

Alliance Terms and Audience Costs:
An Experimental Study of the Microfoundations of Alliance Compliance

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Abstract: Recent research has shown that leaders who violate military alliance agreements would suffer domestic audience costs. We argue that such audience costs depend crucially on two factors: the terms of the alliance agreement and beliefs about who initiated conflict. We distinguish between general alliances, which obligate allies to fight together regardless of who started the war, and defensive alliances, which only require action if one of the signatories was attacked. We hypothesize that general alliances expose leaders to larger audience costs, on average, because they require assistance in a wider range of circumstances, but the difference should vanish if audiences think their ally was the victim of aggression. We designed an original survey experiment to test these hypotheses. Our data show that both the terms of the agreement and the identity of the initiator profoundly affect audience costs, primarily by altering expectations about the reputational costs of abandoning an ally.

When and why do alliance agreements affect state behavior under anarchy? Scholars have argued that both international and domestic audiences play important roles in encouraging leaders to comply with agreements. Leaders fear that violation of alliance agreements could generate international costs, by undermining the country's reputation in the eyes of other nations. At the same time, leaders might worry about the domestic political consequences of abrogating alliances. If the domestic public believes that breaking alliance agreements would undermine their country's reputation, they may prefer to honor existing agreements and punish leaders who act otherwise.

Tomz and Weeks (2015) provided the first experimental test of how international alliance commitments affect domestic support for war. Their survey-based experiments showed that alliance commitments powerfully influence mass preferences about whether to intervene abroad. Other factors equal, both written and unwritten alliances massively increased public support for sending U.S. forces abroad. Three mechanisms drove these effects: concerns about being perceived as a faithful alliance partner, fears of reputation spillover into nonmilitary arenas, and concerns about the morality of leaving an ally hanging.

It seems plausible, however, that the domestic political response to alliances should depend on the terms of the alliance treaty. Alliances vary greatly in their provisions, and those differences influence how signatories behave (Leeds et al. 2002; Leeds and Savun 2007). Of special note, some alliances place conditions on compliance; they specify circumstances under which signatories would be required to help each other, and either state or imply conditions under which there would be no formal obligation to assist. In a recent paper, Fjelstul and Reiter (2015) proposed that such clauses could minimize audience costs by giving signatories an excuse for failing to intervene. To date, however, scholars have not directly tested how compliance clauses affect the domestic political reaction to alliances.

Building on these foundations, we argue that the domestic political reaction to alliances depends crucially on two factors: the terms of the alliance agreement and beliefs about who initiated conflict. We distinguish between general alliances, which obligate allies to fight together regardless of who started the war, and defensive alliances, which only require action if one of the signatories was attacked. We hypothesize that general alliances expose leaders to larger audience costs, on average, because they require assistance—thereby putting the country's reputation on the line—in a wider range of circumstances. The distinction between general and defensive alliances should not be politically consequential, however, in circumstances when citizens believe that their ally was the victim of aggression. Thus, the domestic political reaction to alliances should depend on the interplay between the provisions of the treaty and the instigator of the conflict.

We designed an original survey experiment to test these hypotheses. In our experiment, we informed subjects that a U.S. ally was involved in a conflict, and that the president had decided not to intervene. We randomly varied two main factors: whether the alliance was general or defensive, and who was responsible for starting the conflict. Some subjects were told the alliance was general, requiring the allies to assist each other in any war. Other respondents were told the alliance was defensive, requiring the parties to assist each other only if the ally was attacked first, but not if the ally started the war. Subjects also received information about who started the war. We randomized whether the United Nations concluded that the U.S. ally had started the war, that it was unclear who started the war, or that the U.S. ally had been attacked. We then asked subjects whether they approved of the president's decision not to aid the ally.

We administered the experiment over the internet to a diverse sample of 1,566 U.S. citizens, whom we recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk. Our data strongly show that, on average, the public approval of presidential inaction was much lower when the alliance was general than when it was defensive. In contrast, respondents were equally disapproving of a president who remained aloof when the U.S. ally was attacked, an event that should have triggered both defensive and general alliance obligations. We also found that these dynamics were caused by public concerns that violation of alliance obligations would damage the nation's reputation as an ally and agreement partner more broadly.

The results contribute to our understanding of international alliances. First, they deepen our understanding of how alliance obligations affect domestic opinion, by showing how audience costs depend on contextual factors such as the terms of the alliance and the perpetrator of the conflict. Second, the findings confirm the core institutionalist proposition that institutional form matters. The participants in our study adjusted their political reactions in response to information about the content of the treaty. Third, our findings demonstrate *why* the terms of the alliance matter, confirming that domestic audience costs reflect concerns about the reputational costs of renegeing on commitments (see also Tomz 2007). Overall, our study contributes to an ongoing research agenda about the microfoundations of alliance compliance and the effects of international law and institutions on public opinion.

The remainder of this paper proceeds in four parts. First, we summarize existing literature, and present our theory and hypothesis. Second, we present our research design. Third, we present the results of the experiment. Fourth, we conclude and discuss directions for future research.

I. Theory and Hypotheses

International alliances are legal agreements that commit signatories to take certain actions—or avoid taking certain actions—under specified international conditions. However, no world government exists to enforce international agreements. So why do states comply with alliances? Contemporary institutionalist theory makes a series of claims that answer this question: domestic and international audiences pay attention to the specific terms of alliance agreements, and domestic and international audiences punish leaders who fail to comply with those terms. Alliances shape signatories' behavior because leaders fear the domestic and international audience costs of noncompliance.

How much do the formal terms of the agreements matter to audiences, however, if at all? Some Cold War observers and foreign policy-makers assumed that reputation concerns push signatories to abide by the terms of alliance agreements (see Schelling 1966). If a state failed to abide by the terms of an agreement with one ally, it would cause potential adversaries to become emboldened to attack the state's other allies, and would encourage other allies to consider exiting their alliance agreements. Indeed, when states negotiate alliance agreements they bargain hard about the terms of the alliance agreement, knowing that such terms define the limits of the alliance agreement. For example, the North Atlantic Treaty confines its defense pact commitment to the North Atlantic area, removing the obligation of signatories (especially the U.S.) to intervene in a range of possible conflicts such as in French Indochina or regarding Egyptian or French control of the Suez Canal.

Some scholars were more doubtful that the terms of an alliance would affect state behavior. Realists in particular minimized the significance of the terms of alliance agreements. Morgenthau (1967, 180) proposed that the existence of a formal document does not automatically give an alliance political significance, as, “The legal validity of a treaty of alliance and its propagandistic invocation can easily deceive the observer about its actual operational value.” Relatedly, Stephen Walt, (1987, 1n) downplayed institutional form by defining alliances as including formal as well as informal arrangements (Walt 1987, 1n). Among realists, John Mearsheimer (1994/1995, 13-14) has been perhaps the most dismissive of alliances, proposing that alliances, like other international institutions, have no independent causal effect, and are merely epiphenomenal to state power and interests.

Another perspective, often labeled constructivist, is that alliances are either the cause or the effect of a common identity, and the particulars of the agreements are not as important as the sense of identity itself. Glenn Snyder (1997, 8) made this point, proposing that the institutional particulars of an agreement do not matter, as alliances create a “penumbra, or ‘halo,’ extending beyond the narrow contingency... which activates the commitment...the making of an alliance has political and psychological implications that go well beyond the obligations contained in the formal *casus foederis*.” Thomas Risse-Kappen (1995, 35) developed this point in discussing intra-alliance norms of consultation, commenting that, “Such norms do not need to be explicit.”

In the late 1990s, some scholars began to apply institutionalist theory to alliances (e.g. Haftendorn et al. 1999; Krebs 1999; Wallander 2000), proposing that institutional form matters. Early research, however, failed to assess whether the terms of the alliance matter. There had been for many years a standing empirical finding that allies complied with their alliances only about 25% of the time that an alliance were invoked. Critics observed that this result was a product of using the Correlates of War (COW) alliance data, which had very broad alliance categories (defense pact, neutrality pact, and consultation agreement/entente) rather than information about the specific terms of alliances. They proposed that some instances of apparent noncompliance may have been due to the fact that COW provides insufficient data about alliances’ exact compliance requirements. Ashley Leeds and her coauthors built a new data set, the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) data set, which included a substantially richer and more precise description of alliances, permitting a more accurate coding of when compliance did and did not occur. With these better data, they found that alliance compliance was actually 75%, not 25% (Leeds et al. 2002).¹

Around the same time, Leeds and others (e.g. Fearon 1997) built on Schelling’s insights to develop a more advanced theory of why alliance terms should matter. They reframed Schelling’s argument around the concept of audience costs, that third party audiences would inflict political costs on a state if it failed to comply with its alliance obligations. Though Schelling focused on international audience costs, Leeds argued that elected governments in particular might suffer domestic political costs if they failed to abide by their alliance agreements. She proposed that for this reason, democracies are more likely to abide by their alliance agreements than non-democracies (Leeds 2003). For example, one of the reasons that President Lyndon Johnson felt obliged to support South Vietnam in 1964 was his concern that American withdrawal from South Vietnam and perceived abandonment of America’s Southeast

¹ With even better and more up to date data on alliance compliance opportunities, Fjelstul and Reiter (2015) report an alliance compliance rate of 63%, using ATOP alliance data.

Asia Treaty Organization obligations could hurt him in the November 1964 presidential election (Dallek 1998, 146-7).

An underlying assumption of the audience costs argument is that alliance agreements define compliance requirements, and states do not pay audience costs if they do not violate the letter of the treaty. However, aside from the general studies of alliance compliance rates, there have been only a handful of observational studies that investigate whether the institutional particulars of alliance agreements shape state behavior. For example, Michaela Mattes (2012; see also Chiba et al. forthcoming and Lai 2008) posited that when states form alliance agreements, they are more likely to choose the more binding form of a defense pact as opposed to the less binding consultation agreement, if they fear that one of their members may face future difficulty in maintaining alliance commitments. Jesse Johnson (forthcoming) found that alliances with defensive obligations have differing effects on states' war intervention decisions as compared with alliances with offensive obligations.² Mattes and Greg Vonnahme (2010) found that among alliances, neutrality pacts reduce conflicts between signatories.³

In short, the current form of the institutionalist argument is that the terms of an alliance agreement define compliance obligations, and that states comply with alliances because they fear the audience costs of non-compliance. This central point that international agreements interact with public opinion to affect state behavior has been made elsewhere, in application to a variety of types of international institutions. Todd Allee and Paul Huth (2006) found that international law allowed states to make concessions by providing states with domestic political cover against possible public backlash. Terry Chapman (2011) showed that United Nations approval under some conditions can substantially increase public support for the use of force, thereby facilitating a government decision to use force. Constructivists claim that formal agreements can strengthen international norms, and those norms can affect state behavior in part by activating public support, for example in opposition to violating taboos described by the norm (Price 1997). There is also a variety of theoretical arguments linking domestic politics to compliance with trade agreements (e.g. Mansfield et al. 2002).

On the domestic side of the international alliances/audience costs question, there is an emerging and nuanced body of empirical literature based on historical data. Studies using observational data have found mixed evidence on whether or not alliance compliance behavior supports the supposition that democratic audiences respond to alliance violation as audience costs theory predicts (Leeds 2003; Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004; Fjelstul and Reiter 2015). Perhaps relatedly, though some claim that audience costs encourage democracies to be especially likely to comply with laws of war treaties, empirical analysis of observational data provides only mixed support for this speculation (Morrow 2014, esp. 176; Wallace 2012).

A related question is *why* domestic audiences would punish leaders who violate international agreements. Most of the theories cited above suggest that the central reason is that voters fear the reputational consequences of failing to uphold a promise to an ally. The observational literature has found some support for the general idea that alliance non-compliance has negative reputational consequences for the violator state. Using COW alliance data, Douglas

² Anac and Leeds (2005) found perhaps countervailing evidence, that more formalized or institutionalized alliances are not more likely to enjoy compliance.

³ More generally, the focus on the institutional design of alliances in this set of studies is theoretically connected to the more general rationalist design literature (see Koremenos et al. 2001).

Gibler (2008) found that violations of alliance agreements make other states less willing to ally with the violator, and then also the violator's allies become more likely to be attacked. Mark Crescenzi et al. (2012) examined ATOP data and found similar patterns, namely that states that comply with alliances will be able to enter more alliances in the future as compared with states that violate their alliance agreements. However, to date, little research has been done to examine whether domestic audiences do indeed punish leaders out of concern for the country's military reputation, and whether domestic audiences are concerned about reputational spillover into nonmilitary arenas.⁴

Observational studies of alliance compliance and audience costs, moreover, face challenges. Strategic selection makes it particularly difficult to study compliance with alliances using historical data. Reliable alliances should rarely be tested (i.e., potential attackers will be deterred), while alliances that appear unreliable should be challenged much more frequently (Smith 1996). Addressing this problem by simultaneously modelling the formation of alliances, the decision to challenge alliances, and the decision as to comply with alliances presents non-trivial data collection and estimation challenges.

A growing body of experimental work has attempted to circumvent the research design problems that plague observational studies. Several experimental studies have assessed whether leaders face domestic audience costs for failing to follow through on military threats (e.g. Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck 2011; Horowitz and Levendusky 2012; Levy et al. forthcoming; Kertzer and Brutger forthcoming).⁵ Recently, scholars have also asked whether leaders face audience costs for violating treaty commitments. For example, Geoffrey Wallace (2013) discovered that subjects were more likely to oppose torture if told that torture violated international law. Sarah Kreps and Wallace (2015) found that subjects were less likely to support drone strikes if informed that such strikes violated international law. Perhaps supporting an alternative perspective, Stephen Chaudoin (2014) showed that audience costs for breaking free trade agreements were only substantial for citizens who did not already have strong preferences about such agreements. Michael Tomz and Jessica Weeks (2015) have to our knowledge conducted the only survey experiment on alliance compliance, finding that subjects were much more likely to prefer intervening on behalf of an ally as compared with intervening on behalf of a non-ally, partly out of concerns for the country's international reputation.

In this paper, we push the debate forward by exploring how and why information about the compliance requirements of an alliance affects the intensity of audience costs. Some alliance agreements contain clauses that limit the compliance conditions of the agreement, describing conditions under which allies need *not* act (see Fjelstul and Reiter 2015). The most common such compliance condition refers to whether the ally started the war or was targeted. Some alliances require allied assistance only if an ally is attacked, and a small number require allied assistance only if an ally launches an attack. Other alliances, like the North Atlantic Treaty, are geographically constrained, requiring action in response to conflicts only in a specific region. Some, such as a number of alliance treaties the U.S. entered during the Cold War, require intervention only if consistent with the signatories' constitutional processes. Others, such as the North Atlantic Treaty, allow the ally to decide what form of assistance it wishes to provide, implying that a diplomatic protest against an attack on an ally might be sufficient to constitute

⁴ One exception is Tomz and Weeks (2015).

⁵ There is also a substantial body of empirical observational work on how audience costs affect conflict behavior. E.g. Schultz (2001); Weeks (2014).

compliance. And there are other kinds of compliance conditions, such as the 1940 UK-Turkey-French alliance, requiring Turkish intervention in the event of war in the Mediterranean but only if doing so would not risk Soviet intervention, or the Rio Pact, which requires intervention but only if such intervention receives formal approval by the Organization of American States. We focus here on one important dimension of institutional variation: whether the agreement requires allied assistance if an ally is embroiled in any kind of war (general alliance), or whether it requires assistance only if the ally is attacked (defensive alliance).

We propose that voters are more likely to impose audience costs when their government fails to intervene when the terms of the alliance agreement clearly require intervention, as compared to conditions when the terms of the alliance agreement do not obviously trigger an obligation. We focus on two central independent variables that affect individuals' perceptions of whether the alliance agreement requires intervention: the terms of the alliance (general or defensive), and information about who started the conflict. Moreover, we explore *why* voters react in this way, specifically out of concern for the country's reputation for upholding military alliances and other international agreements. We test the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: If the ally was attacked, the presence of a defense-only clause should not affect public support for a president who withholds assistance from the ally.

Hypothesis 2: If the ally started the conflict or it is unclear who started the conflict, the presence of a defense-only clause should increase public support for a president who withholds assistance from the ally.

Hypothesis 3: Concerns about military and nonmilitary reputation mediate the effect of alliance terms on support for presidents who withhold assistance from an ally.

II. Experimental Design

We conducted an experiment, embedded in a public opinion poll, to study whether knowledge of the conditions of an alliance affects public support for withholding military assistance from an ally. Our experiment presented respondents with a hypothetical scenario in which a U.S. ally went to war with another country over disputed territory. We randomized information about two key variables. First, we randomly assigned what subjects learned about the terms of the alliance—in this case, whether the alliance was general or defensive. Second, we varied information about who started the conflict, since subjects needed that information to assess whether the alliance had been triggered. This design allowed us to estimate the effects of our randomized treatments while evading problems of endogeneity, spurious correlation, and collinearity that can hamper observational research.

We also designed our experiment to cast light on causal mechanisms. We measured how the treatments affected perceptions of two mediators: how U.S. actions would affect its reputation for upholding alliance agreements, and how U.S. behavior would affect its reputation in the nonmilitary realm. Having measured these perceptions, we could study why alliance terms shift (or do not shift) public preferences about intervention.

We fielded our experiment in July and August 2015 to a sample of 1,566 U.S. citizens using Amazon Mechanical Turk. The experiment began by telling respondents that “Countries A

and B went to war over a disputed piece of territory.” We then gave respondents information about who started the conflict. We told all respondents that “the United Nations investigated the situation,” and randomized whether the UN concluded that Country A had started the war, that Country B had started the war, or that the UN could not determine who started the war.

Next, respondents learned that during the war, “Country A requested military assistance from its ally, the United States.” We told all respondents the U.S. had signed an alliance treaty with Country A, but in order to investigate the effect of alliance provisions, we varied whether the alliance agreement was general or contained a defense-only clause. Half of the respondents were given a general alliance, which said: “If one member of the alliance is involved in a war, the other member will use of military force to help its ally.” The other half were told that the alliance was defensive: “If one member of the alliance is involved in a war that it did not start, the other member will use military force to help its ally.”

All respondents then learned that the U.S. president had decided not to get involved in the conflict. The president explained that “joining the war would be costly and would not serve U.S. interests.”

We then measured our primary dependent variable: whether or not respondents supported the president’s decision not to help the ally. Respondents were asked, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. president handled the situation?” They were given five answer options, ranging from “Approve strongly” to “Disapprove strongly.” We then asked respondents to type a few sentences explaining why they gave that answer.⁶ We ended the survey with a series of demographic and background questions. The full text of the questionnaire appears in the appendices.

III. Results

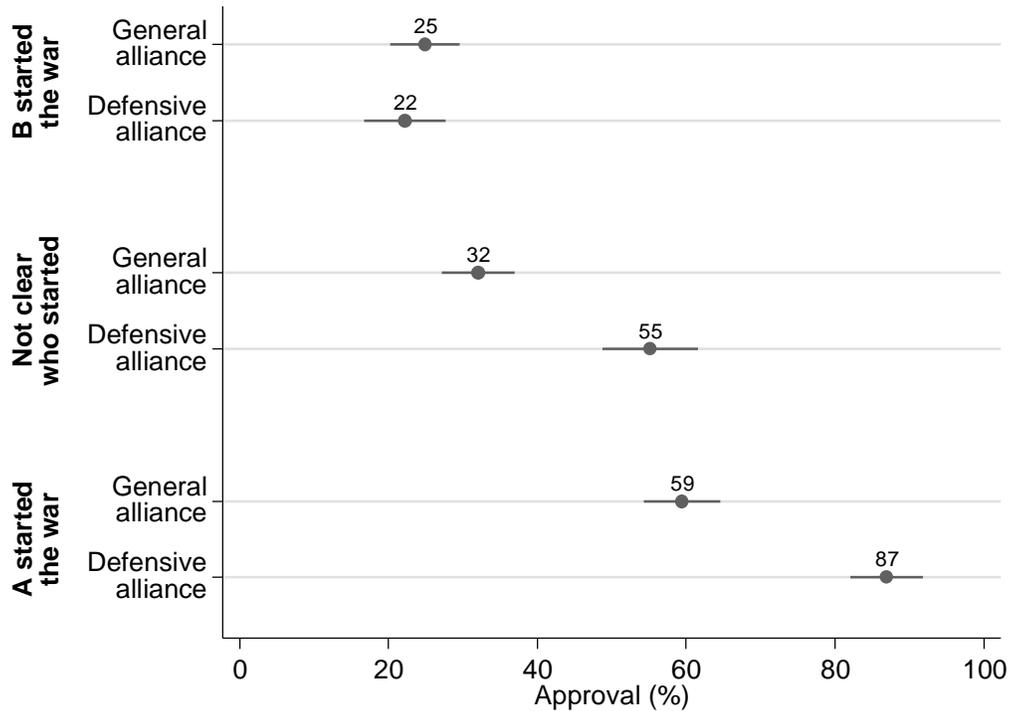
Evidence about the Main Effect of Alliance Provisions

Our central dependent variable was whether the public approved of how the president handled the situation. To simplify the presentation we treated approval as a dichotomous variable, which was coded 1 if respondents approved either strongly or somewhat, and was coded 0 otherwise. When we repeated the analysis with a five-point measure of approval, all our conclusions remained the same.

Figure 1 shows the estimated level of public approval in each of our six treatment conditions. The first two rows show levels of approval when the UN said that Country B had started the war by attacking country A, the U.S. ally. In this context, presidential approval was very low, regardless of the terms of the alliance. Moreover, as predicted by Hypothesis 1, the terms of the alliance had no effect in this condition. Approximately 25 percent of respondents approved when the alliance was general, compared with 22 percent when the alliance was defensive. This difference of 3 percentage points was substantively small and statistically insignificant.

⁶ We also asked a series of questions to measure mediators, discussed in further depth below. At the conclusion of the experiment, we tested whether respondents could recall the terms of the alliance and what the UN had concluded about who started the conflict.

Figure 1: Presidential Approval, by Experimental Condition



Note: Each dot represents the percentage of respondents who approved of how the president handled the situation. The dark horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on a linear regression of approval on dummy variables for each of the treatment conditions, controlling for the respondent’s militarism, internationalism, party ID, gender, race, age, and education. Sample size was 1,566.

The middle rows of Figure 1 show levels of approval when the UN could not determine who started the conflict. Here, the effect of alliance terms was large, providing support for Hypothesis 2. Thirty-two percent of subjects expressed approval when the alliance was general, while 55 percent approved when the alliance was limited to defensive situations. Even though the president claimed that intervention was not in the national interest, and even though the UN expressed uncertainty about who had started the conflict, changing the terms of the alliance from a general alliance requiring assistance under all conditions to a defensive alliance requiring assistance only if the ally was attacked increased support for a policy of non-assistance by 23 percentage points.⁷

Finally, we examined average levels of approval when the UN concluded that Country A (the U.S. ally) had started the war. The UN’s report, in these conditions, implied that the general alliance treaty should have applied, but the defensive alliance would not have been triggered. In

⁷ The 95-percent confidence interval around this effect ran from 15 to 31 percentage points.

our experiment, 59 percent of the public approved of the president's handling of the situation when the alliance was general, whereas approval reached an overwhelming at 89 percent when the alliance was purely defensive. The difference of 28 percentage points was, again, highly statistically significant.⁸

We also verified that the results were not specific to particular subgroups in our sample. In particular, we differentiated between hawks and doves, internationalists and isolationists, liberals and conservatives, males and females, and politically active versus inactive respondents. For every subgroup, approval in the not-clear and A-started conditions was consistently higher when the alliance was defensive than when it was general. Overall, the evidence supports Hypotheses 1 and 2, and our more general theoretical supposition that the terms of an alliance significantly affect the audience costs a leader could incur for failing to intervene on behalf of an embattled ally.

Evidence about Causal Mechanisms

Why did the defensive clause have no effect on approval when B started the war, but prove so consequential when A started the war or the initiator was ambiguous? Here, we test the widespread hypothesis that citizens worry about the reputational consequences of violating alliances. To measure concerns about the country's reputation as a reliable military ally, we asked all respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that, "As a result of the president's decision, other countries will doubt America's willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future."

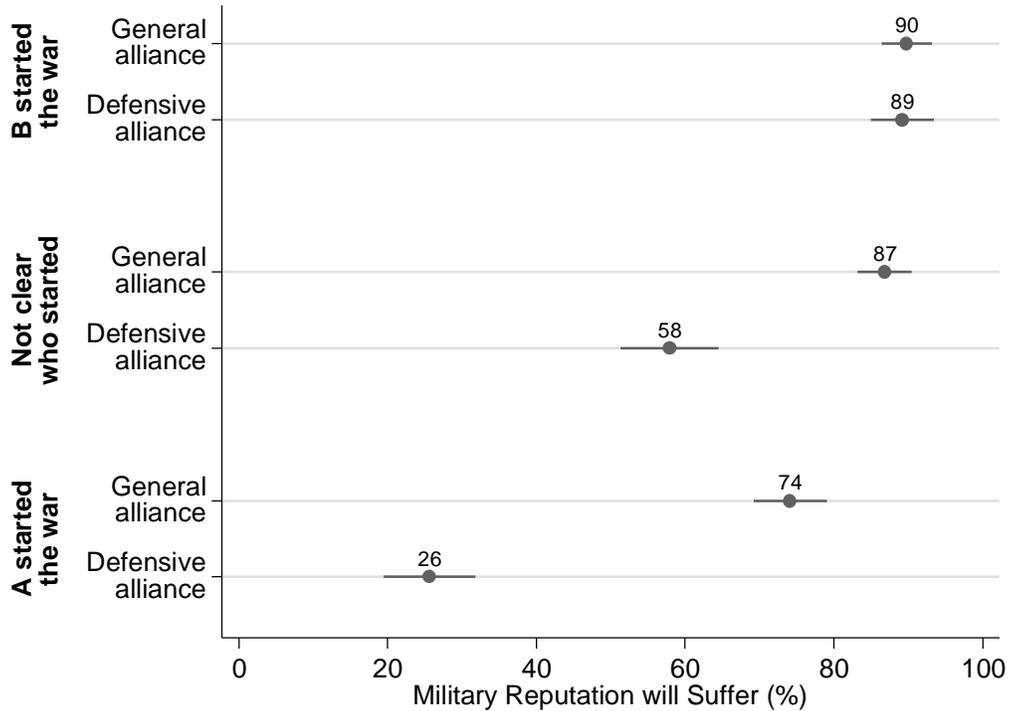
Figure 2 shows the percentage of respondents who thought the country's military reputation would suffer because the president had remained aloof. When country B (the non-ally) started the war, nearly all subjects expected that the president's strategy of nonintervention would undermine America's image as a faithful ally. Moreover, this concern was essentially the same, regardless of whether the alliance was general (90 percent) or defensive (89 percent).

When the UN could not determine who started the war, a similarly large majority of subjects in the general alliance condition (87 percent) believed that not providing assistance would damage American reputation. When the alliance was defensive, however, only 58 percent of respondents shared that belief. The difference of 29 percentage points is large and statistically significant.

Finally, when Country A (the U.S. ally) had started the war, alliance terms had an even larger effect on expectations of reputational damage. When the alliance was general, 74 percent felt that the president's behavior would cause other countries to become more skeptical about America's reliability as an alliance partner. When the alliance was defensive, on the other hand, the belief that other countries would doubt U.S. alliance commitments plummeted to only 26 percent, a difference of 48 percentage points. Thus, when forming beliefs about the military reputation of the United States, our subjects were highly sensitive to the terms of the alliance.

⁸ The 95-percent confidence interval around this effect ran from 20 to 35.

Figure 2: Belief that Military Reputation will Suffer, by Experimental Condition

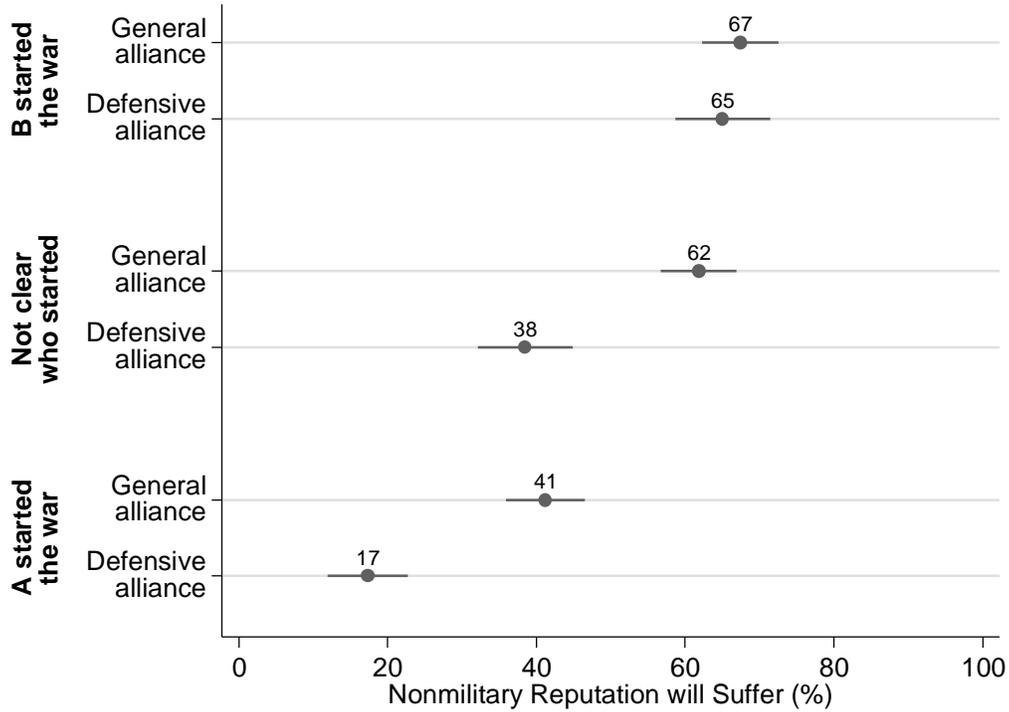


Note: Each dot represents the percentage of respondents who said that, as a result of the president’s decision, other countries would doubt America’s willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future. The dark horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on a linear regression of beliefs on dummy variables for each of the treatment conditions, controlling for the respondent’s militarism, internationalism, party ID, gender, race, age, and education. Sample size was 1,566.

We also examined whether the terms of the alliance affected beliefs about reputational spillovers. Our survey asked whether respondents agreed that, “As a result of the president’s decision, other countries will doubt America’s willingness to honor non-military agreements in areas such as trade or environment in the future.” As Figure 3 shows, when Country B started the war, around two-thirds of subjects felt that America’s nonmilitary reputation would suffer. Once again, beliefs were approximately equal, regardless of the terms of the alliance.

In the other experimental conditions, however, the expected reputational damage was greater with general alliances than with defensive alliances. When it was not clear who started the war, 62 percent of respondents in the general alliance condition thought that the U.S. would suffer reputational damage, versus only 38 percent when the alliance was defensive. Likewise, when the UN identified the U.S. ally as the aggressor, far more citizens expected a reputational hit when the alliance was general (41 percent) than when it was purely defensive (17 percent).

Figure 3: Belief that Nonmilitary Reputation will Suffer, by Experimental Condition



Note: Each dot represents the percentage of respondents who said that, as a result of the president’s decision, other countries would doubt America’s willingness to honor nonmilitary agreements in areas such as trade and the environment. The dark horizontal lines are 95% confidence intervals. Estimates are based on a linear regression of beliefs on dummy variables for each of the treatment conditions, controlling for the respondent’s militarism, internationalism, party ID, gender, race, age, and education. Sample size was 1,566.

Next, we examined how these two mediators affected our primary dependent variable, presidential approval. We regressed support for intervention on the two mediators. Our regression included a battery of demographic control variables, including the respondent’s gender, race (white or not), age, and level of education. We also controlled for two attitudinal variables, militarism and internationalism. All these variables were scaled to range from 0 to 1 for ease of interpretation.

Beyond these demographic and attitudinal variables, we included an indicator for our randomized treatment: whether the alliance was defensive, which we compared to the base category of a general alliance. Thus, the regression was designed to isolate how beliefs about military reputation and nonmilitary reputation affected presidential approval, after adjusting for individual and situational features that could confound the relationship between the mediators and the outcome.

Table 1 shows the results when the UN was not sure who started the war, and when it concluded that the U.S. ally had been the aggressor. (We omitted the analysis for when B started

the war, since there is no treatment effect to explain). As Table 1 shows, both mediators substantially affected presidential approval.

The left side of Table 1 is pertains to cases in which the UN could not determine who started the war. Other factors equal, approval was 34 percentage points lower among people who thought that inaction would undermine America’s reputation for honoring military alliances (military reputation = 1) than among people who did not expect this kind of reputational damage (military reputation = 0). Likewise, approval was 33 percentage points lower among respondents who anticipated that inaction would trigger reputational spillovers (nonmilitary reputation = 1) than among people who did expect reputational spillovers (nonmilitary reputation = 0).

The mediators played similar roles in the second regression, which covered cases in which country A had started the war. Here, approval of the president was 24 percentage points lower for people who thought that the president’s actions would sully America’s reputation as a reliable ally. Independently, approval was 32 points lower for those who believed that the president’s behavior would cause countries to distrust U.S. commitments in other areas.

Table 1: Effect of Mediators on Presidential Approval

	<u>Unclear Who Started</u>		<u>A Started the War</u>	
	Coefficient	Std Error	Coefficient	Std Error
Mediators				
Military reputation	-34.2	(4.6)	-24.2	(4.3)
Nonmil reputation	-32.9	(3.9)	-32.1	(4.2)
Controls				
Defensive clause	5.7	(3.7)	8.2	(3.8)
Militarism	-26.0	(6.7)	-20.1	(7.0)
Internationalism	-7.7	(6.2)	-18.9	(6.1)
Republican	-4.2	(5.9)	2.3	(6.0)
Male	-0.9	(3.5)	-3.9	(3.3)
White	-3.1	(3.9)	-3.6	(3.7)
Age	3.4	(8.3)	-3.7	(8.4)
Education	6.8	(5.8)	-1.6	(5.9)
Intercept	97.6	(7.1)	114.7	(6.4)

Note: The table gives coefficients and standard errors from linear regressions in which the dependent variable was presidential approval, and all explanatory variables were scaled to range between 0 and 1. The sample size was 522 when it was unclear who started the war and 502 when country A started the war. Robust standard errors appear in parentheses.

By combining all the information presented above, we estimated how much of the audience costs were due to concerns about reputation. Recall that, when the UN was uncertain about who started the war, approval was 23 points higher when the alliance contained a defensive clause than when it did not (see Figure 1). Approximately 43 percent of this effect

flowed from concerns about military reputation. To see why, note that the expected damage to America’s military reputation was 0.29 lower (on a 0–1 scale) in scenarios with a defensive alliance than in scenarios without a defensive alliance (see Figure 2). Moreover, a one-unit change in expected damage to the country’s military reputation was associated with a 34.2 point surge in support for intervention (see Table 1). Putting these estimates together, we get $0.29 \times 34.2 = 9.9$, representing $9.9 \div 23 = 43\%$ of the total effect. Using a similar procedure, we calculated that fears of nonmilitary reputational spillovers mediated 33% of the total effect. Together, these two reputational variables accounted for more than three-quarters of the treatment effect, as shown in Table 2.

Concerns about reputation also played a key role when country A started the war. Recall that, under such circumstances, approval was 28 points higher with a defensive alliance than with a general alliance (see Figure 1). The anticipated damage to military reputation accounted for around 43 percent of this total, and concerns about nonmilitary reputation mediated an additional 28 percent. In summary, more than 70 percent of the observed audience cost can be traced to reputational concerns.

Table 2: Estimates of Causal Mechanisms

Mediator	Unclear who started		A Started the War	
	Effect via this mediator	Percent of total effect	Effect via this mediator	Percent of total effect
Military reputation	9.9	42.7	11.7	42.5
Nonmil reputation	7.6	32.6	7.7	27.9
Other	5.7	24.7	8.2	29.6

Note: The table decomposes the total effect of the defensive clause into various mechanisms. It shows how much of the effect was transmitted via each mediator, not only in absolute terms but also as a percentage of the total. Estimates in the column labeled “unclear who started” are based on data from 552 respondents. Estimates in the column labeled “A started the war” are based on data from 502 respondents.

IV. Conclusion

Our study provides strong evidence that the terms of alliances affect domestic audience costs. Leaders experience political costs when the public sees that they are breaking the nation’s international agreements, and these costs are inflicted because of public concerns about damage to the nation’s global reputation as an ally and agreement partner. These are some of the first experimental results supporting the audience costs perspective on alliance compliance, and they complement other experimental research on audience costs and crisis bargaining behavior. These findings also complement other work showing that international law can affect public opinion. Finally, they contravene the realist proposition that alliances are empty words, purely epiphenomenal to national interests.

We conclude with two observations about limits to this study and directions for future research. First, the survey was conducted only on Americans, and there is much to learn about the generalizability of the results to other countries. Citizens of other countries, especially those of non-major powers, could either be more or less concerned with the reputational costs of breaking alliance agreements. For example, a June 2015 opinion survey of citizens in several NATO member states found that Americans were the most likely nationality to support intervention in the event that Russia came into conflict with a NATO-member neighbor: support in the US was 56 percent, as compared with a median across all nations surveyed of 48% and a national low of 38% in Germany (Simmons et al. 2015). Perhaps Americans are more concerned with reputation than citizens of other countries.

On the other hand, citizens of smaller countries outside NATO may be especially fearful of losing allies, making them even more concerned about reputation than Americans. Concerns like these of course affect all work on audience costs, in that publics in major powers like the U.S. could be systematically different from minor powers when it comes to audience costs in all areas, including crisis bargaining. Future work could explore for these possible national differences by conducting experiments in minor-power countries.

Second, our analysis does not explore how the credibility of cue-givers could affect the magnitude of audience costs. In our experiment, respondents received information from three sources: the researchers, the UN, and the president. While we did not construct the experiment to give respondents reason to believe that any of these cue-givers were misrepresenting the facts, it is possible that subjects nonetheless trusted some information more than other information.

In the real world, political actors often do signal strategically, that is, they sometimes send false signals in an effort to shape the beliefs of others. For example, a leader who does not want to intervene on behalf of an embattled ally may falsely assert that the alliance does not require intervention, in order to ameliorate audience costs. In 1914, Italy was allied with Germany and Austria-Hungary, but preferred not to intervene on their side in the emerging war with France, Russia, and Britain. The Italians justified their nonintervention by claiming that the alliance did not apply, because the alliance was purely defensive and Germany was the aggressor. In 1938, France did not want to go to war with Germany over the Sudetenland, and argued that its alliance with Czechoslovakia did not compel France to help Czechoslovakia resist German aggression because the Czechs had volunteered to give up the Sudetenland. In 2014, Russia claimed that its aggressive moves against Ukraine did not violate the 1994 Budapest Agreement non-aggression pact, claiming that agreement did not cover conflicts caused by domestic political factors.

This dynamic asks the question, can leaders effectively mediate audience costs through strategic signaling? Historical evidence that suggests that the answer to this question is yes (Fjelstul and Reiter 2015). Future survey experiments could explore this dynamic, and study the limits of leaders' powers to shape public beliefs about alliance compliance requirements.

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APPENDIX 1: TEXT OF THE EXPERIMENT

Randomization

We randomized two features of the scenario: the identity of the attacker and the type of alliance. The identity of the attacker could take one of three values, which we stored in a variable called *event*.

- *event* = and concluded that Country B had started the war –**OR**–
- *event* = but could not determine who started the war –**OR**–
- *event* = and concluded that Country A had started the war

The alliance type could take one of two values, which we stored in a variable called *alliance_text*.

- *alliance_text* = that it did not start –**OR**–
- *alliance_text* = [no additional text]

Text of Questionnaire

We'd like to get your thoughts about a situation our country could face in the future. The situation is general, and is not about specific countries in the news today. Some parts of the description may seem important to you; other parts may seem unimportant. After describing the situation, we will ask your opinion about how the U.S. president handled the situation.

—*new page*—

Here is the situation:

- Countries A and B went to war over disputed territory.
- The United Nations investigated [event].
- Country A requested military assistance from its ally, the United States
- The U.S. and Country A have an alliance treaty, which both countries signed and ratified.
- The treaty says “If one member of the alliance is involved in a war [alliance_text], the other member will use military force to help its ally.”

Click here after you have read this page carefully.

—*new page*—

Here is how the U.S. president responded:

- The U.S. president decided not to get involved.
- He said that joining the war would be costly and would not serve interests.

Click here after you have read this page carefully.

—new page—

In summary:

- Countries A and B went to war. The United Nations investigated [event].
- Country A requested military assistance from its ally, the United States.
- The U.S. and Country A have an alliance treaty that says “If one member of the alliance is involved in a war [alliance_text], the other member will use military force to help its ally.”
- The U.S. president decided not to get involved. He said that joining the war would be costly and would not serve U.S. interests.

Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. president handled this situation?

- Approve strongly
- Approve somewhat
- Neither approve nor disapprove
- Disapprove somewhat
- Disapprove strongly

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

—new page—

Just to review:

- Countries A and B went to war. The United Nations investigated [event].
- Country A requested military assistance from its ally, the United States.
- The U.S. and Country A have an alliance treaty that says “If one member of the alliance is involved in a war [alliance_text], the other member will use military force to help its ally.”
- The U.S. president decided not to get involved. He said that joining the war would be costly and would not serve U.S. interests.

How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

“As a result of the president’s decision, other countries will doubt America’s willingness to honor military alliance agreements in the future.”

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

“As a result of the president’s decision, other countries will doubt America’s willingness to honor non-military agreements in areas such as trade or the environment.”

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

APPENDIX 2: DEMOGRAPHIC AND ATTITUDINAL CONTROLS

Measured before experiment:

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

“The use of military force only makes problems worse.”

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

“The United States needs to play an active role in solving conflicts around the world.”

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

Measured after experiment:

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

Are you male or female?

- Male
- Female

What racial or ethnic group best describes you?

- White
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Asian or Asian American
- Native American
- Middle Eastern
- Mixed Race
- Some other race – Type in race _____

Please enter your age on your last birthday. Please remember that your responses are kept confidential.
[select from 18-99+]

What is the highest level of school you have completed?

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

How important is religion in your life?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not too important
- Not at all important

Would you describe yourself as a "born-again" or evangelical Christian?

- Yes
- No

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

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

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

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

If selected Republican or Democrat: Would you call yourself a ...

- Strong [Republican/Democrat]
- Not very strong [Republican/Democrat]

If selected neither Republican nor Democrat: Do you think of yourself as closer to the . . .

- Republican Party
- Democratic Party
- Neither party

Some people seem to follow what's going on in government and public affairs most of the time, whether there's an election going on or not. Others aren't that interested. Would you say you follow what's going on in government and public affairs...?

- Most of the time
- Some of the time
- Only now and then
- Hardly at all
- Don't know

Did you vote in the presidential election in November 2012?

- No
- I usually vote, but did not in 2012
- I am not sure
- Yes. I definitely voted.

Did you vote in the congressional election in November 2014?

- No
- I usually vote, but did not in 2012
- I am not sure
- Yes. I definitely voted.

During the past year did you ... (Please check all that apply)

- Attend local political meetings (such as school board or city council)
- Put up a political sign (such as a lawn sign or a bumper sticker)
- Work for a candidate or campaign
- Donate money to a candidate, campaign, or political organization
- Donate blood
- None of these