

## **Military Alliances and Public Support for War**

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April 30, 2019

### **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. We further found that alliances shaped public opinion through two mechanisms: alliances increased public fears about the reputational costs of nonintervention, and heightened the perceived moral obligation to intervene by raising concerns about fairness and loyalty. Finally, the effects of alliances were largest when the stakes of intervention were low, the costs of intervention were high, and the country in need of aid was not a democracy. Thus, alliances create public support for getting entangled in conflicts a country might otherwise avoid. These findings shed new light on debates about the effects of alliances on domestic and international politics.

## 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. According to this view, alliances shape behavior because breaking them would have consequences.

In this article, we examine one important dimension 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.<sup>1</sup> In this article we develop three hypotheses. First, citizens 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 should be most influential when the case for war is otherwise weak, generating public support for wars the country might otherwise prefer to avoid.

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. 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 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. Second, the effects arose through two mechanisms: reputation and morality. Alliances increased public support for war by raising concerns that

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

inaction would hurt America's reputation for reliability and violate ethical norms such as fairness and loyalty.

Finally, alliances proved most consequential when the underlying circumstances made military intervention least appealing. When the stakes for the U.S. were high, the costs of military intervention were low, and the victim was a democracy, public support for intervention was strong regardless of whether an alliance existed. In contrast, when contextual factors mitigated against military involvement, alliances exerted powerful effects, turning public skepticism about intervention into majority support for war. Thus, alliances have the potential to entangle the U.S. in military conflicts it might otherwise avoid.

## **2. Hypotheses**

Scholars have identified many factors that affect public support for war. Studies have shown, for example, that voters are sensitive to the human and economic costs of conflict (Mueller 1973, Nincic and Nincic 1995). Although scholars debate when costs are most likely to dampen enthusiasm for war, most agree that the public is 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 (Larson 1996). Perceptions of the national interest may change over time, but the public is more likely to support military intervention when 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 not studied how alliances affect public support for war, or how alliances interact with other key factors such as costs, stakes, and regime type. In this section we hypothesize that alliances could affect public support for war through three

potentially complementary mechanisms. First, citizens might worry that renegeing on an alliance would undermine their country's reputation as a reliable ally. Second, voters might think that breaking an alliance could taint their country's reputation for reliability on nonmilitary issues. Third, alliances could change the public's moral calculus.<sup>2</sup> After discussing these mechanisms, we hypothesize about the circumstances under which alliances might be most potent.

### *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.<sup>3</sup> 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 et al. 2012, 263). Other countries might respond by demanding costly terms or refusing to form an alliance at all.<sup>4</sup> 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).

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<sup>2</sup> Future research could explore additional mechanisms, for example whether an alliance with the victim of an attack increases confidence that intervention will succeed (Johnson, Leeds, and Wu 2015).

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Levy 1981; Miller 2003, 2012; Gibler 2008; Crescenzi et al. 2012; Mattes 2012a, Johnson 2016; Crescenzi 2018. On public views of reputation, see Brutger and Kertzer 2018.

<sup>4</sup> On the terms of alliances, see Snyder 1997; Mattes 2012a; Johnson 2015.

Citizens might, however, find such concerns overblown. 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.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, even if voters anticipate 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 hurt 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

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Mercer 2006; Press 2005. Moreover, some alliances do not specify precise obligations, allowing states to argue that they are fulfilling the letter if not the spirit of an agreement (Beckley 2015).

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,<sup>6</sup> 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 et al. 2014; Reifler et al. 2014; Liberman 2006, Stein 2012, 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

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<sup>6</sup> Snyder 1997, pp. 8, is an exception.

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 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 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.

### *Context and the Effects of Alliances*

Finally, we hypothesize that alliances have larger effects in some contexts than in others. 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 argue that these same variables should moderate the effect of alliances. When the case for war is already strong—for example, when important U.S. interests are at stake, the costs of intervention are expected to be low, and intervention would help a democracy—the American public should tend to support war even in the absence of alliances. In such situations, we predict that the marginal effect of alliances will be small. In contrast, when the public is skeptical about the underlying merits of intervention, there is more opportunity for alliances to tip the balance, potentially entangling countries in wars they would otherwise prefer to avoid.

Similarly, we predict that alliances will temper the explanatory power of contextual variables. Previous research has shown that costs, stakes, and the regime type of the victim influence public support for war, on average. But if citizens insist that governments should 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.

Put differently, not only should contextual variables moderate the effect of alliances, but alliances should also moderate the effect of these contextual variables.

### **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 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., while the attacked country shared many interests with the U.S.

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.”<sup>7</sup> 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.

We also randomized four contextual variables: stakes, costs, regime type, and region. 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. We independently randomized alliances and the four contextual variables, resulting in a  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4$  design.

After exposing respondents to this information, we asked whether they favored or opposed sending the U.S. military to stop the invasion.<sup>8</sup> There were five response options, ranging from “Favor strongly” to “Oppose strongly.”<sup>9</sup> For our main analyses we dichotomized

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<sup>7</sup> We modeled this language on the North Atlantic Treaty.

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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.

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 both 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 and conditional effects.<sup>10</sup> For example, based on the regression, we estimated the main effect of alliances as the average of the effects in the  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4$  strata defined by the other randomized treatments.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, we estimated the conditional effects of alliances by averaging the effects in selected strata of interest.

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<sup>10</sup> On using linear regression to estimate average marginal and conditional effects of all randomized treatments, see Hainmueller, Hopkins, and Yamamoto (2014).

<sup>11</sup> Our subclassification estimator gave equal weight to each of the  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4 = 32$  strata defined by the other treatments.

#### 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.<sup>12</sup> In this figure and all others, the horizontal lines represent 95% confidence intervals.

[Figure 1 about here]

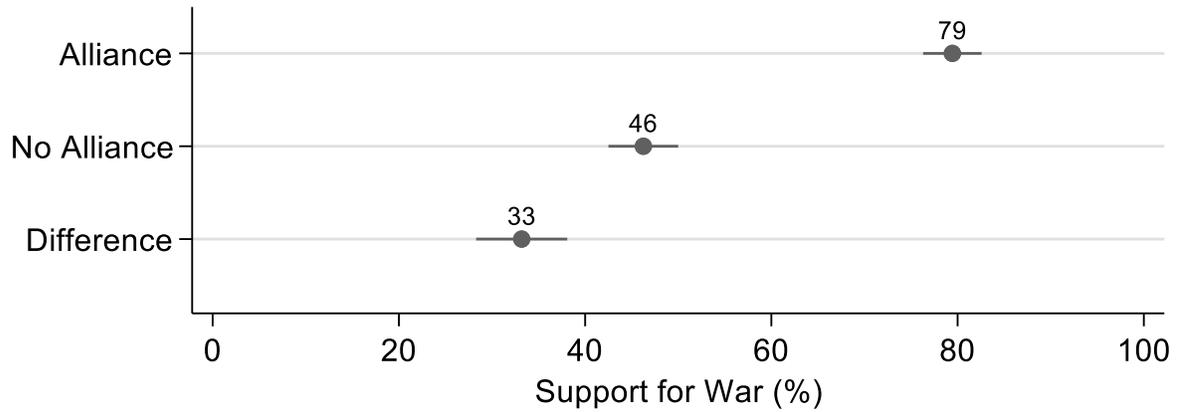
As the appendix shows, the same conclusions held for subsets of the population. Alliances mattered for respondents with high as well as low levels of political interest. Alliances were also consequential regardless of political affiliation, with large effects for Democrats, Republicans, and Independents.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> If we had not run a regression, but 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 alternative weighting and coding schemes. When we reestimated Figure 1 using sampling weights, support for war was 77% with alliances and 47% without, for an effect of 30, nearly the same as our unweighted estimates. When we recoded the dependent variable as a 5-point scale (0, 1, 2, 3, 4), support for war was 3.04 with alliances and 2.09 without, for an effect of 0.95 (C.I. 0.84 – 1.06). See appendix.

<sup>13</sup> The effects of alliances among Democrats, Independents, and Republicans were all above 30 percentage points. See appendix for these and other subgroup analyses.

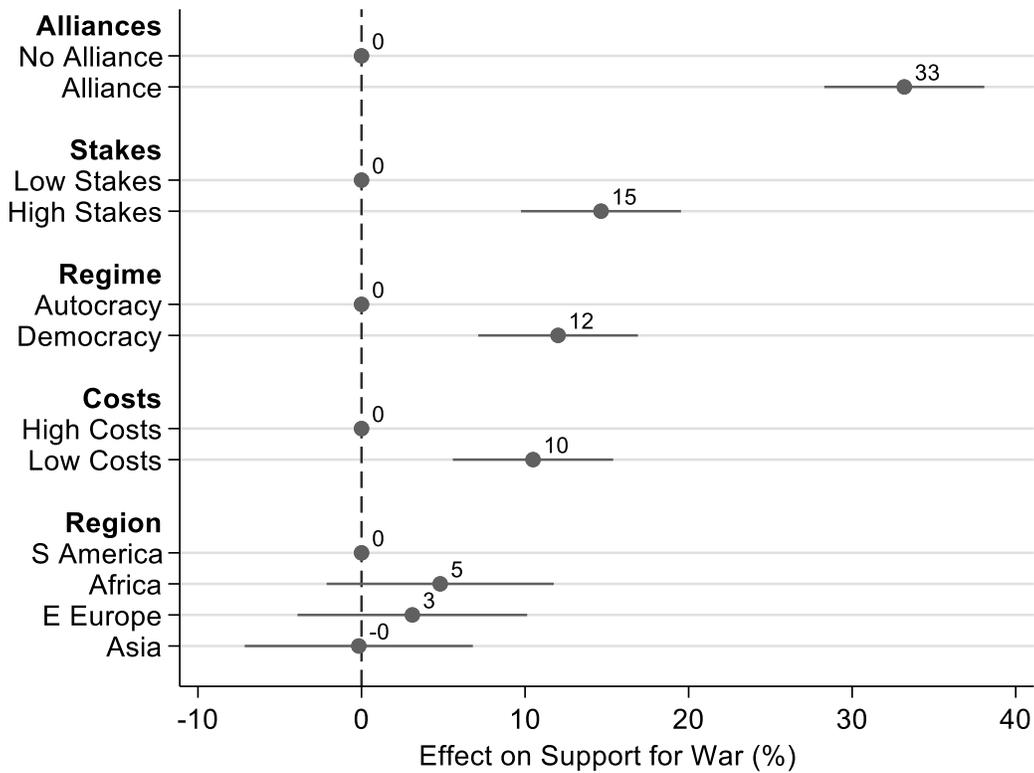
**Figure 1: Effect of Alliances on Support for War**



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

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**



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

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 were 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.<sup>14</sup> The hollow markers measure support for war in scenarios without an alliance, while the solid markers represent support in scenarios with an alliance.

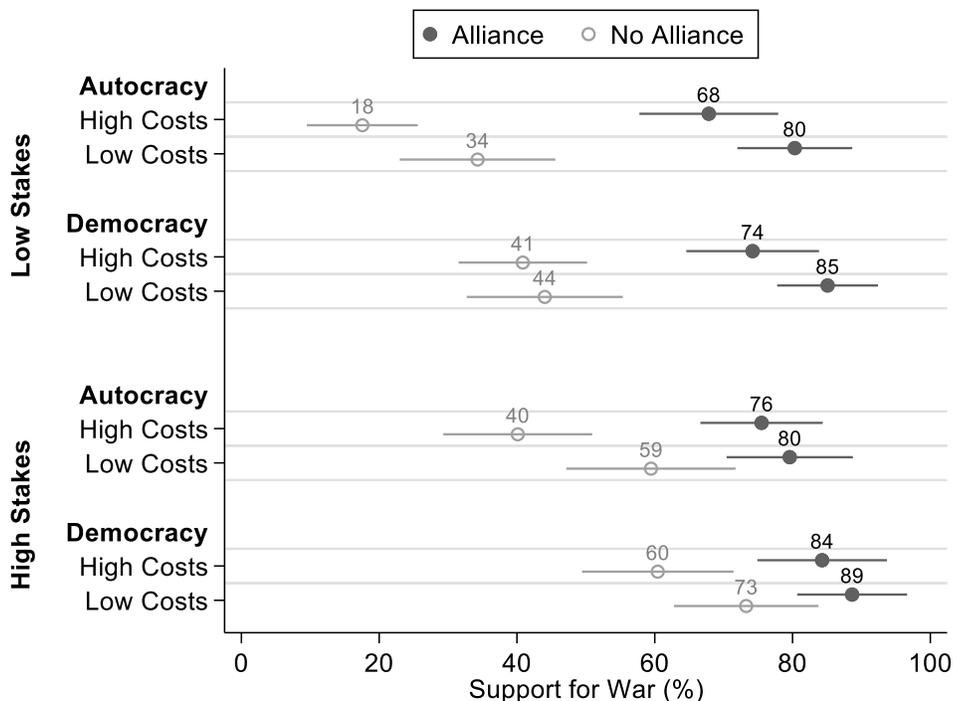
In the absence of alliances, contextual variables powerfully and predictably influenced public opinion. The hollow marker in the top left corner shows that, when the stakes for the U.S. were low, the victim was an autocracy, and the costs of intervention were high, 18% of respondents supported military 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.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The effects of alliances were similar whether the conflict was in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, or South America. See appendix.

<sup>15</sup> The effects were always in the expected direction, though not always significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Figure 3: Support for War With and Without Alliances, by Context**



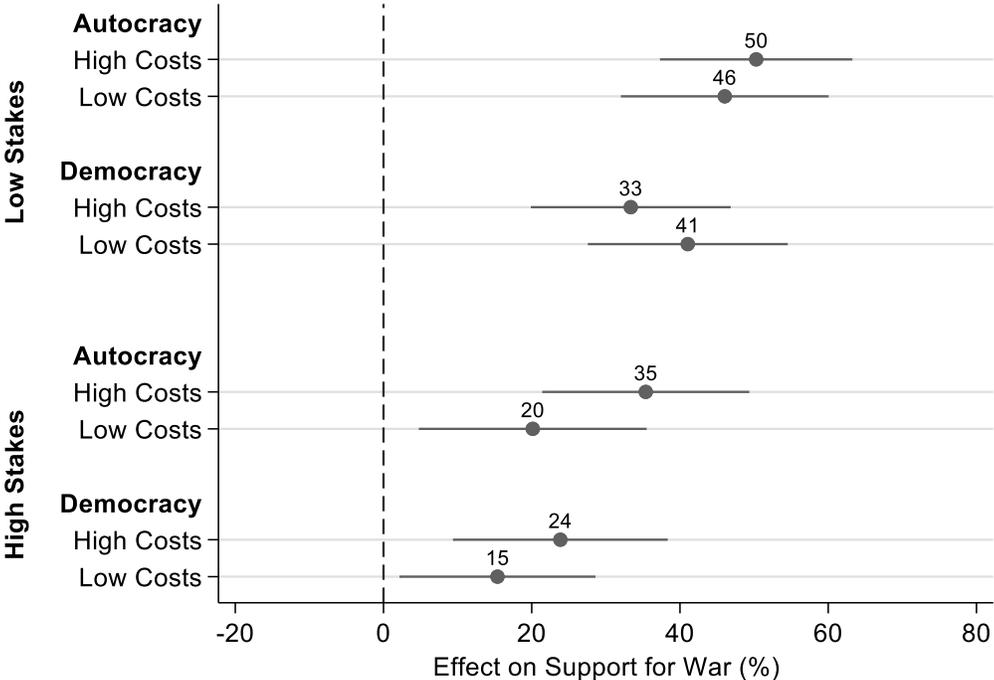
*Note:* Based on the same regression as Figure 1.

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 compared to when it was 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 in which the U.S. had not made an

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 moved opinion by only 15 points.

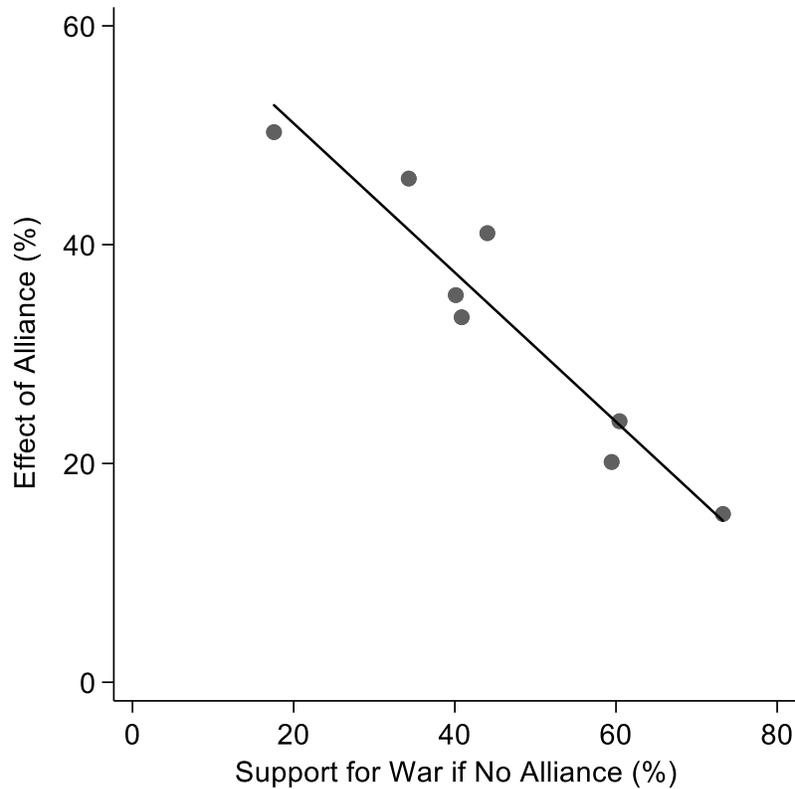
**Figure 4: Effect of Alliances, by Context**



*Note:* Based on the same regression as Figure 1.

What general lessons can we draw? We hypothesized that the effect of alliances would be greatest when other factors made intervention less attractive. Figure 5 tests this hypothesis directly, by plotting the effect of alliances (vertical axis) against support for war in the absence of an alliance (horizontal axis). Each dot represents one of the eight combinations of stakes, costs, and regime type in our experiment. The steep downward slope confirms that the effect of alliances declines as contextual variables increase the baseline popularity of intervention.

**Figure 5: Effect of Alliances, by Baseline Support for War in the Absence of an Alliance**



*Note:* Effect of alliance comes from Figure 4. Support if no alliance comes from Figure 3.

In sum, alliances made the biggest difference when the U.S. did not have strong military, economic, and political reasons to intervene. This finding lends support to fears of entanglement. Alliances greatly enhance the popularity of war—in our scenario, generating majority support for intervention—when the situation would otherwise fail to justify U.S. military involvement.

## 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.”<sup>16</sup> 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).<sup>17</sup>

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

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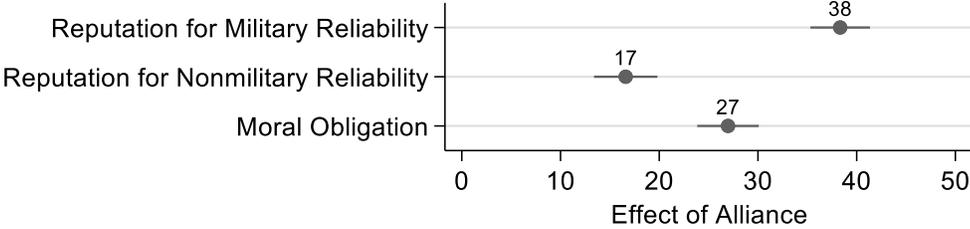
<sup>16</sup> Respondents expressed their (dis)agreement with each mediator individually, rather than choosing among them.

<sup>17</sup> We used five-point scales to increase the precision of the mediation analysis, but conclusions did not change when we dichotomized each mediator.

each mediator by averaging over the effects in the 2×2×2×4 strata defined by the other randomized treatments.<sup>18</sup>

As Figure 6 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 the victim was not an ally. 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. Importantly, citizens expected more damage to America’s military reputation than to its nonmilitary reputation. This finding supports the hypothesis that renegeing causes more reputational damage within the immediate issue area than across issue areas.

**Figure 6: Effects of Alliances on Mediators**



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

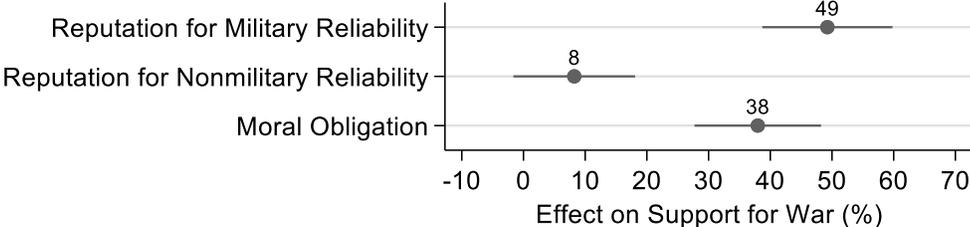
Finally, alliances imbued respondents with a strong sense of moral obligation. Respondents were 27 points more likely to perceive a moral obligation to intervene when the victim was an ally, than when the victim was not. Overall, Figure 6 confirms that alliances

<sup>18</sup> 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.

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? To find out, we regressed support for war on the three mediators, each rescaled from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation. As before, we controlled for all interactions of the randomized treatments, as well as socio-political attitudes and demographic variables, which could confound the relationship between the mediators and the outcome.

**Figure 7: Effects of Mediators on Support for War**



*Note:* Estimated effect of moving each mediator from its minimum to maximum value, holding other variables constant. Based on regression described in the text.

Figure 7 plots the effects of the mediators on support for war. Reputation for military reliability had the largest effect: 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 (reputation for military reliability = 1) than among people who strongly disagreed that staying out would cause this kind of reputational damage (reputation for military reliability = 0). In contrast, support for war was only 8 percentage points higher (a statistically insignificant estimate) among respondents who anticipated that inaction would cause reputational spillovers than among people who doubted the possibility of

reputational spillovers. Finally, independent of any reputational concerns, citizens who perceived a moral obligation gave 38 points more support for war than citizens who denied any moral obligation.

We combined the information from Figures 6 and 7 to estimate the importance of each causal mechanism.<sup>19</sup> 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 (on a 0–1 scale) 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 49-point surge in support for intervention. Putting these estimates together, we get  $0.38 \times 49 = 19$ , representing  $19 \div 33 \approx 57\%$  of the total effect of alliances.

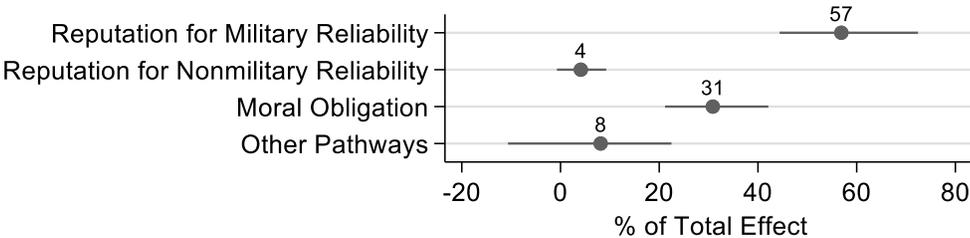
Using a similar procedure, we calculated that fears of reputational spillovers mediated only 4% of the total effect of alliances. This was because, although alliances raised expectations about reputational spillover, fears of spillover had little effect on support for war. Finally, alliances generated a sense of moral duty, which strongly influenced attitudes about intervention. This moral pathway accounted for 31% of the total treatment effect. We present these estimates

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<sup>19</sup> 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. Note, however, that even in an experimental context, causal mediation analysis relies on untestable assumptions, including that the observed values of the mediators are independent of treatment status and all pretreatment confounders (Imai et. al. 2011).

in Figure 8, which suggests that alliances drove public opinion primarily by changing perceptions of moral obligation and America’s reputation as a reliable ally.

**Figure 8: Estimates of Causal Mechanisms**



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

**7. What Drives Perceptions of Moral Obligation?**

We found 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.<sup>20</sup> We began with text identical to our main YouGov study, and found that our previous findings replicated well. As the appendix shows, the average effect of alliances was 28 percentage points in the follow-up study, compared to 33 points in our main study. Moreover, as in the main study, the effects of alliance varied by context, and alliances mattered by raising concerns about moral obligation and America’s reputation as a reliable ally.

The follow-up study concluded with a battery of questions about moral foundations, designed to gauge which specific considerations influenced perceptions of moral obligation. We

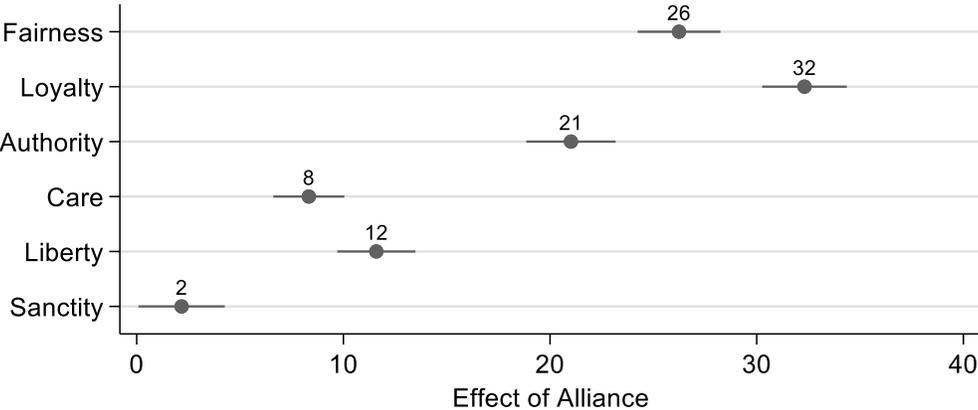
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<sup>20</sup> Lucid used quota sampling to produce a sample that was diverse with respect to gender, age, ethnicity, and geographic region.

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 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, while controlling for demographic and attitudinal variables (gender, race, age, education, party, hawkishness, internationalism, and nationalism) that might affect perceptions of morality. From the regressions, we estimated the effect of alliances on each moral foundation by averaging over the effects in the  $2 \times 2 \times 2 \times 4$  strata defined by the other randomized treatments, and plotted the effects in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Effect of Alliances on Moral Foundations**



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

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.

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 based military plans on the assumption that the ally would uphold its side of the agreement.

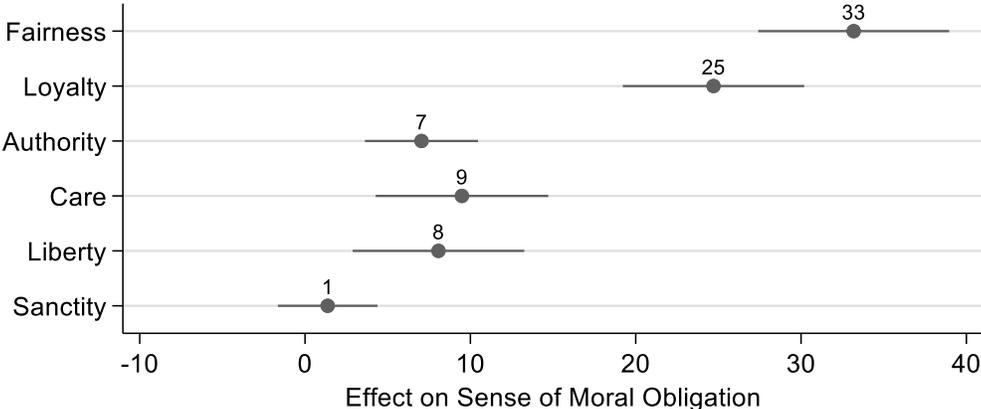
Surprisingly, alliances also raised concerns about liberty. Subjects were 12 points more likely to believe failing to intervene “would be a threat to the liberty of people in the invaded country” when that country was an ally, though it is not clear why they would have this perception. We leave this as a topic for future research. 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 how the six moral foundations affected overall beliefs about a moral obligation to intervene. Thus, the dependent variable was the respondent’s level of agreement with the statement that the “U.S. has a moral obligation to defend the country that was attacked.” We regressed this sense of moral obligation on all six measures of moral foundations, controlling for attitudinal and demographic variables and all interactions of the randomized treatments.

The estimated effects of each moral foundation appear in Figure 10. Other factors equal, moral obligation was 33 points higher among people who strongly agreed that nonintervention

was unfair, than among people who felt the opposite. Similarly, perceptions of moral duty were 25 percentage points higher among those who strongly agreed that staying out would be disloyal, than among people who disagreed with that view. Three other moral foundations—authority, care, and liberty—had smaller but still positive effects, while sanctity did not drive thinking about the morality of military intervention.

**Figure 10: Effects of Moral Foundations on Moral Obligation**

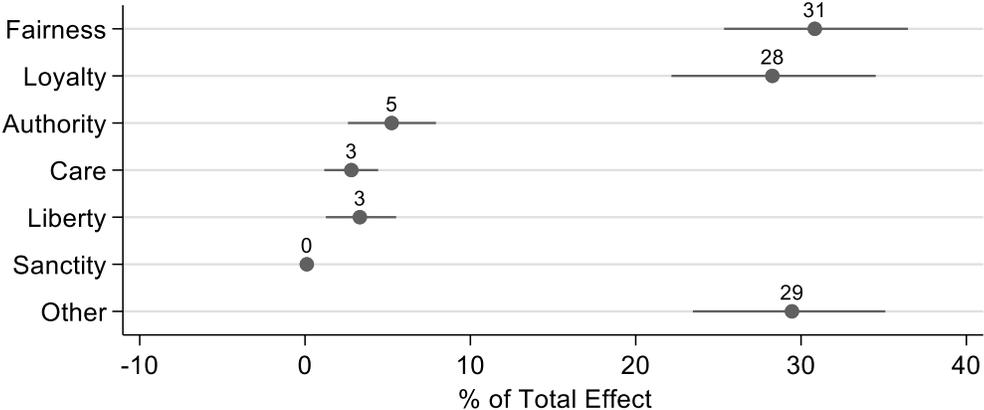


*Note:* Estimated effect of moving each moral foundation from its minimum to maximum value, holding other variables constant. Based on regression described in the text.

We combined the estimates from Figures 9 and 10 using the same approach to causal mediation described above. In our study, alliances affected overall beliefs about morality primarily by raising concerns about fairness and loyalty. Together, these two moral obligations mediated nearly 60% of the effect of alliances on moral obligation. Three other moral foundations—authority, care, and liberty—played small mediatory roles, each accounting for 3-

5% of the total effect. Finally, concerns about sanctity did not mediate the effect of alliances on moral obligation.

**Figure 11: 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 experiments indicate 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 et al. 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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 held the most sway when the context least favored war. Alliances transformed public reticence about high-cost, low-stakes wars on behalf

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[https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/07/19/tucker\\_carlson\\_are\\_you\\_ok\\_with\\_your\\_kids\\_dying\\_to\\_protect\\_montenegro.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2018/07/19/tucker_carlson_are_you_ok_with_your_kids_dying_to_protect_montenegro.html)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-loyal-putin-nato-1018293>

of autocracies into enthusiasm for military intervention. Third, we found strong evidence of mechanisms. 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 influenced perceptions of obligation by activating two important moral foundations: fairness and loyalty.

These findings about the effects of alliances on public support for war, and the mechanisms through which they shape public sentiment, have important implications for policymakers. Our findings suggest that policymakers are right to be concerned about entanglement. Alliance commitments greatly increase U.S. public support for military intervention, particularly when the U.S. has little underlying interest in the conflict. Leaders who breach alliances when the stakes seem low, the costs seem high, or the ally is nondemocratic will face a public primed to think that renegeing would be both unwise and unethical; it would undermine the country's reputation for military reliability and violate moral obligations grounded in fairness and loyalty.

At the same time, our findings suggest that alliances should 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 help maintain peace in the international system.<sup>23</sup> Alliances can, therefore, be a potent tool of international politics.

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<sup>23</sup> Though beyond the scope of this paper, alliances could also embolden allies to act aggressively (e.g. Benson 2012) or encourage them to solve disputes peacefully (Fang, Johnson, and Leeds 2014). Further, alliances could make states seem more threatening, creating a security dilemma (e.g. Vasquez 1993).

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.<sup>24</sup> 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? 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 ramifications of breaching an alliance. Future research could evaluate whether, and when, elite rhetoric dampens 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)? 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

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<sup>24</sup> E.g. Mattes 2012b, Clare 2013, and DiGiuseppe and Poast 2018.

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?<sup>25</sup>

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.

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<sup>25</sup> 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.

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—nor by foreign powers tempted to test existing ones.

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