Fighting to Be Friends: Third-Party Bargaining, Alliance Formation, and War

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Abstract Alliance formation typically entails some risk of abandonment, wherein an ally may not honor its obligations in the future. When potential security partners' preferences are misaligned, this risk looms large, discouraging mutually beneficial investment in an alliance. How can a prospective ally credibly reassure an uncertain patron that their preferences align, to mitigate abandonment risks and elicit a security commitment? We show formally that pre-alliance bargaining with third parties is one way to do so. When the patron holds abandonment concerns, the prospective ally can reassure the patron by making greater concessions to the patron's existing allies, but more hard-line demands of its rivals. This finding implies that the prospect of an alliance can alternately promote conflict with a prospective patron's enemies and forestall conflict with its friends. Indeed, we show that incentives for pre-alliance reassurance can result in war, even with perfect asset divisibility, no commitment problems, and complete information among the belligerents. The results are illustrated by China's intervention in the Korean War and Australia's post-World War II rapprochement with Japan, which were motivated largely to foster security cooperation with the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively.

As the Chinese Civil War concluded in 1949, Mao Zedong wanted no part of a conflict with the United States, given the litany of foreign and domestic problems facing the nascent Chinese communist regime. Yet less than a year later, Mao had committed tens of thousands of Chinese troops to fight the US in Korea, with clear intent to escalate as needed. Around the same time, a similarly abrupt sea change occurred in Australia's policy toward Japan. Until 1950, the Australians considered Japan their primary security threat and steadfastly opposed Japanese rehabilitation. Yet in 1951, Australia signed a multilateral peace agreement that made substantial economic concessions to Japan, which would underpin Tokyo's revival as a leading regional power.

In this article we argue that such shifts in a state's bargaining position can result from the conditional promise of an alliance from a third-party patron, and the resulting

International Organization 79, Summer 2025, pp. 494–525

doi:10.1017/S0020818325100817

incentives the state faces to reassure its prospective patron that it will be a reliable ally. In the case of China the patron was the Soviet Union, whose leader, Josef Stalin, was skeptical of China's resolve to fight in support of Soviet aims. He therefore presented the Korean conflict to Mao as an explicit test of Mao's "revolutionary credentials," promising a substantial alliance investment if China were to intervene with sufficient vigor. In the other case, the US had withheld an alliance with Australia out of concern that it was not sufficiently anti-communist to support US containment policies. Thus, conceding to Japan's rehabilitation as a bulwark against communist expansion, despite the pronounced threat it was still believed to pose, constituted a costly signal of Australia's commitment to US priorities. In short, the need to reassure a prospective ally incentivized China to go to war with a rival of the Soviet Union (the US), and Australia to back down in its dispute with an existing client of the US (Japan).

These cases illustrate how pre-alliance bargaining with third parties affects, and is affected by, the reassurance problems patrons face when considering whether to commit to an alliance.[1] One key risk of such a commitment is the potential for *abandonment*—that is, that the ally would shirk its obligations in the future.[2] The prospect of being abandoned ex post informs the patron's decision about whether to grant an alliance ex ante, because it wants to avoid sinking resources into a security relationship that then does not provide a return. Thus, we focus on largely overlooked cases of potential alliance formation in which the costs of investing in an alliance make patrons hesitant to conclude one, out of fear that clients would abandon them in the future. Abandonment risks, in turn, stem from misaligned preferences—specifically, when one's ally values shared objectives insufficiently. Thus, before a mutually beneficial alliance can be consummated, clients must reassure patrons that their preferences adequately align.

We present two models that show how a prospective ally can achieve such reassurance through its pre-alliance bargaining behavior toward third parties. By taking a hard line toward the patron's rival or making concessions to the patron's existing client, a prospective ally can signal its resolve to uphold alliance obligations and thereby reduce the patron's abandonment concerns. These signals of compatible preferences can induce an initially skeptical patron to grant an alliance, even when doing so carries direct costs.

The role of third parties in pre-alliance reassurance has been largely neglected. Instead, the focus has been on how abandonment affects the likelihood of war between an allied coalition and a third-party adversary after an alliance has formed. Although some works have addressed intra-alliance reassurance, none examine the signaling effects of a prospective ally's posture toward a third party in ameliorating abandonment concerns, or the effect that the prospect of an alliance can have on a state's incentives for war with a third party.

1. We use "alliance" as shorthand for any security relationship in which one state commits to transfer resources to another, thereby augmenting their joint capabilities. This can take several forms, which we elaborate on later.

2. Morrow 2000; Snyder 1984, 1997. We use a standard definition of abandonment as failure to join a conflict when alliance terms require it.

Our models yield several key results. First, the prospect of an alliance makes a potential ally's bargaining behavior with third parties more informative of its preferences. Second, the conditional promise of an alliance incentivizes a state to take a hard line toward its prospective patron's adversaries and offer concessions to the patron's current allies. Fighting can thus serve as a crucial signaling mechanism that underpins alliance formation. Indeed, a secondary result is that when an alliance is valuable enough, the incentive to reassure the patron can generate inefficient, costly conflict between the prospective ally and a shared rival, even with perfect asset divisibility, no commitment problems, and complete information between the belligerents in their bilateral interaction. Instead, this mechanism for war centers on incomplete information held by a nonbelligerent third party, which generates reputational incentives for a prospective ally to fight as a costly signal of its reliability. It is therefore only possible in a multilateral setting, one in which the net benefits of alliance outweigh the cost of war.

We first review the literature on alliances, reassurance, and war. We then present the models and their results, illustrating each with an historical case: China's alleviation of Soviet abandonment concerns through intervention in the Korean War, and Australia's alleviation of US abandonment concerns through post-World War II rapprochement with Japan.

Previous Models of Alliances

Few models have studied the interplay of intra-alliance reassurance and third-party bargaining.[3] Most work on alliances focuses on how they commit allies to defend each other's interests and send credible deterrence signals to common adversaries.[4] This literature has sought to identify how the existence and design of alliances affect the likelihood of conflict.[5] Yet it does not address the dynamics of reassurance that allow the alliance to form in the first place.

Recent models have tackled alliance formation, but not its relationship to third-party bargaining beforehand.[6] Kim studies intra-alliance bargaining where allies are completely informed of each other's preferences, which omits reassurance entirely.[7] Other work examines how various forms of reassurance can facilitate alliance

3. There is a large literature on interstate reassurance that addresses conflict avoidance with potential rivals under security dilemma dynamics in a bilateral setting. See, for example, Haynes 2019; Haynes and Yoder 2020; Jervis 1978; Kydd 2005; Kydd and McManus 2017; Schultz 2005; Yoder 2019a, 2019b. The focus here is instead on cooperation with potential allies in the context of abandonment concerns in a multilateral setting.

4. Benson, Meirowitz, and Ramsay 2014; Morrow 1994, 2000.

5. Benson 2012; Fang, Johnson, and Leeds 2014; Haynes 2024; Kim 2011; Leeds 2003a, 2003b; Leeds and Johnson 2011; Wolford 2014, 2015.

6. Iwanami 2024; Johnson 2017.

7. Kim 2016. In their empirical study of multilateral alliance formation, Fordham and Poast 2016 likewise assume that states are completely informed of the degree to which their preferences converge (see also Poast 2019).

formation,[8] or maintain alliance cohesion,[9] but these analyses are restricted to bilateral signals between allies, not bargaining behavior toward third parties. Studies of how the institutional design of alliances mitigates abandonment risks are likewise limited to the interactions of the alliance parties.[10]

A few works capture parts of our argument, but ultimately address different questions. Several scholars show how states form reputations for alliance reliability through past behavior toward their own allies, but not toward a prospective patron's existing client or rivals, nor how these signaling processes affect conflict incentives.[11] Blankenship shows how the US has used reassurance to dissuade its current allies from pursuing outside options.[12] However, he addresses neither alliance formation, nor the sources of credibility in reassurance signals, nor the role of third-party *threats* (as opposed to alternative allies).[13] Gannon and Kent corroborate an aspect of our argument empirically by showing a correlation between a state's contribution to a joint intervention and its possession of a formal security relationship with the coalition leader.[14] Our argument is more general, however, showing how the prospect of an alliance affects a state's bargaining interactions with third parties prior to coalition formation, and that it can promote peace as well as conflict. And although Benson and Smith address pre-alliance reassurance in a trilateral setting, they focus on reassuring the *rival* of moderate *capabilities*, rather than reassuring a prospective ally of compatible aims.[15]

The models closest to ours are Scott Wolford's, which examine how a patron balances the trade-off between coercing the adversary into greater concessions, on the one hand, and reassuring its ally that it will not make excessive demands that raise the likelihood of war, on the other.[16] Like our models, Wolford's capture incentives for intra-alliance reassurance and examine how those incentives affect bargaining outcomes with a third-party adversary. Yet his argument remains quite distinct from ours. First, Wolford's main outcome of interest is the probability of war between the patron and the adversary. We focus instead on whether alliances form in the first place, and whether the *pre*-alliance reassurance process can generate or forestall war between a prospective client and a third-party adversary. Accordingly, the key conditions we compare here are whether or not the patron's alliance decision hinges on the prospective ally's pre-alliance bargaining behavior, which in turn is a function of the patron's beliefs. This is our main causal variable. Wolford's, on the other hand, are the adversary's military power and the patron's resolve, which determine whether

8. Horowitz, Poast, and Stam 2017; Koga 2024; Smith 2021.
9. Izumikawa 2018; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017.
10. Benson 2012; Kim 2011; Mattes 2012.
11. Crescenzi et al. 2012; Gibler 2008; Henry 2020.
12. Blankenship 2020.
13. The first and third distinctions also apply to Blankenship and Lin-Greenberg 2022 and to Sukin and Lanoszka 2024.
14. Gannon and Kent 2021.
15. Benson and Smith 2023. Yoder 2020a, 2020b also models multilateral reassurance, but does not address the causes of alliance formation or war.
16. Wolford 2014, 2015.

the presence of the ally increases or decreases the likelihood of war between the patron and the adversary.

Before proceeding, we offer some notes on our scope. First, our model captures the process of forming any security relationship, formalized or not, wherein one party (the "patron") transfers net resources to another (the "ally"), and their joint capabilities are enhanced. This transfer can take the form of either money and matériel or military integration that asymmetrically benefits one side.[17] We use "alliance" as a shorthand for such security relationships, but our argument extends beyond formal alliances.

Second, one of our contributions is to highlight *patrons*' abandonment concerns *prior* to alliance formation, in contrast to the prevailing theoretical focus on clients' abandonment concerns following alliance formation.[18] Abandonment concerns straightforwardly affect patrons' decisions about whether to grant alliances, which is our focus: they must avoid investing substantial resources in security relationships with clients that might not fulfill their obligations.[19] Even if the client suffers more from abandonment ex post, after the investment in the relationship has been sunk, the patron is more concerned about its prospective ally's reliability ex ante, when deciding whether to make the investment in the first place. For example, our case studies will show that the US and the USSR were extremely wary of admitting unreliable allies even in the insecurity-fraught environment of the early Cold War.[20] Furthermore, even asymmetrically small allies (such as Vietnam or Cuba) carry significant value for a great power, as evidenced by the intense US–Soviet competition for clients and the oft-cited advantages the US reaps from the alignment of middle powers in Europe and Asia.[21] Thus, the potential for future abandonment by clients is a significant concern in great-power alliance decisions.

Finally, although our argument clearly captures asymmetric patron–client relationships, the mechanisms also potentially apply to roughly symmetrical security relationships in which one party transfers net resources to the other. This often occurs among great-power allies with complementary and heterogeneous strengths. For example, before World War I France used its comparative financial advantages to subsidize Russia's modernization and thus take advantage of its ally's location, size, and resource endowments, despite their comparable overall capabilities. Similar divisions of labor characterized great-power relations between the Western Allies and the Soviet Union in World War II, the Dual Alliance of Germany and Austria-Hungary, and the Sino–Soviet alliance in our case study in this article.

17. Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016. Of course, the patron must sink investment into the alliance before the ally is faced with the decision about whether to support the patron in a conflict; otherwise the investment could simply be withheld.

18. A recent exemplar is Lanoszka 2022; for exceptions see Wolford 2014, 2015.

19. Crescenzi et al. 2012; Henry 2020; Snyder 1997, chap. 2.

20. This is also in part why contemporary China has broadly refrained from substantial alliance investments. Zhang 2025.

21. Beckley 2015; Cha 2016.

Baseline Model: Bargaining with a Third-Party Rival

Specification

The baseline model has three players: a patron (P), a prospective ally (A), and a common rival (R). There are two stages, each of which entails a bargaining interaction with R. In stage 1 A bargains with R on its own, while in stage 2 P and R bargain, with A potentially weighing in on P's side. Here, we study how observing A's bargaining interaction with R in stage 1 allows P to draw inferences about A's preferences and future behavior in stage 2.

A and P share a preference over the distribution of the assets in dispute with R, but place different values on them. P (and R) value them at 1, while A values them at $\alpha < 1$, which is private information to A. In other words, A holds a "bias" in favor of P's bargaining position, capturing the intuition that A's preferences over the issue(s) at stake are closer to P's than to R's, but not identical to P's.[22] α can take on one of two values, $\underline{\alpha}$ or $\overline{\alpha}$, where $\underline{\alpha} < \overline{\alpha}$. When $\alpha = \underline{\alpha}$, A is defined as an *abandoner* (denoted $\underline{A}$) that will not support P against R even with an alliance, whereas when $\alpha = \overline{\alpha}$, A is a *supporter* (denoted $\overline{A}$) that will honor its alliance obligations to P. P is initially uncertain of A's type, holding prior beliefs that $\alpha = \overline{\alpha}$ with probability q and $\alpha = \underline{\alpha}$ with probability $1 - q$. Similarly, R holds priors that $\alpha = \overline{\alpha}$ with probability ρ and $\alpha = \underline{\alpha}$ with probability $1 - \rho$.[23] Figure 1 illustrates the configuration of the actors' goals.

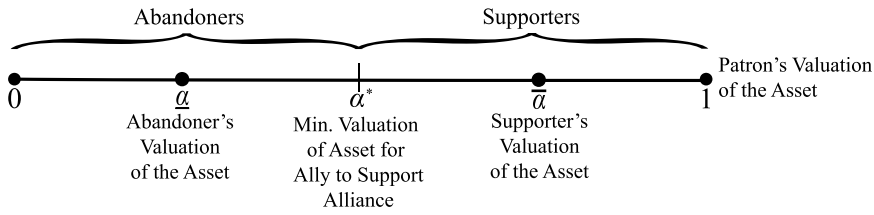

FIGURE 1. *Spatial graph of actors' preferences and types*

22. For a similar specification, see Wolford 2023. We conceive of the first-stage asset as comprising issue(s) of local or regional scope, where A has the capacity to intervene against R unilaterally, whereas P is precluded from intervening by geographical, logistical, domestic, or other constraints. The second-stage asset then represents the broader international order where P and R are competing more comprehensively. We also straightforwardly assume second-stage preferences are endogenous to first-stage preferences, which is all that is required for our results to hold. For example, in our case study, China's and Russia's preferences for the political orders both on the Korean Peninsula and globally were much closer to each other's than to those of the US, even though there were certainly disagreements among them.

23. This specification relaxes the standard assumption of common priors to show that the results hold even if R and P hold differing beliefs about A's type, which is certainly a realistic possibility. In terms of second-order beliefs, we assume that R observes P's priors, whereas P's beliefs about R's priors are irrelevant since R makes no moves after P's decision node. Importantly, all results are robust to retaining common priors: there is always some range of k_R under which the reported equilibria hold in the special case where $\rho = q$.

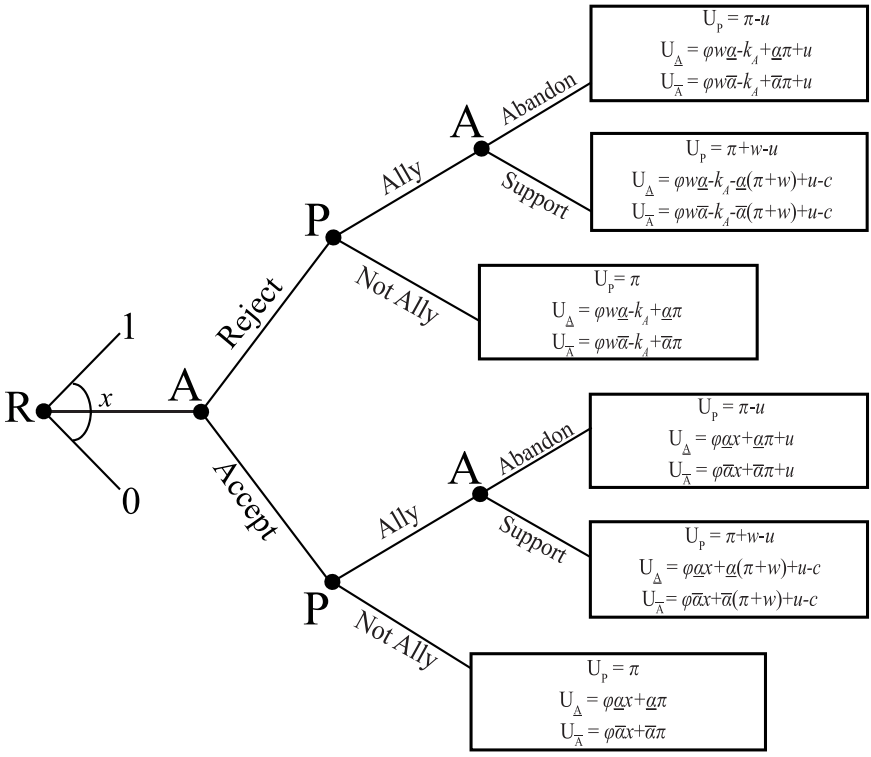

FIGURE 2. *Extensive form of the baseline model (R's payoffs omitted for legibility)*

Figure 2 presents the game tree. Stage 1 begins with A choosing whether to accept or reject an offer, x, from R. Acceptance results in peaceful settlement at x. Rejection results in winner-take-all conflict that imposes costs k_R on R and k_A on A, and which A wins with probability w, its share of the bilateral distribution of power with R. Payoffs from the first-stage settlement are weighted by a factor, ϕ, which can be greater than or less than 1. This captures the relative value of the different assets at stake across the two stages (including discount rate). Conflict thus yields expected payoffs of $\phi w\alpha - k_A$ for A and $\phi(1-w) - k_R$ for R, while a peaceful settlement yields payoffs of $\phi\alpha x$ for A and $\phi(1-x)$ for R.[24]

Between stages, P chooses whether to ally with A. Alliance transfers utility u from P to A, whereas nonalignment is payoff-neutral.[25] u captures two benefits to A at P's expense.[26] First is the investment P makes to enhance A's military capabilities and

24. P's payoffs from the first-stage outcome are inconsequential, and thus assumed to be zero without loss of generality.

25. This captures the "patron's dilemma," wherein one party decides whether to transfer net resources to another in the form of military integration or money and matériel. Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper 2016.

26. Blankenship 2020; Spindel 2023. u is not necessarily a single up-front transfer but also captures the stream of benefits A expects to receive from P over the duration of the alliance.

coordinate them with P's own. Second, by accepting some degree of dependence on A for operational effectiveness—such as basing, logistics, or local force deployments—P becomes obligated to defend A from third-party threats in general. In turn, P's investment in and commitment to its allies reduce their defense spending needs,[27] amounting to a direct transfer captured by u. Thus, we model P's prospective abandonment concerns during the alliance-formation process as the risk that its costly investment in A will yield no strategic payoff.

The second-stage asset is again valued at 1 by P and α by A, with the actors holding identical ideal points.[28] How stage 2 proceeds depends on whether P has allied with A. Without an alliance, P reaches a peaceful settlement according to the bilateral distribution of power, π. This yields second-stage payoffs of π for P, $\alpha\pi$ for A, and $1-\pi$ for R.

Conversely, if P has allied with A, stage 2 begins with A choosing whether to support P against R or to abandon its alliance commitment. Support carries cost c, which represents the effort A must expend to actually bring its military power to bear on P's side.[29] Whereas abandonment entails pocketing the security resources bestowed by P, support, even short of war, requires A to invest in and mobilize its military capacity to enhance P's bargaining leverage against R.[30] Thus, support occurs when α is above a particular threshold, $\alpha^* \equiv \frac{c}{w}$, while abandonment occurs when $\alpha < \alpha^*$. As mentioned, we assume that $\underline{\alpha} < \alpha^*$ and that $\overline{\alpha} \geq \alpha^*$, such that A is an *abandoner* when $\alpha = \underline{\alpha}$ and a *supporter* when $\alpha = \overline{\alpha}$.

If A abandons, the second-stage payoffs follow just as they did with no alliance. However, sustaining the alliance adds A's capabilities to P's in the bargaining interaction with R. With A's support, the coalition of P and A holds capabilities of $\pi + w$, raising the settlement to that point. P's second-stage payoff is then $\pi + w$, while A's is $\alpha(\pi + w) - c$ and R's is $1 - \pi - w$.

Results

Equilibrium analysis. We solve the model using the perfect Bayesian equilibrium solution concept.[31] There are three "classes" of equilibria across all parameter spaces, depicted in Figure 3: (1) separating equilibria (SE) in which abandoners accept R's offer and supporters reject it; (2) pooling equilibria (PE) in which both types accept;

27. Beckley 2015.

28. Assuming constant preferences over the assets in each stage does not affect our results as long as preferences are *correlated* across local (first-stage) and global (second-stage) issues. This is almost certainly true. See Goldfien, Joseph, and McManus 2023.

29. We assume away the risk of war, another obvious cost of supporting P.

30. For simplicity, abandonment is costless for A. Introducing a dissolution cost, d, to A for breaking the alliance would only serve to narrow the range of α for which A is an abandoner from $\left[0, \frac{c}{w}\right]$ to $\left[0, \frac{c-d}{w}\right]$. But since we assume that one type is an abandoner with an exogenous probability, adding this variable would not affect the results in any way.

31. Section 1 of the appendix provides a full equilibrium analysis.

and (3) a PE where both types reject.[32] Our main results concern a comparison of the SE and the acceptance PE, so we begin by describing those equilibria before returning to the rejection PE.

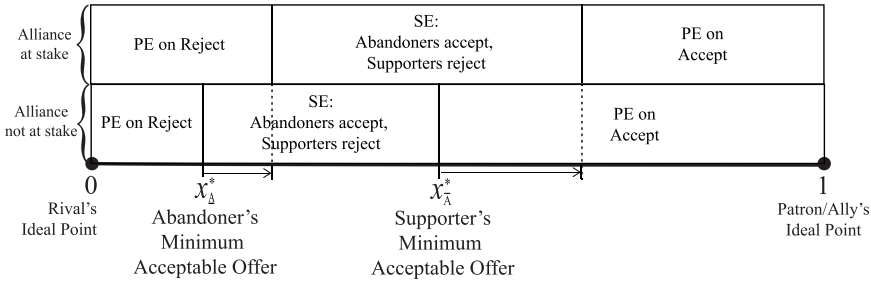

FIGURE 3. *A's equilibrium response for the baseline model. Arrows indicate the effect of having alliance at stake*

The acceptance PE occur when R is sufficiently confident A is a supporter that it issues the minimum offer, $x^*_{\overline{A}}$, that supporters (and thus both types) accept.[33] In response to acceptance, P retains its prior beliefs, allying if and only if it holds sufficiently confident priors that A is a supporter ($q > \frac{u}{w}$).[34]

Conversely, the SE occur when R is sufficiently confident that A is an abandoner that it issues the minimum offer, $x^*_{\underline{A}}$, that only abandoners would accept. Supporters, being the more resolved type, necessarily reject this offer. P therefore forms posterior beliefs that A is a supporter with certainty in response to rejection, and an abandoner with certainty in response to acceptance. In the latter case P never allies, while in the former case P allies if and only if $w \geq u$.[35]

Our key results rest on a comparison of A's incentives to fight in the equilibria where alliance is at stake versus those where it is not. Alliance is defined to be at stake when P would ally if and only if A rejects R's offer.[36] Thus, in terms of the exogenous game parameters, alliance is at stake in the SE if and only if $w \geq u$, whereas in the PE it also depends on P's prior and off-path beliefs.[37] Since these formal definitions are

32. Within these equilibrium classes, there are three SE and four acceptance PE. Alliance is at stake in two of the SE and one of the acceptance PE, where alliance is defined to be at stake when P would ally if and only if A rejects R's offer.

33. The acceptance PE also require that w be below a particular threshold when offer $x^*_{\overline{A}}$ would put alliance at stake. Otherwise pooling on rejection occurs (see the later subsection, "Pooling Equilibrium on Reject").

34. For a full characterization of all acceptance PE, see section 1.3 of the appendix.

35. For a full characterization of all SE, see section 1.2 of the appendix.

36. By this definition, there are two SE with alliance at stake (characterized in sections 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 of the appendix) and one without, and one acceptance PE with alliance at stake (characterized in section 1.3.1 of the appendix) and three without.

37. Formally, alliance is at stake in the acceptance PE if and only if three conditions are satisfied: (1) P's priors dictate no alliance in response to pooling ($q \leq \frac{u}{w}$); (2) P forms off-path beliefs $q' \geq \frac{u}{w}$; and (3) the

cumbersome and unintuitive, we use "alliance at stake" as a more substantively meaningful shorthand hereafter.

Comparative statics. Our most straightforward result is that with alliance at stake A rejects offers from R it otherwise would accept, allowing it to signal compatibility with P and thereby elicit an alliance commitment. Pooling offer $x_{\underline{A}}^*$ and separating offer $x_{\underline{A}}^*$ each take one of two values, depending on whether alliance with P is at stake. In the SE without alliance at stake, $x_{\underline{A}}^* = w - \frac{k_A}{\phi\underline{\alpha}}$. But this threshold increases to $x_{\underline{A}}^* = w - \frac{k_A}{\phi\underline{\alpha}} + \frac{u}{\phi\underline{\alpha}}$ in the SE with alliance at stake. Likewise, in the PE without alliance at stake, $x_{\underline{A}}^* = w - \frac{k_A}{\phi\underline{\alpha}}$, but this increases to $x_{\underline{A}}^* = w - \frac{k_A}{\phi\overline{\alpha}} + \frac{w\underline{\alpha}+u-c}{\phi\overline{\alpha}}$ in the PE with alliance at stake.[38] Figure 3 illustrates how these thresholds shift with versus without alliance at stake, and the ranges of offers (including out-of-equilibrium offers) each type accepts and rejects under each condition.

Result 1. *Having an alliance at stake increases A's threshold for accepting R's offer.*

Result 1 implies that conflict becomes more likely when alliance is at stake. When that alliance is sufficiently valuable, the minimum offer the supporter will accept is greater than R is willing to make. Formally, this occurs when w exceeds a particular threshold.[39] When w falls below this threshold, R simply increases its offer with alliance at stake to meet A's inflated demands. However, when w is large enough, R is no longer willing to make the high pooling offer both types would accept, and instead makes the separating offer that the supporter rejects. The reason for this is as follows. Recall that the supporter gains more from alliance than the abandoner does, because the supporter will actually benefit from the increased bargaining leverage against R in stage 2, whereas the abandoner will not. Thus, the supporter's minimum offer increases more than the abandoner's does when alliance is at stake. This increases R's incentive to make the separating offer that satisfies only the abandoner and yields conflict with the supporter, rather than the high pooling offer that will satisfy the supporter as well. At the extreme, when alliance is sufficiently valuable, the supporter rejects *all* offers with alliance at stake: A prefers to suffer the costs of conflict with R in order to reassure P that it will be a reliable ally. Thus, a patron's abandonment concerns, and the resulting incentive to reassure this generates for its prospective ally, can drive the ally into costly conflict with the patron's rival.

Result 2. *When alliance is sufficiently valuable, A's incentive to induce P to grant an alliance can completely eliminate the bargaining range between A and R, producing costly conflict.*[40]

benefits of A's support against R outweigh P's investment in the alliance ($w \geq u$). These conditions imply that P would ally off path in response to rejection, but not in response to pooling on acceptance.

38. See Proposition 2 in the appendix. Because $w\overline{\alpha} > c$ by definition, $x_{\underline{A}}^*$ is always greater with alliance at stake than without.

39. This threshold of w depends on the specific equilibrium; see Lemmata 3, 4, and 6 in the appendix.

40. Formally, when w is sufficiently high, the minimum offer the supporter will accept exceeds 1. This threshold of w is defined in Proposition 3 in the appendix.

A secondary implication is that when A rejects all offers, inefficient conflict can occur even when R and A enjoy complete information *bilaterally*. Without alliance at stake, R would always make an offer acceptable to the supporter. But when a sufficiently valuable alliance is at stake, there is no offer the completely informed supporter will accept, so even a completely informed R cannot avoid war. In this case, incomplete information is driving conflict, but not in the typical way: it is *third party P's* uncertainty about A's resolve, not R's uncertainty, that underpins the bargaining failure. In contrast to the standard bilateral informational mechanism, war in this case occurs because fighting constitutes an informative signal that is necessary for P to grant an alliance, giving A a reputational incentive to reject R's offer. When this positive byproduct of fighting—alliance formation—is taken into account, war becomes net-beneficial to A, even though it remains an inefficient mechanism for dividing the asset with R. Others have recognized that incentives to build reputations for *toughness* with potential third-party adversaries can make war net-beneficial in multilateral settings,[41] but our model extends this logic to reputations for *compatibility* with potential third-party allies. We build on these past arguments in demonstrating that in a multilateral context, the strategic behavior of third parties can make war rational even with perfect asset divisibility, no commitment problems, and complete information between the belligerents, conditions that have been axiomatically cited as sufficient for peace between rational actors.[42]

A final result is that having an alliance at stake can facilitate credible signaling when that alliance is sufficiently meaningful. Because A's signals are fully informative in the SE but uninformative in the PE, expansion of the SE represents an increase in signal credibility.[43] Proposition 4 in the appendix shows that the parameter space under which R issues the separating offer instead of the high pooling offer (thereby enabling credible signals) expands with alliance at stake whenever w exceeds a certain threshold. In short, the prospect of an alliance not only gives prospective allies incentives to reassure the patron of their reliability, it also makes sending credible reassurance signals more feasible than it otherwise would be.

41. Clare and Danilovic 2010; Jervis 1988; Schelling 1966; Walter 2006. The only formalization of this dynamic in international relations of which we are aware is Chatagnier 2015, although it is also reflected in the classic chain-store paradox (Selten 1978). Crescenzi 2007 models the belief-formation mechanism by which fighting confers reputation for toughness, but does not extend it to motivations for fighting in the first place.

42. Fearon 1995. Others have modeled different mechanisms by which multilateral settings can promote war: sufficiently divergent preferences when bargaining over policy issues (Gallop 2017) and incomplete information about an opponent's capabilities relative to its third-party rival (Tarar 2023).

43. Although A keeps the entire transfer from P even if it abandons, the alliance commitment from the supporter is self-enforcing, since the supporter by definition cares enough about the asset to join P's side against R in stage 2. Fighting R in stage 1 helps reveal the supporter's type precisely because the asset, and therefore the prospect of alliance, is more valuable to the supporter than to the abandoner. The supporter is therefore more willing to bear the costs of war in stage 1, even though we assume the two types benefit equally from the direct transfer from P.

Result 3. *Separating signals that reveal A's type are more likely with alliance at stake, as long as the alliance is sufficiently valuable to the supporter (that is, as long as w is sufficiently high).*[44]

Pooling equilibrium on reject. Interestingly, the model also reveals a second theoretical pathway to war whereby R issues a low offer that both types reject (the rejection PE).[45] It does so under very large values of w that raise high pooling offer $x_{\overline{A}}^*$ to a level that is unacceptable to R: R would prefer to fight than to make such an offer. w must also be high enough that R is unwilling to make separating offer $x_{\underline{A}}^*$, because the effect of an alliance between P and A (if A turns out to be a supporter) would be too onerous for R.[46] Thus, R would rather fight with certainty than allow the possibility of P forming an alliance with the supporter. Under this set of conditions, R "jams" A's signals by making a low pooling offer that both types would reject rather than letting the supporter separate and signal its compatibility with P (assuming P's priors dictate no alliance). In principle, therefore, R might overtly precipitate war with A to conserve P's priors and forestall alliance formation. However, although this pathway to war is theoretically interesting, we know of no examples and are not confident that it is a common empirical phenomenon.

Empirical Applications

To establish the generality of our argument before presenting a detailed empirical illustration, we first provide a brief, nonsystematic survey of historical cases that appear to exhibit our theoretical logic.[47] Naturally, the range of the examples that follow is constrained by the limits of our own knowledge, and there are likely many additional manifestations of the theory.

There are numerous instances of military confrontations that were motivated in part by reassurance of a prospective security partner. Many occur under US hegemony, with other states attempting to secure or maintain a beneficial security relationship with the US as patron. In a cross-national study that corroborates one aspect of our mechanism, Gannon and Kent find a correlation between a state's need for a US alliance commitment and the costliness of its contribution to the 2001–2014 war in Afghanistan,[48] suggesting that our causal logic motivated US security partners in this period. The same was true of the Korean War. In Thailand, for example, the "mere prospect of military aid had sparked a revolution in postwar Thai foreign policy

44. See Proposition 4 in the appendix. There are two SE in which alliance is at stake, which are distinguished by P's off-path beliefs. For one of these SE, Result 3 holds only when w falls in an intermediate range. This is due to an expansion of the rejection PE when w exceeds the upper bound of that range (see next subsection).

45. The rejection PE requires that P's prior beliefs dictate no alliance and that offers $x_{\underline{A}}^*$ and $x_{\overline{A}}^*$ put alliance at stake. For a full characterization, see section 1.4 of the appendix.

46. The set of thresholds w must exceed for the rejection PE to hold are defined in Lemmata 3 and 4 in the appendix.

47. These cases are speculative to varying degrees, and we do not claim them as any more than plausibility probes.

48. Gannon and Kent 2021.

amenable to American interests."[49] The Thais knew the US sought a "definite confirmation regarding the policy of the Thai government in defending against communist aggression,"[50] and acknowledged that by deploying troops with UN forces in Korea "we will get various things in return," ultimately resulting in membership in the US-led SEATO alliance.[51]

A more speculative example is China's attempt to achieve rapprochement with the US in what would become a "tacit alliance" against the USSR. Margaret MacMillan suggests that Mao Zedong may have provoked the 1969 Sino–Soviet border war in part as a means of "sending a signal to the Americans that the rupture between the People's Republic and the Soviet Union was permanent," and marks this as "the moment when [Henry] Kissinger finally accepted that ... the time was favorable for an American move toward China."[52]

Our argument is equally applicable in contexts where reassurance is needed to maintain existing alliance benefits or resuscitate a lapsed or fraying alliance. In recent years, Denmark's "will to actively maintain its status as a contributing and constructive ally through participation in [US-led] military operations [was] driven by a perception of the United States as crucial to Denmark's national security."[53] Denmark has been "happy to fight ... to secure the alliance commitments that not so long ago seemed unchallenged."[54] Similarly, Austria made a deliberate decision in 1914 to provoke war with Serbia, in part to assure Germany of Austrian reliability and sustain its alliance commitment. Austrian diplomats fretted that "our decision should be influenced strongly by the fact that ... by a weak and hesitating policy we might risk not being so certain of German support at some future time."[55] Austria's foreign minister wrote that "in Germany it would not be understood if we were to neglect this opportunity" to provoke war with Serbia. That is, "Germany would consider further negotiating with Serbia a confession of weakness on our part," which would have serious "repercussions for our position in the Triple Alliance and Germany's future policy" toward Austria.[56] Germany's urging "had a great influence on the firm attitude of the [Austrian] Emperor" Franz Joseph, resulting in an ultimatum to Serbia "composed so that the possibility of its acceptance is practically excluded."[57]

This last illustration highlights the applicability of our argument to contexts without a hegemonic US patron, and to relatively symmetrical great-power security relationships. An example under the former condition is the intervention of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia ("Piedmont") in the Crimean War. Piedmont joined the anti-Russia coalition in part to "insinuate [itself] into the West's good graces ahead of Austria, and, if possible, to gain Western support for [Piedmont]'s ambitions

49. Fineman 1997, 125; see also Raymond 2019.
50. Fineman 1997, 104.
51. Ibid., 117.
52. MacMillan 2007, 137–38; see also Yang 2002.
53. Wivel 2020.
54. Jakobsen and Rynning 2019.
55. Quoted in Mombauer 2013, 214; see also 199.
56. Quoted in ibid., 223.
57. Quoted in ibid., 247.

in Italy."[58] Thus, Piedmont fought to signal that it would be a more reliable partner to the British and French in securing the European status quo than the Austrians would be. Historians conclude that as a result of its involvement in the Crimean War, Piedmont "came to the [diplomatic] understanding which led ultimately to the independence of Italy," with a Franco–Italian coalition defeating Austria at Solferino in 1859.[59]

Another pre-1945 manifestation of our mechanism was the formation of the Anglo–Japanese Alliance. In 1894, "Russian penetration into northern China ... culminated in the Sino-Japanese War," wherein Japan sought to wrest Korea from a crumbling Qing Empire to prevent it from falling to the Russians. Thus, "Japan emerged as a rival with Russia"—which was also Britain's chief rival—making clear that "Britain and Japan shared a common interest in opposing further Russian expansion."[60] In light of Japan's war to obstruct Russia, Britain's foreign secretary considered "a Russo-Japanese clash over Korea ... inevitable in the long run," deeming Japan "our natural ally... [Japan] will be a counterpoise to the Russians & so far a distinct advantage to us. Our policy must be to make her our ally."[61] Similar dynamics played out more intentionally in the Boxer Rebellion during 1901. Tokyo dispatched 10,000 soldiers to help defend joint Japanese–British interests and contest expansion of Russian influence in China, in hopes of making "Britain willing to allot Japan a role as its principal partner in Asia."[62] The interventions were ultimately successful in this endeavor, as "Japan finally achieved its goal of concluding a new treaty with Britain" in 1902.[63] Ian Nish concludes that "Japan's behavior helped in steering British opinion towards recognizing Japan as a useful ally against Russia in Asia."[64]

Furthermore, although our argument applies most clearly to asymmetric cases in which a powerful patron confers security rents on a relatively weak ally, it can also obtain among relatively equal powers when one transfers net resources to the other. Once such instance is the "diplomatic revolution" of 1756, during the Seven Years' War, in which long-time rivals France and Austria aligned with each other against their previous allies, Prussia and Britain, respectively.[65] Key to the realignment was the burgeoning Austro–British commercial and colonial rivalry, as well as Britain's overtures toward Austria's main rival, Prussia.[66] As Britain moved increasingly toward Prussia, the Austrians looked to France, Britain's adversary in the North American theater, as a potential alternative. Recognizing that they "held in prospect a substantial alliance with Austria," the French launched maritime operations against Britain and a 15,000-troop landing at Minorca to attract Vienna further. Subsequently, the Austrians

58. Schroeder 2004, 206; see also Rathbone 2008, 31.
59. Hearder 1996, 833; see also Rathbone 2008, 31; Rupasov 2024.
60. Clark 2012, 137–38.
61. Quoted in Otte 2007, 71.
62. Iriye 1989, 774.
63. Ibid., 764.
64. Nish 2003, 17.
65. For a general treatment of this case, see Szabo 2007.
66. Watson 2021.

were "impressed by France's performance in the war, and believed ... Versailles would deal with her more honestly than had their counterparts in London."[67] Thus, France's demonstrated willingness to fight the British in Europe helped persuade the Austrians that France would also be a reliable ally against Prussia.[68]

A final empirical implication is that if taking a hard line and demonstrating a willingness to fight a common adversary can promote alliance formation, then a prospective ally's concessions and refusal to fight should forestall it. This is seen in the effect that British and French appeasement of Nazi Germany had on alliance negotiations with the Soviet Union. Although the British "saw Soviet policy as a ruse to get Britain and France into a war with Germany while the USSR sat aside ... the Soviet side saw it the other way around, convinced by various Anglo-French attempts to come to terms with Hitler."[69] Indeed, "after the Munich conference, Soviet confidence in Britain and France hit rock bottom."[70]

This brief historical survey demonstrates that our logic generalizes across several different contexts. Whereas smaller states have often fought to garner patronage from a hegemonic US since 1945, we can also identify several cases with a non-US patron, one with symmetrical alliance partners (the Seven Years' War), and another (Allied appeasement of Germany) exhibiting the negative implication of our argument that failure to stand firm can subvert alliance formation that otherwise seemed likely.

Sino–Soviet Reassurance in the Korean War

We illustrate results 1 to 3 with China's entry into the Korean War in 1950. This case captures the SE with alliance at stake, casting China as the prospective ally, the USSR as patron, and the United States as third-party rival. We argue that China's involvement in the war helped Chinese leader Mao Zedong demonstrate to Soviet dictator Josef Stalin China's reliability as an ally. This allowed Mao to garner a Soviet alliance commitment and corresponding economic aid vital to the survival of the fledgling PRC. Initially skeptical of China's intentions, Stalin demanded that the Chinese demonstrate their resolve to fight in support of Soviet aims by intervening in Korea. This conditional promise of Soviet security cooperation played an important role in Mao's authorization of North Korea's initial invasion, his decision to enter the war, and the manner in which he conducted it, informing both the timing of the intervention and the costly and prolonged military strategy China employed. But our primary purpose is to show how Mao used his entry into the war and tough bargaining posture during its course to credibly reassure Stalin and secure alliance benefits, rather than showing that war would not have occurred counterfactually. We will

67. Schumann and Schweizer 2008, 169.

68. There is also circumstantial evidence that the French were convinced Austria would be a reliable ally by their observation of Austria's hard-line bargaining in its disputes with Britain, which the French came to recognize "could simply not be reconciled." Schweizer 1987, 247.

69. Carley 2019, 723–24.

70. Ibid., 704.

discuss later how our argument complements Mao's other main motivation for intervention, to counter the threat of US troops approaching the Chinese border.

In late 1949, the Chinese communists faced a litany of problems that made securing a Soviet alliance immensely valuable. The task of rebuilding and governing a backward, war-torn country stood before them, and US-backed threats still loomed from Taiwan and Japan. A Soviet alliance was China's best hope of bolstering itself against these formidable security challenges, while also promising desperately needed economic assistance.[71] As Westad notes, "virtually all Chinese Communist leaders believed that the construction and survival of [a Chinese socialist] state would depend on Soviet support."[72] Thus, through 1949 Mao bombarded Stalin with pleas for an alliance accompanied by aid. Yet Stalin repeatedly declined to hear Mao's requests.[73]

The fundamental barrier to an alliance was a daunting reassurance problem. Stalin was skeptical that the PRC was sufficiently reliable to warrant the massive investment in China's reconstruction Mao hoped would accompany a formal alliance.[74] As the CCP emerged victorious in its civil war, "Stalin could not shake his doubts about Mao's long-term intentions toward the Soviet Union and the West,"[75] concluding from Mao's ambivalent diplomatic posture toward the US that if push came to shove the Chinese would not "want to quarrel with the Americans."[76] Ideologically, "Stalin remained very concerned about Mao's loyalty to Soviet leadership" and his commitment to Stalin's vision for world communism.[77] As Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue emphasize, "Stalin did not consider Mao a true Marxist and always suspected that the Chinese revolution sooner or later would mutate into something else, meaning something anti-Marxist and anti-Soviet."[78] Moreover, "Mao was aware of Moscow's apprehensions about Chinese 'Titoism' and was determined to prove China's loyalty to the world revolutionary movement."[79] To overcome these concerns and achieve a mutually beneficial alliance, credible reassurance signals were needed.

Mao's key reassurance signal was his willingness to confront the US over Korea once it became clear the Soviet alliance was at stake. North Korean leader Kim Il Sung badly needed Soviet and Chinese support in his pending civil war, but initially found both Stalin and Mao unenthusiastic.[80] Mao twice turned down Kim's early

71. Chen 2001, 49–53; Westad 2003, 166–67, 255, 297, 311. This transfer of resources from patron to client is captured by u in the model. China received a USD 300 million loan as part of the Sino–Soviet alliance, and economic assistance to China absorbed an astounding 7 percent of Soviet GDP by the mid-1950s. See Shen and Xia 2015, 88–91, chap. 4.

72. Westad 2003, 165–66; see also Shen and Xia 2015, 21–23.

73. Westad 2003, 166–67, 253, 262–63, 268; Zhang, Zhang, and Yao 2006, 106–109.

74. Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993, 31.

75. Ibid., 36; see also 32–33, 41.

76. Ibid., 34.

77. Christensen 2011, 51.

78. Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993, 44, 8.

79. Garver 1994, 10; see also Chen 2001, 53; Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993, 42–44, 47; Shen and Xia 2015, 58–61.

80. Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993, 134. Although Stalin was wary about Soviet involvement in Korea given the threat of US intervention, this dampened neither his enthusiasm for *Chinese* intervention in the

requests for Chinese intervention in Korea, and Chinese leaders even agreed in October 1949 that a North Korean attack on the South should be avoided entirely.[81]

Once Stalin agreed to discuss a potential alliance with Mao in January 1950, however, Mao's position on Korea changed dramatically. In one exchange, Stalin (who himself had leverage to restrain Kim Il-Sung) "clearly placed the last chance at stopping [North Korea's initiation of] the war on Mao's shoulders by giving him veto power over Kim's final decision."[82] Stalin's reason for doing so was "to test Mao's dedication to 'proletarian internationalism.'"[83] Christensen concurs that "the outbreak of the Korean War was the first 'great test' of the Sino-Soviet alliance, and the process leading up to it exemplified Stalin's pre-war lack of trust in Mao."[84] This clearly shows that Stalin saw China's behavior in the looming Korean conflict as a critically informative signal of Mao's commitment to Soviet aims. In terms of our model, an alliance was at stake.

Crucially, Mao fully recognized Stalin's "great test" and responded as we hypothesize. Once he had been "put on the spot by Stalin, Mao Zedong had no alternative but to confirm his support for the North Korean plans" in order to maximize alliance benefits from the USSR.[85] Thereafter, as Westad notes, Mao was quite genuinely "fighting for friendship."[86] Mao himself recalled that "Stalin did not fully trust him to be a real revolutionary until after China's massive intervention in the Korean War."[87] To demonstrate his revolutionary credentials, in January 1950 Mao sent 50,000 to 70,000 troops to North Korea, a move he had previously refused to make.[88] Thus, having ensured war was imminent by granting support for Kim's invasion, Mao then committed to covert intervention by preemptively deploying Chinese troops.[89] These were key signals of Mao's resolve that coincided precisely with the initiation of Sino–Soviet alliance discussions.

Furthermore, as US forces approached the Chinese border in October, Mao responded to Stalin's request that he officially enter the war with five to six additional divisions by instead sending nine, despite his awareness that the initial lack of Soviet air support would leave his troops immensely vulnerable.[90] For Shen and Xia, "China's dispatch of troops, therefore, was a key step in turning the Sino-Soviet alliance from a paper alliance to a real one."[91]

conflict without Soviet cover, nor the degree to which he updated his beliefs in response to it. Weathersby 1993.

81. Christensen 2011, 48, 50.
82. Ibid., 59.
83. Westad 2003, 311–12.
84. Christensen 2011, 57.
85. Westad 2003, 320. According to the logic of our model, authorizing the war would have been net-costlier if Mao did not share Soviet security goals because he would not have benefited as much from the alliance. This generates separation and thus credibility that, given Mao's willingness to precipitate a war that threatened to extend to China, he was firmly committed to fight for Soviet aims.
86. Westad 1996, 224.
87. Christensen 2011, 57.
88. Chen 2001, 55.
89. Chen 1994
90. Christensen 2011, 70–73.
91. Shen and Xia 2015, 91.

Consistent with result 3, the Soviets deemed China's entry into the Korean War a credible signal of its reliability and responded accordingly. Chinese intervention served to "convince Stalin that Mao and his government would not compromise with the United States and would stand by the Communist cause even against staggering odds... The Korean conflict strengthened Stalin's trust in Mao."[92] Mao himself confirmed that until China's intervention in Korea, the Soviets "doubted that ours was a real revolution."[93] Thus, "only because of the outbreak of the Korean War and Mao's decision to send troops to aid Korea under extremely difficult circumstances was the Sino-Soviet relationship strengthened... The political, military, diplomatic, and economic dimensions of the Sino-Soviet alliance were transformed by the war."[94] As mentioned (see note 71), Soviet assistance to China dramatically increased thereafter.

The direct quotes and historical literature we have cited show that the actors were motivated at least in part by our hypothesized mechanism. However, this is not intended to refute the leading alternative hypothesis for why China entered the war—the threat from the US advance on the Korean Peninsula—which operated alongside ours. Christensen, among others, argues that "Mao's decision to enter Korea in force was triggered by the American decision to send US forces north of the 38th parallel... Mao did not intend to allow American troops to remain permanently behind a buffer in North Korea, regardless of the buffer's width."[95] Yet many of these scholars have also acknowledged the salience of Mao's desire to secure Soviet support. Christensen himself notes that the aggressive military strategy and "tough posturing" Mao adopted were at least partly "designed to influence the Soviets."[96] Hao and Zhai similarly identify "several Chinese interests and goals, including the improvement in Sino-Soviet relations [that] were considered by the Chinese leaders in making their decision."[97] Likewise, for Chen Jian, Rosemary Foot, and Allen Whiting, defending China against US forces and strengthening ties to the Soviets were both significant elements of Mao's calculus.[98]

Furthermore, while the arguments are not mutually exclusive, ours helps account for several aspects of China's entry into and conduct in the war that are otherwise anomalous. The first is the timing of Mao's authorization of, preparation for, and initial intervention in the conflict. As we have seen, Mao invited the US threat by signing off on Kim's invasion in the first place, in order to impress Stalin. Likewise, the deployment of combat-ready troops to North Korea in January occurred immediately after Stalin revealed the conditional possibility of an alliance, but nine months *before* US forces entered North Korean territory and threatened China's border. Second, as Christensen observes in his later work, once China intervened its

92. Goncharov, Lewis, and Xue 1993, 200; see also 195.
93. Quoted in Christensen 2011, 260.
94. Shen and Xia 2015, 63, 69.
95. Christensen 1992, 128; see also Foot 1991; Hao and Zhai 1990; Lowe 1997; Whiting 1960.
96. Christensen 1992, 139.
97. Hao and Zhai 1990, 106. As they write, "To Mao's mind, if China stood by when North Korea was in peril; then the Soviet Union could also stand by when China was in peril."
98. Chen 1994, 85–91; Foot 1991, 418; Foot 1996, 480; Whiting 1960, 151–58.

military strategy "of course ran directly against the goal of deterring the United States from sending its forces across the 38th parallel in the first place and reduced the likelihood that Sino-American conflict would remain limited after escalation."[99] Thus, while "Mao's decision to enter Korea *in force*" may have been "triggered by the American decision to send US forces north of the 38th parallel," as Christensen argues,[100] our mechanism helps explain the earlier Chinese diplomatic and military policies that helped precipitate this threatening US behavior.

Finally, our argument sheds light on the intransigent bargaining position Mao adopted even as the US sought a settlement that could eliminate the threat to China. As Oriana Mastro notes, after entering the war China "maintained a closed diplomatic posture for the next eight months, refusing all third-party proposals for direct talks and not making any offers itself."[101] This bargaining posture is puzzling if Mao's *only* goal was to eliminate the US threat on the Korean Peninsula. However, it fits very well with Mao's goal of securing an alliance by reassuring the Soviets of his resolve to incur high costs in opposing the Americans. Our argument thus works in tandem with Mao's defensive motivations to explain China's entry into the Korean War, and adds value in explaining crucial aspects of Mao's strategy.

In sum, China's entry into the Korean War nicely illustrates the model's first three results. A state might harden its bargaining position and even incur costs of war with a common rival to reassure a prospective patron and secure a valuable alliance. Although China's costs of fighting the US were immense, once Stalin made clear that authorization of and intervention in the Korean War would be seen as credible signals of China's reliability, Mao jumped in with both feet. He endorsed Kim's invasion, committed thousands of his best troops to fighting well before the war began, and then adopted a military strategy and bargaining position that guaranteed much higher costs than were necessary to defend China's border. The gamble was successful, helping to nail down the Soviet alliance commitment and economic aid China so desperately needed.

Extension: Bargaining with a Patron's Existing Client

This section extends the baseline framework to capture pre-alliance bargaining with a third-party client that shares the patron's preferences, rather than with the common rival. In contrast to the baseline model, here the patron views acceptance of the third party's offer as a signal of compatibility, and rejection as a signal of incompatibility. Thus, instead of securing an alliance by fighting the third-party rival, in this extension reassurance and alliance formation are facilitated by concessions from the prospective

99. Christensen 2011, 71.
100. Christensen 1992, 138, emphasis added
101. Mastro 2019, 37, 42; see also Stueck 1995, 159. Moreover, when Mao finally did engage the US, he asked the Soviets to mediate, increased troop deployments, and ensured that he had Stalin's approval for all concessions, all of which served to ensure that Stalin could not perceive China as lacking resolve. Mastro 2019, 39.

ally to the patron's existing client, which can avert conflict that otherwise might have occurred.[102]

Specification

This extension adds a new actor, P's existing client, C, who shares P's ideal point and valuation of the asset.[103] Stage 1 parallels the baseline model, except that instead of bargaining with R, A bargains with C over an asset orthogonal to the one at stake with R in stage 2.[104] This first-stage asset carries a value of β to A. As above, C makes an offer, x, regarding the first-stage asset, which A accepts or rejects. In stage 2 P then bargains with R, either alone or in conjunction with A, depending on P's and A's previous choices.

Two departures from the baseline model more realistically capture bargaining with P's existing client.[105] First, because C reliably supports P against R, first-stage conflict between A and C reduces P's second-stage bargaining leverage against R by quantity f, from π to $\pi - f$. Second, we no longer assume A's power relative to C is the precise degree of power that it adds in coalition with P against R. Instead, we attach coefficient $z \geq 1$ to A's first-stage share of power, giving A a zw probability of winning a first-stage conflict with C. Thus, C receives a first-stage payoff of $\phi(1-x)$ following acceptance and of $\phi(1-zw) - k_C$ following rejection. C's second-stage payoffs are identical to P's.

Results

The equilibrium profile of this extension is identical to the baseline model, except that there is no pooling on rejection.[106] This leaves two equilibrium classes, separating and pooling on acceptance.[107] Section 2 of the appendix contains a full equilibrium analysis of the extension.

The PE occur when C is sufficiently confident A is an abandoner that it issues the minimum offer, $x_{\underline{A}}^*$, that both types accept. In response to acceptance, P retains its prior beliefs, allying if and only if it holds sufficiently confident priors that A is a supporter ($q > \frac{u}{w}$). Alliance is at stake in the PE if and only if P's priors dictate alliance in response to pooling ($q \geq \frac{u}{w}$) and P forms off-path beliefs $q' \leq \frac{u}{w}$. These

102. Lee 2023 employs a similar logic in showing that having a common ally decreases rivalry duration, but does not examine reassurance or prospects for alliance formation.

103. C holds prior beliefs that A is a supporter with probability ψ and an abandoner with probability $1 - \psi$.

104. A separate first-stage asset is necessary because C and A both share P's ideal point regarding the asset in dispute with R. Thus, the latter policy space contains no disagreement over which A and C can bargain.

105. Omitting these additions would not affect the results; they are included purely to demonstrate robustness to a more realistic specification.

106. Here, the separating offer dominates a low offer that induces pooling on rejection because (unlike R in the baseline model) C has no incentive to "signal jam." Alliance between A and P is beneficial to C, because C shares P's bargaining position and thus gains from an increase in P's bargaining leverage versus R.

107. As before, there are four acceptance PE, one with alliance at stake and three without, and three SE, two with alliance at stake and one without.

conditions imply that P would ally in response to pooling on acceptance, but not off path in response to rejection.[108]

The SE occur when C is sufficiently confident A is a supporter that it issues the minimum offer, $x_{\overline{A}}^*$, that only supporters would accept. P therefore forms perfectly accurate posterior beliefs. P never allies in response to rejection, and allies in response to acceptance if and only if $w \geq u$. Thus, alliance is at stake in the SE if and only if $w \geq u$.[109]

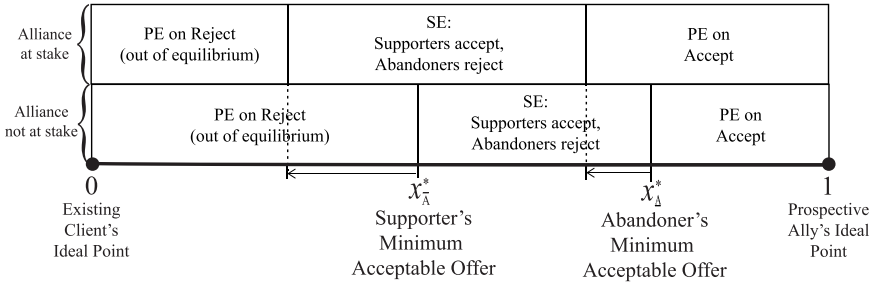

FIGURE 4. *A's equilibrium response for the model extension. Arrows indicate the effect of having alliance at stake*

As before, we compare A's incentives to fight in the equilibria where alliance is at stake to those where it is not. Figure 4 shows how the minimum offers each type will accept—$x_{\overline{A}}^*$ for the supporter and $x_{\underline{A}}^*$ for the abandoner—shift with and without alliance at stake, and the ranges of offers (including out-of-equilibrium offers) each type accepts and rejects under each condition. In the SE without alliance at stake, $x_{\overline{A}}^* = zw - \frac{k_A + f\overline{\alpha}}{\phi\beta}$. But this threshold decreases to $x_{\overline{A}}^* = zw - \frac{k_A + f\overline{\alpha}}{\phi\beta} - \frac{u - c + w\overline{\alpha}}{\phi\beta}$ in the SE with alliance at stake. Likewise, in the PE without alliance at stake, $x_{\underline{A}}^* = zw - \frac{k_A + f\underline{\alpha}}{\phi\beta}$, but this decreases to $x_{\underline{A}}^* = zw - \frac{k_A + f\underline{\alpha}}{\phi\beta} - \frac{u}{\phi\beta}$ in the PE with alliance at stake.[110]

These results are the mirror image of the baseline model's. As before, the prospect of an alliance incentivizes both abandoners and supporters to reassure P. In contrast, however, reassurance entails *accepting* the offer from the patron's existing client, rather than rejecting an offer from its rival. Thus, accepting C's offer signals compatibility with P, whereas rejection signals incompatibility.

This implies that whereas the prospect of alliance can generate conflict between a prospective ally and the patron's rival, it can *avert* conflict that counterfactually might have occurred between the ally and the patron's existing client (due, for example, to exogenous incomplete information or commitment problems that are not included in our model). Proposition 6 (in the appendix) shows that when the alliance is

108. For a full characterization of all PE, see section 2.2 of the appendix.
109. For a full characterization of all SE, see section 2.1 of the appendix.
110. See proposition 6 in the appendix. Note that because $w\overline{\alpha} > c$ by definition, $x_{\overline{A}}^*$ is always lower with alliance at stake than without.

sufficiently valuable, supporters accept *all* offers. In this case, even if C were overoptimistic about its likelihood of victory or underestimated A's valuation of the first-stage asset, war with the supporter would still be avoided no matter how severe these information problems.[111] In short, a patron's abandonment concerns can facilitate rapprochement between its prospective and existing clients, as a means for the former to reassure the skeptical patron of its reliability.

Result 4. When P's alliance decision is conditional on A's bargaining behavior toward an existing client that shares P's preferences, both supporters and abandoners are more likely to accept the client's offer. If alliance is sufficiently valuable, supporters accept all offers.[112]

Empirical Applications

As we did for the baseline model, we preface our full-length case study of the formation of the ANZUS Alliance with several other real-world manifestations of result 4 to establish that it generalizes beyond a single example.

In 1972, Egypt sought substantial US military and economic aid, if not an alliance, yet "American economic aid was largely contingent upon [Egypt] pursuing a USA-sponsored peace with Israel."[113] Consequently, reducing hostilities with Israel loomed large in Egyptian strategy: "The Egyptian-Israeli peace process ... was intimately linked to ... Egypt's transition from a Soviet ally to a nation in the American orbit."[114] Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's unprecedented concessions to achieve peace with Israel "aimed at changing the attitudes of the US public, Congress and the USA's Jewish community."[115] Indeed, Sadat saw the "framework for the agreement he was seeking with the Israelis" as part of a wider plan to "restore diplomatic relations between Egypt and the United States."[116]

This mechanism also operates in the absence of a hegemonic US. When considering expansion of the Austro–German Dual Alliance to include Italy, Germany made its commitment conditional on Italian concessions to Vienna. The Germans required Italy's "abandonment of irredentism"—that is, of "the enlargement of the Italian state by the conquest of Austria's subject nationalities." But although "acceptance of the status quo in Central Europe and the Balkans must have been a bitter pill,"[117] the Italians recognized it as a worthwhile trade-off on the grounds that "as soon as we have removed the causes of distrust existing towards us in Austria, the accomplishment of an alliance with Germany will meet with no obstacle."[118]

111. These sources of incomplete information are unmodeled, but the conclusion follows straightforwardly since A accepts all offers.
112. Formally, when u is above a particular threshold, the minimum offer the supporter will accept falls below zero. See proposition 6 in the appendix.
113. Karawan 2015, 178.
114. Rabinovich 2004, 6; see also Sadat 1978.
115. Karawan 2015, 167.
116. Stein 1999, 103–104.
117. Scott 1978, 405, 415.
118. Langer 1964, 229.

Bismarck himself acknowledged that for Italy "the key to the German door was to be found in Vienna."[119]

Finally, this causal logic again manifested between symmetrical allies during the "diplomatic revolution" early in the Seven Years' War. With the Anglo–Austrian alliance breaking down in 1755, the British attempted to resurrect it by offering a massive subsidy to Russia, which had been allied with Austria since 1746. Although this gambit was unsuccessful for the reasons discussed earlier, Britain's extension of aid to Russia was a direct response to an Austrian suggestion and implies that reassuring Austria was a key British motive.[120]

Australia's Bid for a US Alliance

We illustrate result 4 through Australia's post-World War II bargaining position regarding its rival, Japan, which the US was nurturing as a bulwark against communist expansion. In terms of our model, this case again captures the SE with alliance at stake, with the US as P, Australia as A, Japan as C, and the USSR/China as R. Despite profound fear of renewed Japanese aggression, Australia made substantial concessions concerning Japan's economic revival to demonstrate that it shared US anti-communist priorities—actions that were sufficiently credible to American decision makers that the US granted the ANZUS alliance by mid-1951. To be clear, we do not claim that war between Australia and Japan would have counterfactually occurred, only that Australia took a softer line toward Japan to signal compatibility with the US, which captures our core argument.

Although the US and Australia now seem like natural and inevitable allies, the overlap in their interests and regional visions was quite unclear following World War II. Australia initially seemed far less committed than the US to containing communism. Tensions between Canberra and Washington centered on, among other things, Australian efforts to develop a neutral camp between the US and USSR that would include London and Ottawa,[121] and the American perception that the Australians were simply "unrealistic as regards Communist designs and methods."[122] US concerns about "initial efforts by Australia to lead a third force in the growing conflict between East and West" persisted into 1950, as reflected in a US embargo on sharing classified intelligence with Canberra.[123] Due to this US skepticism, Australia's initial efforts to "extract some sort of post-war security guarantee ... proved unsuccessful."[124]

Abandonment concerns underpinned US alliance hesitancy.[125] NSC 48/2 emphasized in 1949 that Asia-Pacific countries, including Australia, must show

119. Ibid., 237.
120. Baugh 2014, 125.
121. *FRUS* 1947, vol. 3, doc. 366; vol. 6, doc. 258; Robb and Gill 2019, 31 n156.
122. *FRUS* 1948, doc. 550.
123. *FRUS* 1950, vol. 6, doc. 96.
124. Robb and Gill 2019, 17.
125. This is reflected in the heterogeneous timing and content of US security relationships in Asia, even at the height of Cold War tensions, due to differential US beliefs about prospective allies' reliability. Cha 2016.

themselves willing to contain communism collectively before the US would become involved.[126] Prominent in the minds of American policymakers was the cost of sinking resources into Australia's defense capabilities, represented in the model by the direct utility transfer, u, from P to A. Assistant Secretary of State William Butterworth opposed allying with Australia, largely because US security provision would reduce Australia's incentives to pay for its own defense.[127] Thus, as Australia's Department of External Affairs noted, "Between the end of 1947 and mid-1950 the Americans showed little inclination [toward a multilateral] Japanese peace settlement or a Pacific Pact."[128]

Crucially, US anti-communist strategy in Asia centered on a rehabilitated Japan as the United States' key ally. As Secretary of State Dean Acheson put it, the US needed to "push ahead with the reconstruction of those two great workshops," Japan and Germany.[129] Thereafter, "the new [US] priority was to make provisions for Japan's security from outside aggression. Punitive efforts were replaced by regenerative efforts."[130]

However, Australia still perceived Japan as a profound threat.[131] Indeed, "one legacy of the war shared by the overwhelming majority of Australians was this realised fear of Japan."[132] In February 1951 Minister of External Affairs Percy Spender decried US plans to include Japan in a Pacific Pact that would transform it "from an enemy into an ally over-night... We would clearly find it most difficult to accept... We cannot, in common prudence, dismiss Japan as a threat to Australian security, remote as this may seem at the moment."[133] In short, as Spender stated, "we did not trust Japan."[134]

Spender reiterated to Truman advisor John Foster Dulles many times Australia's resistance to cooperating with Japan, and the Americans were well aware that they could not resolve these Australian insecurities.[135] Indeed, Dulles and Acheson were convinced that a multilateral alliance including Japan would be a nonstarter with Australia.[136] Acheson bemoaned that Australian behavior at the Far Eastern Commission overseeing the Japanese occupation threatened to "jeopardize [Japan's] stabilization program" and "seriously weaken [authority] of occupation," from which "only Sovs and their Jap Commie Party minions will reap any advantage."[137]

126. *FRUS* 1949, vol. 7, pt. 2, 1216.
127. Ibid., vol. 7, pt. 2, doc. 318.
128. 22 Minute From Dexter to Shaw, 27 October 1950, National Archives of Australia, available at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-21/22-minute-from-dexter1-to-shaw>.
129. Quoted in Cha 2016, 127–28; see also LaFeber 1997, 273–75.
130. Cha 2016, 129.
131. Cohen 2023.
132. Millar 1978, 126–27, 228.
133. Top Secret, for Full Cabinet, Department of External Affairs, Pacific Defence Pact: Forthcoming Exploratory Talks with Mr. John F. Dulles, National Archives of Australia, A4639 A4639XM1, vol. 8, 5104728.
134. 25 Cablegram from Spender to Watt, 3 November 1950, available at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-21/25-cablegram-from-spender-to-watt>.
135. *FRUS* 1951, vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 38.
136. Ibid., vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 70.
137. *FRUS* 1949, vol. 7, pt. 2, doc. 116.

Furthermore, he expressed deep concern that "Australia has clung to the belief that the principal threat to its security comes from a revived Japan rather than from a Communist Asia backed by the Soviet Union."[138] Thus, American leaders held pessimistic prior beliefs about Australia's support for a US containment strategy centered on a powerful Japan.

However, as result 4 implies, Australia's apprehensions about Japanese aggression also made its willingness to support Japanese rehabilitation an informative signal of whether it shared US anti-communist priorities. The US therefore made alliance with Australia conditional on Australia's policies toward Japan. According to Dulles' chief advisor, Marshall Green, the key question was whether, given that an alliance was at stake, "Australia could be expected to moderate its previous position demanding that Japan remain completely disarmed and demilitarized for decades hence."[139] Truman was adamant that he would commit to a "mutual assistance arrangement among the Pacific island nations" only on the strict condition that potential alliance partners "accept the general basis on which the United States is prepared to conclude a peace settlement with Japan."[140] Dulles likewise wrote in January 1951 that "in view of the inter-dependence of the Pact and the proposed Japanese peace, the United States should not become committed to the Pact unless it is assured that the other Parties will agree to the kind of a Japanese peace that the United States feels is necessary."[141]

By early 1951, the Australians came to realize that a US alliance commitment was conditional on Australia's acquiescence to a revived and integrated Japan: "The American interest in guaranteeing Australia and New Zealand appears to be linked with their desire to ensure that Japan ... is protected against Communist aggression."[142] An External Affairs memo confirmed that to consummate a US alliance "we should be required to identify ourselves with the policy that ... Australia is committed to support Japan."[143] This was the first time the Australians had explicitly linked "some substantial guarantee of our security" from the US to "a form of peace treaty with Japan which we dislike."[144]

Having come to understand that a US alliance was at stake, Australian policy-makers deemed it sufficiently valuable that they tolerated much looser restrictions on Japan than they preferred, ultimately accepting Tokyo's economic and military resurgence as a counterweight to Chinese and Soviet expansionism. As Spender noted in February 1951, he had "taken the utmost care during the past few months to

138. *FRUS* 1949, Ibid., vol. 7, pt. 2, doc. 124.
139. Ibid.
140. *FRUS* 1951, vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 34.
141. Ibid., vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 33.
142. 45 Minute From Watt to Spender, 9 February 1951, National Archives of Australia, available at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-21/45-minute-from-watt-to-spender>.
143. 44 Minute From Tange to Watt, 8 February 1951, National Archives of Australia, available at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-21/44-minute-from-tange-to-watt>.
144. 45 Minute From Watt to Spender, 9 February 1951, National Archives of Australia, available at <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/historical-documents/Pages/volume-21/45-minute-from-watt-to-spender>.

maintain a common front with the United States."[145] Consequently, the multilateral Japanese peace settlement Australia signed in 1951 was historically unprecedented in its generosity to a defeated adversary. Japanese reparations were satisfied by mandatory purchases of Japanese goods that gave Tokyo privileged access to its former victims' markets.[146] Economically, the currency that flowed into Japan enabled "the Japanese to re-equip and modernize their plants" and "to expand in an amazing way."[147] Purged wartime elites were reintegrated into government. Crucially, despite Japan's Article 9 peace constitution and immediate US control over Japan's Self-Defense Forces, binding restrictions on Japanese rearmament were perceived as slight to nonexistent, subject only to ad hoc enforcement by the US. In terms of the model, Australian concessions to support Japan's economic recovery and inclusion in Pacific defense arrangements were costly signals that Australia shared US anti-communist security preferences and would serve as a reliable ally.

US observers recognized these signals. Acheson, Dulles, and their colleagues were impressed by Prime Minister Robert Menzies's vow of "assistance in swinging [Australian] public opinion around to realities of Japanese situation, with special emphasis upon ... denying Japan and its industrial complex to Soviets."[148] The Americans acknowledged "a greater measure of [Australian] support than in the past for our Far Eastern policies in general and particularly as they relate to Japan,"[149] concluding that "the views Mr. Menzies expressed when he was in Washington were [regarding the Japanese treaty] in large measure close to ours."[150] Assistant Secretary of State Dean Rusk wrote Acheson that Australia had, "in connection with negotiation of the Japanese peace treaty, now accepted the principle of eventual Japanese contribution to its own defense."[151] National Intelligence Estimate 19 (of April 1951) noted that Canberra was "reconciled to the necessity of Japanese defensive rearmament" and "desire[d] safeguards against both Communist expansionism and resurgent Japanese militarism."[152]

In response, American leaders updated their beliefs about the compatibility of Australian and US security preferences. In March 1950 the US ambassador to Australia emphasized the "sincerity of [Spender's] intention and [the] importance [the] new Australian Government attaches to [the] US phase of its foreign relations," noting that "every known act of [Menzies'] government since taking office indicates it really means business" in combating communism, and that it "has gone out of its way to strengthen [the] US-Australian relationship. In particular, it is endeavoring to meet our position re ... [the] Communist problem." The State Department soon updated as well, noting the "marked change in the orientation and direction of Australian foreign

145. Relationships between Australia and China, 19 February 1951, National Archives of Australia, A4639 A4639XM1 vol. 8, 5104728.
146. LaFeber 1997, 276–77, 291–95.
147. Ibid., 293-94.
148. *FRUS* 1950, vol. 6, doc. 741.
149. Ibid., vol. 6, doc. 104.
150. Ibid., vol. 6, doc. 108; see also doc. 99.
151. *FRUS* 1951, vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 650.
152. Ibid., vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 556.

policy" since 1950, and that "Spender is desirous of establishing the closest and most cooperative relations with the United States and has in effect made this objective a cardinal point of his foreign policy."[153] The Joint Chiefs of Staff affirmed in December 1950 that Australia could be trusted to "contribute ... to the security of the [Asia-Pacific] area."[154] Dulles thereafter deemed Australia perhaps the most loyal US ally, with Canberra having "stoutly faced up to [the] situation" and served as "our strong supporters" in combating communism.[155]

These updated US beliefs culminated in the ANZUS alliance in the summer of 1951, within days of the Japan peace settlement. Although the Japan treaty was "a signal [that the US] expected the Japanese to rearm soon,"[156] which the Australians deplored, its signing generated credible assurances that Australia would support the US anti-communist strategy in Asia even when it conflicted with Australia's other perceived interests. This allowed Spender to overcome US abandonment concerns and secure the alliance that had been an elusive holy grail for Australian governments for decades.

Conclusion

A fundamental barrier to alliance formation is the risk of future abandonment, which is underpinned by misaligned preferences between the prospective ally and patron: the ally may be insufficiently resolved to fight on the patron's behalf, but misrepresent its intentions to reap the benefits of the patron's investment in the security partnership. Overcoming this barrier thus constitutes a reassurance problem. How can the prospective ally signal that it shares the patron's goals with sufficient credibility to convince the patron to commit to an alliance?

We have argued that the prospective ally's bargaining behavior toward third parties is a potent means of achieving such reassurance. By taking a hard bargaining position with the patron's rivals, or making concessions to the patron's existing clients, prospective allies can credibly signal that they will uphold alliance obligations and thereby overcome abandonment concerns. Consequently, these incentives to reassure the patron and secure an alliance can promote war between the prospective ally and the third-party rival, on the one hand, and promote rapprochement between the prospective ally and the patron's existing client, on the other. Thus, war and alliance formation interact in mutually reinforcing ways: since fighting a common rival reassures its patron and secures an alliance, a prospective ally has greater incentives to fight whenever such reassurances are necessary.

Indeed, a secondary result is that when the alliance at stake is sufficiently valuable, the prospective ally rejects all offers from the rival. In this case, inefficient conflict arises even without asset indivisibility, commitment problems, or incomplete

153. *FRUS* 1950, vol. 6, doc. 96.
154. *FRUS* 1951, vol. 6, pt. 1, doc. 122.
155. *FRUS* 1952–1954, vol. 12, pt. 1, docs. 156, 183.
156. LaFeber 1997, 291.

information between the belligerents themselves. Rather, it occurs due to the third-party *patron's* incomplete information about the ally's type, which generates a reputational incentive to send a costly reassurance signal by fighting. This potential cause of war has been overlooked by bilateral bargaining models, but our results imply that it could arise in a multilateral setting.

This paper is the first to explore the interaction between pre-alliance bargaining, alliance formation, and conflict, but there is plenty more to be done. On the theory side, we consider the effects of patrons' abandonment concerns, but the converse—entrapment concerns—are an equally likely barrier to alliance formation. Intuitively, a patron's entrapment fears should have the reverse effect of abandonment concerns with alliance at stake, incentivizing the prospective ally to make concessions to a third-party rival instead of stronger demands, in order to reassure the patron that their preferences converge. Empirically, our approach has been to illustrate the operation of our causal logic using in-depth historical case studies, while also attempting to establish the breadth of our argument by finding instances of each mechanism in a variety of contexts. Future work should employ large-*N* methods to systematically evaluate the generalizability of our mechanisms and assess the frequency and magnitude of their effects under different conditions.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818325100817><https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/NGKYXZ>.

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Acknowledgments

We thank Brian Blankenship, Tom Christensen, Ben Goldsmith, Kyle Haynes, Tyler Jost, Andrew Kennedy, Michaela Mattes, Brad Smith, Marija Taflaga, Scott Wolford, and the *IO* editors and anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on prior versions of this article.

Key Words

Alliances; reassurance; bargaining; war; game theory; signaling; credibility; Korean War; ANZUS; abandonment

Date received: May 21, 2024; Date revised: July 09, 2025; Date accepted: July 09, 2025