, alliances could increase public support for military intervention by raising the specter of reputational damage (Johnson 2016).

Citizens might find such concerns overblown, however. Morrow (2000, 71–72) argues that “every decision to intervene is unique, and the interests and values that drive decisions to intervene vary from case to case.” If observers see a particular act of betrayal as *sui generis*, rather than evidence of a general proclivity to break promises and abandon allies, the mere existence of an alliance might not affect their calculations. Moreover, even if voters anticipate

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7 On the terms of alliances, see Snyder 1997; Mattes 2012a; Johnson 2015.

8 E.g. Mercer 1996; Press 2005. Moreover, some alliances do not specify precise obligations, letting states argue that they are fulfilling the letter if not spirit of an agreement (Beckley 2015; Fjelstul and Reiter 2019).
reputational damage, it remains to be seen how they weigh these particular reputational costs when considering military intervention.

**Reputation for Nonmilitary Reliability**

The public could also worry about tarnishing the country’s reputation in other domains, known as “reputation spillover” (Cole and Kehoe 1998; Guzman 2008, 103). Jervis (1989), for example, argues that countries can form a “signaling reputation,” or a general reputation for keeping their word. If foreign countries draw broader conclusions about a country’s reliability from how it treats allies, reneging on an alliance could make it harder to recruit partners for cooperation in nonmilitary contexts like trade, finance, immigration, and the environment. If voters share these concerns, reputation spillover could be a mechanism through which alliances influence public support for war.

However, citizens might be skeptical that reneging on a military agreement would hurt the country’s reputation in other areas. Downs and Jones (2002) contend that the reputational consequences of breaking an international agreement are usually limited to similar agreements. Or, as Goldsmith and Posner (2005) put it, “it is not clear how much the violation of one treaty says about a state’s propensity to violate other treaties” (102; see also Posner and Sykes 2013: 33). Moreover, even if voters anticipate reputational spillover, they may focus on other considerations when judging potential military interventions.

**Moral Obligation**

Finally, citizens could deem it morally wrong to break a promise, even in the absence of
reputational consequences. Although morality is largely absent from the literature on alliances, a growing body of scholarship argues that moral considerations influence public thinking about foreign policy (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Herrmann and Shannon 2001; Kertzer, Powers, Rathbun, and Iyer 2014; Reifler et al. 2014; Liberman 2006, Kreps and Maxey 2017). This research suggests a potentially important causal mechanism: alliances could alter preferences by triggering perceptions of a moral obligation to intervene.

How, specifically, could alliances activate moral concerns? Recent scholarship on moral foundations theory (MFT) argues that conceptions of morality are based on five or six “moral foundations” (Haidt and Joseph 2004; Graham et al. 2013). Two foundations, care/harm and fairness/cheating, invoke longstanding Western theories about “how individuals ought to relate to, protect, and respect other individuals” (Graham et al 2013, 59). The care/harm foundation holds that people should help rather than harm others, and the fairness/cheating foundation emphasizes the importance of equal treatment and reciprocity. Other MFT principles relate to membership in groups and deference to authorities: loyalty/betrayal (associated with virtues such as loyalty and patriotism), authority/subversion (associated with obedience and deference), and sanctity/degradation (related to qualities such as chastity, piety, and cleanliness). Finally, some have proposed a sixth moral foundation, liberty/oppression, which emphasizes freedom from domination and coercion (Haidt 2012).

Alliances could activate several of these moral foundations. First, we hypothesize that alliances will raise concerns about fairness. Alliances are typically reciprocal, in that countries promise to defend each other in the event of attack. Countries profit from having allies, for

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9 Snyder 1997, pp. 8, is an exception.
example because alliances deter foreign aggression. Failing to defend an ally could be viewed as cheating: reaping the benefits of an alliance but refusing to pay the costs.

Second, we hypothesize that alliances will prompt questions of loyalty. As Haidt and Graham (2007, 105) write, “Because people value their ingroups, they also value those who sacrifice for the ingroup, and they despise those who betray or fail to come to the aid of the ingroup, particularly in times of conflict.” If alliances create an “ingroup,” failing to help an ally could be viewed as an immoral betrayal of a fellow group member.

Alliances could also raise issues related to the authority moral foundation, which involves respect for hierarchy and the rule of law. The public could reason that abrogating an alliance violates international law—contravenes the international legal principle that agreements must be kept—and is therefore morally wrong. However, voters might instead believe that abrogating an alliance is consistent with international legal principles, or might ignore international law when weighing the morality of intervention.

Finally, rebuffing an ally could generate concerns about care. Voters might reason that it is more harmful to spurn an ally than a non-ally, since “the failure of an alliance likely renders the abandoned partner more vulnerable than it was prior to its formation” (Crescenzi et al. 2012, 260). However, voters might not perceive allies to be more vulnerable, reasoning that the harm stemming from nonintervention would be the same regardless of whether an alliance had been signed. We design empirical tests to examine which of these countervailing logics dominate.

In contrast, it is difficult to imagine why alliances would elicit concerns about the remaining two foundations: liberty and sanctity. The liberty foundation involves freedom from domination; voters might reason that they have a moral duty to protect citizens of other countries from domination by an invading army, but it is unclear why an alliance would heighten those
concerns. It also seems improbable that alliances would trigger concerns about sanctity, which has to do with issues of spiritual and bodily purity. Our experiments test how alliances affect the six moral foundations, and how those foundations in turn shape views about the morality of intervention.

\textit{Context and the Effects of Alliances.}

Previous research has found that support for intervention varies with the stakes of the dispute, the anticipated cost of intervention, and the regime type of the country needing help. We hypothesize that these same contextual variables should moderate the effect of alliances. In general, alliances should make more of a difference when there are not already good reasons for war, than when the case for war is already compelling because important U.S. economic and security interests are at stake, the costs of intervention are expected to be low, and/or intervention would help a democracy. As a corollary, we also predict that alliances will temper the explanatory power of contextual variables. If citizens insist that governments honor their alliance commitments even when doing so would be inconvenient, the presence of an alliance should make costs, stakes, and regime type less reliable predictors of support for war.

These hypotheses, if correct, help explain why leaders would exercise caution when forming alliances. If alliances were merely scraps of paper, leaders could forge alliances with countries they would rather not defend, knowing they could renege with impunity if they were called to act. But if alliances proved consequential even—or especially—when intervention would otherwise seem imprudent, leaders would need to choose more carefully: entering alliances only when vital interests were at stake, defending the ally would be inexpensive, and/or the prospective ally had an acceptable political regime. By studying alliances across a wide range of circumstances, including ones in which intervention might be inconvenient and actual alliances
might be rare, we can learn not only about the potential effects of alliances, but also about the incentives to sign or avoid alliances in the first place.

3. Research Strategy

To study how alliances affect support for war, we conducted survey experiments in the U.S. Respondents read a hypothetical situation in which one country invaded another in an effort to seize territory. We randomized whether the U.S. had an alliance with the invaded country, and contextual factors that could make alliances more or less consequential. After describing the scenario, we measured support for U.S. military intervention to stop the invasion. We also measured perceptions of three mechanisms: how the U.S. response would affect America’s reputation for upholding alliance agreements; how it would affect America’s reputation in the nonmilitary realm; and whether the U.S. had a moral obligation to intervene.

Our main experiment was administered to a nationally representative sample of 1,200 U.S. adults by YouGov in April 2017 (see appendix for questionnaire). In the scenario we presented, 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. All participants read that the attacked country shared many interests with the U.S., and that the attacking country was non-democratic, did not have a military alliance with the U.S., and did not share many interests with the U.S.

To isolate the independent effect of alliances, we randomized whether the U.S. had a formal alliance with the attacked country. Half of the respondents read that the U.S. “does not have a military alliance” with the country that was attacked. The other half read 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.”

Our experiment therefore estimates how American voters would react upon learning that the U.S. had a formal alliance agreement with the country that was attacked.

In addition to randomizing alliances, we independently randomized four contextual variables—stakes, costs, regime type, and region—resulting in a 2×2×2×2×4 design. To vary the stakes for the U.S., we told half the sample, “If the attacker succeeds in taking part of the other country, this would weaken U.S. military security and hurt the U.S. economy.” The other half read that a victory by the attacking country would “neither weaken U.S. military security nor hurt the U.S. economy.” We also randomized whether the military operation would or would not be “very costly for the United States,” and whether the country under attack was or was not “a democracy.” Finally, we randomized whether the dispute took place in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America, both to make the vignette more concrete, and to make sure our findings were not unique to a particular region. Thus, we can estimate the effect of alliances for each possible configuration of contextual variables, including situations in which actual alliances might be more or less common and intervention might seem more or less attractive.

After exposing respondents to this information, we asked whether they favored or opposed sending the U.S. military to stop the invasion. There were five response options, ranging from

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10 We modeled this language on the North Atlantic Treaty.

11 A related question, requiring a different experimental design, is how alliances might affect public perceptions of leaders making decisions about war. On perceptions of leaders, see Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Gelpi and Grieco 2015; Levy et al. 2015.
“Favor strongly” to “Oppose strongly.” For our main analyses we dichotomized the dependent variable: 100 if respondents favored military intervention strongly or somewhat, and 0 otherwise. Coded this way, our dependent variable measures the percentage of Americans who favored military intervention, and our treatment effects are percentage-point changes in public support for intervention. Focusing on percentages simplifies the presentation and allows a natural interpretation that matches how news organizations and political analysts present public opinion data. Nevertheless, our conclusions did not change when we analyzed public opinion on a five-point scale (see appendix).

To estimate the effects of the randomized treatments, we regressed support for war on all interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party identification, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism) that might affect support for war. This approach not only corrected for minor imbalances in treatments and demographic/attitudinal variables, but also facilitated the analysis of both main effects, and effects for each possible combination of contextual variables. Similarly, we estimated the conditional effects of alliances by averaging the effects in selected strata of interest.

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12 At the end of the experiment, we administered five attention checks, shown in the appendix. YouGov delivered a nationally representative sample of 1,200 respondents who answered at least four attention checks correctly.

13 On using linear regression to estimate average marginal and conditional effects of all randomized treatments, see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014). For example, based on the regression, we estimated the main effect of alliances as the average of the effects in the
4. The Effect of Alliances on Public Support for War

Figure 1 shows the effect of alliances on public support for war, averaging over the other randomized treatments. Approximately 79% of respondents supported war when the victim was a U.S. ally, whereas only 46% supported intervention to help an otherwise identical non-ally. Thus, other factors equal, having an alliance increased public support for intervention by 33 percentage points, swinging opinion from majority opposition to majority support for war.\(^\text{14}\) In this figure and all others, the horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

**Figure 1: Effect of Alliances on Support for War**

![Figure 1: Effect of Alliances on Support for War](image)

*Note: Estimates based on the regression model described in the text.*

As the appendix shows, the same conclusions held for different subsets of the population. Alliances mattered for respondents with high as well as low levels of political interest, and were defined by the other randomized treatments. Our subclassification estimator gave equal weight to each of the 32 strata.

\(^\text{14}\) If we had instead calculated average support for war with and without alliances, without controlling for demographic/attitudinal variables or other randomized treatments, the effect of alliances would have been the same: 33 points. Our conclusions were also robust to using sampling weights or a 5-point scale for the dependent variable (see appendix).
consequential regardless of political affiliation, with large effects for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.¹⁵

Figure 2 presents the average effects of the other randomized treatments and compares them to the effect of alliances. Ceteris paribus, intervention was 15 points more popular when the stakes were high—i.e., inaction would weaken the safety and economy of the U.S.—than when the stakes were low. The public was also 12 points more willing to intervene on behalf of a democracy than an autocracy, and 10 points more willing to intervene when the expected costs of action were low rather than high. Regional differences (with South America as reference category) were small and statistically indistinguishable from zero.

**Figure 2: Effects of All Treatments on Support for War**

![Figure 2: Effects of All Treatments on Support for War](image)

*Note: Each effect was estimated by contrasting the treatment to its relevant baseline (e.g., high stakes versus low stakes), averaging over other treatments. Based on same regression as Figure 1.*

¹⁵The effects of alliances among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans were all above 30 percentage points. See appendix for these and other subgroup analyses.
In sum, our data strongly confirm that alliances shape public support for war. Moreover, the impact of alliances was more than twice as large as the effect of any other treatment in our experiment. Evidently citizens attach high importance to honoring military alliances and are willing to send American forces into battle to uphold prior commitments.

5. Does Context Moderate the Effect of Alliances?

In this section we investigate whether alliances could be more consequential in some situations than in others. Figure 3 depicts support for war given different combinations of alliances and three contextual variables: the stakes for the U.S., the expected costs of military intervention, and the regime type of the victim. We averaged over the fourth contextual variable, region, which proved relatively unimportant. The hollow markers measure support for war in scenarios without an alliance, while the solid markers represent support for war in scenarios with an alliance.

In the absence of alliances, contextual variables powerfully influenced public opinion. The hollow marker in the top left corner shows that, when the stakes for the U.S. were low, the victim was an autocracy, and the costs of intervention were high, only 18% of respondents supported military intervention when there was no alliance. As background conditions changed, support for war grew. For instance, enthusiasm for war was much greater when the stakes were high (bottom half of the figure) than when the stakes were low (top half), a pattern that held for every combination of regime type and costs. Regime type and cost operated similarly, driving support for war not only on average, but also for each combination of the other contextual variables.\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) The effects of alliances were similar regardless of geographic region. See appendix.

\(^{17}\) The effects were always in the expected direction, though not always significant at \(p<.05\).
When we introduced alliances, contextual variables became far less important. The public was not substantially more willing to defend an ally when the stakes for the U.S. were high than when the stakes for the U.S. were low. Likewise, opinions were not systematically different when the ally was a democracy rather than an autocracy, and costs mattered only when the stakes were low. In general, alliances deprived contextual variables of their explanatory power.

Our findings also imply that alliances exert stronger effects in some contexts than in others. Each dot in Figure 4 shows how alliances increased support for intervention under the stated conditions, relative to an otherwise identical situation without a U.S. alliance commitment. The first row shows that when the stakes for the U.S. were low, the costs of intervention were high, and the victim was an autocracy, alliances boosted support for war by 50 percentage points. The bottom row shows the opposite situation: when the stakes were high, the costs low, and the victim a democracy, alliances still moved opinion, but by a smaller margin (15 points).
In summary, alliances made the biggest difference when the U.S. did not already have strong military, economic, and political reasons to intervene. Thus, unlike mere scraps of paper, alliances are powerful commitments that can sway public opinion even—and especially—when war would otherwise seem unattractive. This fact helps explain why leaders tend to be extremely selective about the agreements they sign.

6. Why Do Alliances Affect Support for War?

We next investigated three mechanisms through which alliances could drive public support for war: reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligation. We measured these three potential mediators by asking how much respondents agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements: (1) “If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America’s willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future.” (2) “If the U.S. does not send its military, other countries will doubt America’s
willingness to honor nonmilitary agreements in areas such as trade or the environment.” (3) “The U.S. has a moral obligation to send its military to defend the country that was attacked.”18 In each case, 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).19

We regressed each mediator on all interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party, hawkishness, internationalism, nationalism) that might affect how respondents thought about reputation or morality. From the regressions, we estimated the main effect of alliances on each mediator by averaging over the effects in the 2×2×2×4 strata defined by the other randomized treatments.20

As Figure 5 shows, respondents were 38 points more likely to agree that staying out would hurt America’s reputation for military reliability when the victim was an ally, than when it was not. Respondents also felt that abandoning an ally would taint America’s reputation for nonmilitary reliability; concerns about reputational spillovers were 17 points higher when the U.S. had previously made an alliance commitment. Citizens expected more damage to America’s military reputation than to its nonmilitary reputation, supporting the hypothesis that reneging

18 Respondents reacted to each mediator individually, rather than choosing among them.
19 We used five-point scales to increase the precision of the mediation analysis, but conclusions did not change when we dichotomized each mediator.
20 If we had not run regressions, but instead calculated differences in the mean values of the mediators with and without alliances, the estimates would have been nearly identical.
causes more reputational damage within the immediate issue area than across issue areas.

Figure 5: Effects of Alliances on Mediators

Note: Each row based on a regression, as described in the text.

Finally, alliances imbued respondents with a strong sense of moral obligation. Respondents were 27 points more likely to perceive a moral obligation to intervene when the victim was an ally, than when the victim was not. Overall, Figure 6 confirms that alliances affected perceptions of all three mediators: reputation for military reliability, reputation for nonmilitary reliability, and moral obligation.

Moving down the causal chain, how did these mediators affect support for war? The appendix shows that, other factors equal, willingness to intervene was 49 percentage points higher among people who strongly agreed that inaction would undermine America’s reputation for honoring military alliances than among people who strongly disagreed that staying out would cause this kind of reputational damage. In contrast, support for war was not significantly higher among respondents who anticipated that inaction would cause reputational spillovers than among people who doubted reputational spillovers. Finally, independent of reputational concerns, citizens who perceived a moral obligation to intervene gave 38 points more support for war than citizens who denied any moral obligation. We treat these results with caution, as they are only causally identified given the untestable assumption that the observed values of the mediators
were independent of the treatment condition and all pretreatment confounders (Imai, Keele, Tingley, and Yamamoto 2011).

Finally, we used these estimates to infer the importance of each causal mechanism.\textsuperscript{21} Recall that alliances increased public support for intervention by 33 points. Approximately 57\% of this effect flowed from concerns about a reputation for being a reliable ally. To see why, note that the expected damage to America’s reputation for military reliability was 38 points higher in scenarios with an alliance than in scenarios without an alliance. Moreover, a one-unit change in expected damage to the country’s reputation for military reliability was associated with a 0.49-point surge in support for intervention. Combining these estimates, we get $38 \times 0.49 = 19$, representing $19 \div 33 \approx 57\%$ of the total effect of alliances.

Using a similar procedure, we calculated that fears of reputational spillovers mediated only 4\% of the total effect of alliances. This was because, although alliances raised expectations about reputational spillover, fears of spillover had little relationship with support for war. Finally, alliances generated a sense of moral duty, which was strongly related to attitudes about intervention. According to our calculations, this moral pathway accounted for 31\% of the total treatment effect. We present these estimates in Figure 6, which suggests that alliances drove public opinion primarily by changing perceptions of moral obligation and America’s reputation as a reliable ally.

\textsuperscript{21} We calculated the strength of each pathway using the product-of-coefficients method (Baron and Kenny 1986). The appendix shows that our conclusions remained the same when we instead applied the Imai et al. (2011) potential outcomes framework to non-linear probit models.
7. What Drives Perceptions of Moral Obligation?

We found evidence that alliances affect support for war partly by triggering a sense of moral obligation. Why do citizens regard alliance commitments as morally binding? To find out, we fielded a follow-up study to 2,703 U.S. adults, recruited via Lucid in December 2017 and June 2018.\textsuperscript{22} We began with text identical to our main YouGov study, and found that our previous findings about the effects of alliances, the role of context, and the underlying mechanisms replicated well (see appendix).

The follow-up study concluded with a battery of questions designed to gauge which specific moral foundations influenced perceptions of moral obligation. We asked whether failing to intervene would violate principles of fairness, loyalty, authority, care, liberty, and sanctity, the six main constructs in moral foundations theory. We captured beliefs about fairness by asking how much respondents agreed or disagreed that “If the U.S. does not send its military, this would be unfair to the country that was invaded.” Similarly, we studied perceptions of loyalty by measuring reactions to the claim, “If the U.S. does not send its military, this would be disloyal to

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{22} Lucid used quota sampling to produce a sample that was diverse with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, and geographic region.}
the country that was invaded.” The appendix provides the text of all six moral foundation items, each coded on a five-point scale from 0 (disagree strongly) to 100 (agree strongly).

We regressed each moral foundation on all interactions of alliances, costs, stakes, regime, and region, controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (listed earlier). Figure 7 gives the average the effect of alliances on each moral foundation. As hypothesized, respondents were far more likely to view nonintervention as unfair and disloyal when the victim was an ally than when the victim was not. Alliances also raised concerns about authority; subjects were substantially more likely to think staying out of the conflict would “show disobedience to higher authorities” if the U.S. had previously cemented an alliance agreement. This effect makes sense to the extent that citizens view breaches of treaties as violations of international law.

**Figure 7: Effect of Alliances on Moral Foundations**

![Graph showing the effect of alliances on moral foundations](image)

*Note: Based on six regressions, described in the text.*

Alliances also affected perceptions of care. In vignettes with alliances, respondents were 8 points more likely to agree that “If the U.S. does not send its military, the country that was invaded would suffer serious harm.” This effect, though relatively small, fits the hypothesis that allies might suffer disproportionately if abandoned, because they had made military plans on the assumption that the ally would uphold its side of the agreement. Surprisingly, alliances also
raised concerns about liberty. Subjects were 12 points more likely to believe failing to intervene “would be a threat to the liberty of people in the invaded country” when that country was an ally, though it is not clear why they would have this perception. Finally, as expected, we found no evidence that alliances increased concerns about sanctity/purity, operationalized as the belief that nonintervention would “increase the spread of germs and diseases.”

We next studied the relationship between the six moral foundations and overall beliefs about a moral obligation to intervene (see appendix). Other factors equal, perceptions of fairness and loyalty were strongly associated with the belief that “U.S. has a moral obligation to defend the country that was attacked.” Three other moral foundations—authority, care, and liberty—had smaller but still positive relationships with perceptions of moral obligation, while sanctity did not appear to drive thinking about the morality of military intervention.

Finally, we estimated the importance of each causal pathway, using the methods described earlier. As Figure 8 shows, alliances appeared to affect overall beliefs about morality primarily by raising concerns about fairness and loyalty. We calculated that together, these two factors mediated nearly 60% of the effect of alliances on moral obligation. Three other moral foundations—authority, care, and liberty—played small roles, each accounting for 3-5% of the total effect, and concerns about sanctity did not appear to mediate the effect of alliances on moral obligation.

23 As before, these estimates and the full causal mediation analysis are causally identified only under the untestable assumption that the observed values of the mediators were independent of treatment status and all pretreatment confounders (Imai et al. 2011).
Figure 8: Estimates of Causal Mechanisms for Moral Obligation

Note: Based on regressions described in the text.

In summary, alliances raise concerns about fairness and loyalty, contributing to the sense of moral obligation that helps make alliances bind. These findings have both scholarly and practical implications. First, they underscore the importance of studying moral inclinations when explaining attitudes about foreign policy (Kertzer et al. 2014, Kreps and Maxey 2017). Although fairness and loyalty have received relatively little attention in the literatures on alliances and military intervention, our findings reveal that these are important considerations in the public mind.

Second, our results suggest both challenges and opportunities for leaders seeking to sway public opinion about supporting an ally. When voters see policies in terms of moral values, they report being much less open to changing their minds than when issues do not involve questions of morality (Mooney and Schuldt 2008). Indeed, people express “moral outrage” at the suggestion that nonmoral considerations such as economic costs could eclipse moral concerns (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner 2000). Leaders wishing to mute public support for intervention would therefore need to explain why refusing to help an ally would be neither unfair nor disloyal. On the other hand, when voters do not already view an issue in moral terms, moral rhetoric can shift public opinion (Feinberg and Willer 2013). In some contexts, therefore, moral rhetoric might shape the public debate.
Our findings also shed light on contemporary debates about the future of U.S. alliances such as NATO. President Donald Trump claims it is unfair to expect the U.S. to defend NATO allies who are spending less than 2% of annual GDP on defense. If the American public sees NATO allies as shirking their commitments, it may conclude that the U.S. is not obligated to reciprocate by defending those countries militarily. On the other hand, critics have portrayed President Trump as showing more loyalty to Russia than to NATO. To the extent that Americans care about loyalty to in-group members, such rhetoric could strengthen the public perception of a moral obligation to defend NATO allies.

8. Conclusion

When and why do military alliances affect public opinion? Our experiments revealed three main findings. First, having a military alliance profoundly influenced support for war. On average, Americans were 33 percentage points more supportive of defending a U.S. ally than an otherwise identical non-ally. Second, alliances mattered in all contexts but held the most sway when the context least favored war. Third, alliances shaped public opinion about war by raising concerns about America’s reputation for military reliability, and by generating a sense of moral obligation. When we investigated the roots of these moral beliefs, we found that alliances activated two important moral foundations: fairness and loyalty.

Our findings help explain why alliances have significant deterrent value (Leeds 2003a; Johnson and Leeds 2011). If potential aggressors understand that alliance agreements increase domestic political support for coming to the victim’s aid, alliances could discourage attacks and

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help maintain peace in the international system.\textsuperscript{25} Alliances can, therefore, be a potent tool of international politics. At the same time, our findings help explain why democratic leaders are so careful in choosing their allies and designing their alliances (Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015; Fjelstul and Reiter 2019). Unlike scraps of paper, alliances are powerful commitments that boost domestic support for war in general, and especially when war would otherwise seem unwise.

Our results could also help explain existing empirical findings in the literature on alliances. We found that a strong majority of the public supported intervention on behalf of allies, regardless of the context. This finding could provide microfoundations for the idea that democracies are particularly reliable allies (Leeds 2003b). To the extent that democratic leaders are more sensitive to pressure from domestic audiences, public opinion could help explain the credibility of democratic alliances.\textsuperscript{26} Future research could evaluate this possibility from both a theoretical and empirical standpoint.

Future research could explore additional questions about alliances and public opinion. For example, how might elite rhetoric moderate the effect of alliances on public support for war? On the one hand, studies have shown that leaders who fail to honor international commitments can mitigate public disapproval by providing justifications (Levendusky and Horowitz 2012). Leaders might misrepresent the terms of the alliance, claim that circumstances have changed, or paint the ally’s behavior in an unflattering light. On the other hand, leaders might try to marshal support for defending an ally by highlighting the reputational consequences and moral

\textsuperscript{25} Though beyond the scope of this paper, alliances could also embolden allies to act aggressively (e.g. Benson 2012); encourage them to solve disputes peacefully (Fang, Johnson, and Leeds 2014); or make states seem more threatening (e.g. Vasquez 1993).

\textsuperscript{26} E.g. Mattes 2012b, Clare 2013, and DiGiuseppe and Poast 2018.
ramifications of breaching an alliance. Future research could evaluate whether, and when, elite cues dampen or boosts the large effects of alliances found in our experiments.

Scholars could also explore whether leaders can design agreements that allow greater public leeway. Does the agreement contain escape clauses or vague language providing allies with freedom of action (Leeds 2003a; Benson 2012; Beckley 2015; Chiba, Johnson, and Leeds 2015; Fjelstul and Reiter 2019)? How specific and complete are the terms of the agreement? Do formal alliances differ from informal ones, or from coalitions that emerge during crises (Wolford 2015)? Studies that randomize not only the existence but also the content of alliance agreements would interest policymakers tasked with crafting alliances that deter foreign attack while avoiding entanglement.

Scholars could also 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 violate agreements when circumstances have changed fundamentally since the alliance was formed, for example because the ally has become less strategically important, has changed its political regime, or has adopted new policy preferences (Leeds and Savun 2007)? Do citizens feel less bound by older treaties or treaties signed by previous leaders, even if other circumstances have not shifted appreciably?  

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27 Future research could also assess whether citizens believe that reputational effects would adhere to the country or the leader who broke the agreement (Renshon, Dafoe, and Huth 2018). See also Leeds, Mattes, and Vogel 2009 on leadership change and alliance termination.
Future research could also explore how the origins and nature of the conflict influence public reactions to alliances. In the experiment we conducted, the ally was attacked. Future experiments could examine how alliances affect the likelihood of intervention when the ally instigates the dispute, to find out whether alliances not only entangle but also entrap (Kim 2011). Furthermore, we described the attacking country as a nondemocracy that is not an ally and shares few interests with the U.S. Future research could explore whether alliances remain equally potent when upholding them requires war against another ally or a fellow democracy. Our results suggest that, perhaps surprisingly, alliances could be consequential in precisely these situations, by generating support for military interventions that voters would otherwise scorn.

Finally, scholars could investigate whether alliances have similar effects in other countries. We fielded our study in the U.S., a superpower and one of the most militarily active democracies in the world. Researchers could replicate our experiments on other samples—including citizens of other countries and foreign policy elites—to explore the effects of alliances in countries that are militarily weaker or that differ from the U.S. in other ways.

Observers often decry world politics as a realm devoid of enforcement. Without a central authority to punish countries that renege on their promises, why should international agreements such as alliances carry any weight when it comes to life-or-death decisions such as sending military forces into battle? Our findings suggest that by engaging concerns about reputation and morality, military alliances have potent effects on public support for military intervention. The power of alliances to sway public opinion should not be taken lightly by leaders contemplating new agreements—not by foreign powers tempted to test existing ones.
Works Cited


