

**Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zack Cooper. "To Arm or to Ally?: The Patron's Dilemma and the Strategic Logic of Arms Transfers and Alliances." *International Security* 41:2 (Fall 2016): 90-139. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00250](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00250).**

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In an analytical review of alliance research, James Morrow posed the title question, "Alliances: why write them down?"<sup>1</sup> A decade and a half later, Keren Yarhi-Milo, Alexander Lanoszka, and Zack Cooper revisit this issue, posing their own title question: "To arm or to ally?" Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper pose this question through the structural lens of hierarchical relations, setting it up as a "patron's dilemma" of how patrons can best ensure a client state's security—through either a formal guarantee to defend the state against foreign attack, the provision of significant arms, or both (or neither). Hierarchical relations and patrons' dilemmas have received increased attention in security scholarship, with several scholars expounding upon the nature of international hierarchy and its role in security provision, economic relations, democratization efforts, and many other international political issues.<sup>2</sup> In their article, Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper focus on the central alliance tradeoff of credibility versus flexibility. By agreeing to a formal institutionalized security pact in the nature of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) a patron can send a clear and credible signal of commitment, but such an ironclad commitment may trap the patron in an unwanted conflict. Conversely, simply supplying arms provides greater flexibility and will enhance the client's security,

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<sup>1</sup> James D. Morrow, "Alliances: Why Write Them Down?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 3 (2000): 63-83. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.3.1.63>.

<sup>2</sup> David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009); Michael Mastanduno, "System Maker and Privilege Taker: U.S. Power and the International Political Economy," *World Politics* 61:1 (January 2009): 121-154, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887109000057>; Michael McKoy and Michael Miller, "The Patron's Dilemma: The Dynamics of Foreign-Supported Democratization," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56:5 (October 2012): 904-932, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002711431795>.

but not to the degree that a formal defense pact would. How then do patrons decide which strategy to adopt? Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper seek to answer that question.

Their explanation includes two variables: commonality of security interests and the patron's assessment of the client's military capabilities. Commonality of interests shapes whether the patron offers a formal defense commitment, while assessments of client capabilities shape whether the patron provides a costly level of arms. When commonality is considered high and client capabilities low, the authors hypothesize that the patron will likely offer both a formal alliance and costly arms. As (perceived) commonality decreases, so does the likelihood of a formal defense pact; as (perceived) client capabilities increase, the imperative to provide costly arms decreases.

Their argument is intuitively convincing, in essence bringing together the common parameters of preferences and capabilities. A potential problem arises, however, when the authors label their variables as both "realist" and "perceptual" (98). Other realists have sought to include perception as an independent variable in alliance formation.<sup>3</sup> However, this opens them to criticism that they are slipping in non-realist factors, undercutting their explanatory logic.<sup>4</sup> This is more than a semantic point, as demonstrated by the authors' alternative explanations: domestic political concerns and economic interests (103). The origins of perceptions are very hard to disaggregate, and the authors rely largely on the policymakers' explicitly stated motives in assessing their motivations. However, policymakers may well have motivated biases based on domestic political or economic interests or incentives that either unconsciously influence their threat assessments or are such that policymakers would be reluctant to openly admit them. Such evidence, therefore, may be absent from the written record. As Eric Gartzke and Yonatan Lupu note, "It might be said that the first rule of audience costs is you do not talk about audience costs. Leaders may at times document such intentions privately ... On the other hand they may not, given limited time, interest, or introspection."<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the authors' archival work is truly impressive and highly commendable. Their case studies focus on the variation in the United States' Cold War relations with Taiwan (1953-1982) and Israel (1961-1973). These studies are extremely well-researched, utilizing a large trove of recently released documents and taking advantage of expert secondary research. The U.S.-Taiwan case study provides a great amount of variation in the independent and dependent variables. They vividly outline the debate within the Eisenhower administration over whether to make a formal defense pact with the Guomindang regime in Taiwan and illustrate how common perceptions of the mainland Communist Chinese threat and U.S. perception of overwhelming Taiwanese weakness convinced Washington to make a formal alliance with Taipei. However, as U.S. relations with mainland China improved, Washington maintained arms sales to Taiwan—albeit mainly defensive arms—while allowing its formal defense pact to lapse. It is critical, then, to understand why

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<sup>3</sup> Stephen Walt, *Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Thomas Christensen, "Perceptions and Alliances in Europe, 1865-1940," *International Organization* 51:1 (Winter 1997): 65-97. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081897550302>.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Legro and Andrew Moravcsik, "Is Anybody Still a Realist?" *International Security* 24:2 (Fall 1999): 5-55.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Gartzke and Yonatan Lupu, "Still Looking for Audience Costs," *Security Studies* 21:3 (2012): 394-395. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2012.706486>.

U.S. threat perceptions changed. The authors state that “...when the Sino-Soviet split made normalization with China possible, U.S. leaders’ perception of the threat from China changed” (118). Yet, the U.S. recognized the Sino-Soviet split some years before President Richard Nixon’s rapprochement. Indeed, the Kennedy-Johnson administration made overtures to Moscow regarding a joint attack against China in 1964 in order to pre-empt China’s first nuclear detonation.<sup>6</sup> The change in perception regarding mainland China was therefore not due to changing geopolitical conditions alone. Rather, it seemed in great part due to changing views of the U.S. military role in Asia, driven by domestic opposition to the Vietnam War. As Nixon broached the idea of a rapprochement with China in the lead-up to his 1968 presidential campaign, he made clear that he was as much motivated by the Vietnam War and the resultant “severe strains on the United States, not only militarily and economically but socially and politically as well” as he was the gains from geopolitical realignment.<sup>7</sup> Once the costs of such commitments began to feel too burdensome, threat perceptions and considerations changed as well, leading to a softening of U.S. commitments in Asia.

The U.S.-Israel case study explores the effect of changes in Israel’s relative regional power. Prior to the Six Day War of 1967, Washington viewed Israel as sufficiently strong enough to defend itself without costly arms provision, a view confirmed by Israel’s overwhelming military victory in 1967. However, this victory encouraged the Soviet Union to provide more costly arms to its Arab clients—which is consistent with the authors’ argument. This in turn sparked a debate within the Nixon administration about whether to increase its arms sales to Israel. Here the debate was not as clear-cut as with Taiwan, because there were conflicting perspectives on the changing balance of power. While Secretaries of Defense Melvin Laird and (to a lesser extent) State William Roger were wary of providing Israel with greater arms, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger was more concerned about Israel’s security and thus more in favor of providing more arms; Nixon was largely ambivalent. Yet once intelligence agencies confirmed that long-term trends did not favor Israel, the Nixon administration agreed to costly arms sales to Israel (132-133). Surprisingly though, the case study ends rather abruptly in 1973. This is noteworthy, because the October War of that year marked a significant shift in U.S. Middle East policy. Washington began taking seriously Egyptian President Anwar el-Sadat’s peaceful overtures, most notably his expulsion of Soviet military advisors and his visit to the Israeli Knesset in Jerusalem. These events culminated in the Camp David Accords of 1978-1979. The irony is that the agreement included significant military aid to Egypt, causing Israel to demand significant aid as well, culminating in the extraordinary amount of U.S. military aid both countries receive to this day. Yet, this actually fits the authors’ argument. The American, Egyptian, and Israeli governments all agreed on the common goal of maintaining peace in the Middle East, so much so that the latter two governments now receive over 75% of U.S. military aid worldwide (91).

Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper conclude by discussing the current policy implications of their argument. They notably state that “if domestic political opposition can be overcome, Vietnam could be a major security partner of the United States” (138). This highlights two points with which I would like to conclude. First, threat perception is often domestically contested, making it difficult to convincingly separate alliance policy from domestic political interests. Currently, there are intra- and inter-partisan debates concerning the threats posed by China, Iran, Russia, and nonstate actors. Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper would predict that the

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<sup>6</sup> William Burr and Jeffrey Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960-1964,” *International Security* 25:3 (Winter 2000/2001): 54-99.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Nixon, “Asia after Viet Nam,” *Foreign Affairs* 46:1 (October 1967): 114.

growth in Iranian power—through the lifting of sanctions and its strengthened ties with the ruling governments in Iraq, Lebanon, and the besieged regimes in Syria and Yemen—suggests that the United States would increase its military aid to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf states. And indeed, the U.S. offered to significantly increase military aid to and military cooperation with the Gulf states and Israel, despite in the latter case the fraught relations between President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, most Republicans and many Democrats view Iran as being far more threatening than Obama did. Moreover, President Donald Trump has an idiosyncratically benign view of Russia that as of this writing is out of step with the views of his fellow Republicans in Congress. The policies Obama adopted and that Trump and future presidents will adopt will inevitably result from spirited domestic contestations over differing biased threat perceptions, regardless of whether they admit so in their documented correspondences.

Finally, I return to where this review began: the question of why states make formal alliances. The authors suggest that Vietnam could become a major security partner of the U.S., but would that partnership ever include a formal defense agreement? Just as Tanisha Fazal has noted that declarations of war have become a thing of the past, I wonder if the same is true of formal alliances.<sup>9</sup> It seems as though the bar for such commitments is rather high. Senator Arthur Vandenburg famously advised the Truman administration that if it wanted Congress to fund aid to its war-torn allies, Truman would have to “scare the hell out of the country.”<sup>10</sup> The subsequent fear generated allowed the Truman and Eisenhower administrations to push through several security pacts, including NATO, but the Cold War environment was uniquely suited for this. One wonders whether such conditions can be duplicated. The U.S. almost certainly does not need a formal defense pact to convince Iran that an attack on Israel or the Gulf states would elicit a fierce American counter-attack. The same could be said about a mainland Chinese attack on Taiwan. Regarding Asia, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, though explicitly an economic pact, is perhaps the closest the U.S. is going to come to a formal defense pact against China in the foreseeable future—and even this was rejected by the U.S. public.

Yarhi-Milo, Lanoszka, and Cooper’s article tells us much about past and future alliance policymaking. They not only provide a convincing and thought-provoking explanation for alliance decision-making but also engage in expert archival research to validate their claims. It is rare to find both in single article publication, and the authors are to be commended for such a contribution to the literature.

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<sup>8</sup> Michael Gordon, “[John Kerry Wins Gulf States’ Cautious Support for Iran Deal](#),” *New York Times*, 3 August 2015; Emma Green, “[Why Does the United States Give So Much Money to Israel?](#)” *The Atlantic*, 15 September 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Tanisha Fazal, “Why States No Longer Declare War,” *Security Studies* 21:4 (2012): 557-593.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Isaacson and Evan Thomas, *The Wise Men: Six Friends and the World They Made* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 395.

Commitment and Consistency in Audience Costs Theory,” *American Journal of Political Science*, 59:4 (October 2015), co-authored with Jack Levy, Paul Poast, and Geoffrey Wallace; and “Coalition Dynamics and the Sèvres Pact: Do Opposites Attract?” in Melissa Yeager and Charles Carter, eds., *Pacts and Alliances in History: Diplomatic Strategy and the Politics of Coalitions* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012).

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