

H-Diplo | ISSF Review Essay 65

Raymond C. Kuo. *Following the Leader: International Order, Alliance Strategies, and Emulation*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781503628434 (hardcover, \$75.00).

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Military alliances are a crucial and much-studied aspect of world politics. They are also a defining feature of US grand strategy. During its tenure as the leading state in the international system, the United States has assembled an unprecedented network of security relationships that extend across the globe, including its multilateral alliance with other members of the North Atlantic community, its bilateral alliances in East Asia and Oceania, and its informal but close partnerships with states throughout the Middle East. Indeed, these security relationships are regularly cited as a unique source of advantage in competitions with major power rivals, as well as a potential source of vulnerability for a hegemon hoping to avoid overextension. Understanding why alliances emerge, what form they take, and the roles they play not only is of interest to academics, therefore, but is also at the center of current foreign policy debates over deepening versus downsizing Washington's commitments.

Given this background, Raymond Kuo's *Following the Leader* is a welcome addition to the literature on alliances – one that sheds light on a number of relevant issues, including the role of status and prestige in the origins of formal security commitments, the conditions under which those commitments contribute to or detract from a state's credibility, and how to adapt US alliances going forward.

Kuo's book seeks to explain a notable puzzle: although alliances should vary in their organizational form depending on the members they have and the threats they confront, at any given time most alliances tend to share many key features in common. According to Kuo, these common features can be attributed a dominant alliance strategy that diffuses through the international system. Specifically, in the aftermath of a major war, the leading state that emerges victorious will often establish a "core alliance" (24) with other great powers to restore stability and preserve its own position. This core alliance might be a lightly institutionalized pact in the *realpolitik* tradition, or it could be a more integrative effort that provides a framework for deeper collaboration. In either case, other alliances that come into being will mimic the main attributes of the core alliance. This is not due to a hegemon imposing its preferred approach on other states. Nor is it due to shared threats that drive similar responses across the system. Rather, it can be explained by two different processes.

The first is the credibility mechanism. When it comes to alliance politics, protégés understandably worry that their patrons will be too distracted by other commitments to fulfill all of their obligations.¹ According to Kuo, secondary states – those that are not members of the core alliance but still want separate agreements with a hegemon – are especially concerned that their guarantees will carry less weight and receive less emphasis. Consequently, they push for their pacts to resemble the core alliance. For these states, he argues, “obtaining a similar alliance strategy reassures countries that their security ties are approximately as credible and strong as those found among the great powers” (28).

The second is the normative mechanism. Security policy decisions are often influenced by non-material considerations, which can drive states to take actions that seem incongruent with strategic and operational realities.² In the case of alliances politics, peripheral states – those that are not directly tied to the hegemon – look to the core alliance as a clear indicator status and prestige. When these actors form pacts with one another, therefore, they often emulate the core alliance, regardless of whether its attributes best fit their own circumstances. Doing so, Kuo argues, demonstrates that they “are also sovereign entities in the international system, abiding by the institutional markers of productive security cooperation and pursuing strategic goals validated by the hegemon and other great powers” (26).

To his credit, Kuo is extremely clear about the underlying logic of his theory and the causal mechanisms at work. Moreover, he assesses these arguments and illustrates his claims with an impressive set of statistical tests and several case studies, including Germany’s alliances during the late nineteenth century, US alliances during the first half of the Cold War, and post-Cold War security pacts in southern Africa. Collectively, the empirics lend weight to the theory. This is especially true for the quantitative analysis, whereas the case studies produce slightly more mixed support.

Overall, *Following the Leader* is a well-researched and well-written book. Nevertheless, there are some notable ambiguities and omissions in the theory and evidence. For instance, both the existence and diffusion of a core alliance raises some unresolved questions. Specifically, although NATO is the canonical case of a postwar alliance formed by a leading state to anchor the security dimensions of a new international order, putting German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s postwar alliances in the same category seems to stretch the concept. Meanwhile, although secondary states are expected to oppose alliance arrangements that differ from those of the core alliance, it is unclear why a secondary state would recoil from a more integrative form of security cooperation than the hegemon has with its great power partners, if such an alliance were offered to them.

¹ For recent discussions on the credibility challenges that leading states confront, see Evan Braden Montgomery, “Primacy and Punishment: US Grand Strategy, Maritime Power, and Military Options to Manage Decline,” *Security Studies* 29:4 (2020): 769-796; and Tongfi Kim and Luis Simón, “A Reputation Versus Prioritization Trade-Off: Unpacking Allied Perceptions of US Extended Deterrence in Distant Regions,” *Security Studies* 30:5 (2021): 725-760.

² For instance, states sometimes organize their armed forces or purchase military equipment based on status considerations, even when the choices they make are ill-suited to the military problems they face. See, for example, Theo Farrell, “Global Norms and Military Effectiveness: The Army in Early Twentieth-Century Ireland,” in Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, eds., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 136-156.

Empirically, the exclusion of informal security partnerships represents a limitation of the book, albeit an understandable one given the need to tackle a focused and tractable research question. One wonders, however, how the inclusion on these types of arrangements might alter the book's conclusions. Why do some secondary states settle for informal partnerships with or implicit guarantees from a hegemon when the credibility mechanisms suggests that they should demand something more? And why would peripheral states engage in a form of security cooperation that has none of the status or prestige of the core alliance?

Finally, Kuo does an admirable job of drawing clear and concrete policy implications from his arguments. In particular, he suggests that the United States should convert its bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines (along with its legal commitment to support Taiwan's self-defense) into a multilateral alliance modeled on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Simply put, until US allies and partners in Asia are bound together in a security pact that is equivalent to Washington's core alliance in North America and Europe, they will never be fully assured, and US efforts to prioritize competition with China will never really succeed. This would, however, entail abandoning the hub-and-spoke alliance system that has lasted for many decades and overturning the policy of strategic ambiguity that has characterized Washington's approach to cross-strait relations. Setting aside the merits of this proposal, which are certainly debatable, the logic of Kuo's argument would suggest that the demand for a multilateral alliance upgrade should be coming from Asian states that fear playing second fiddle to American allies in another region. Yet that demand hardly seems to exist.³

These minor criticisms aside, *Following the Leader* is an excellent book. Not only does it identify and explain a new puzzle when it comes to military alliances, but it offers a compelling argument that skillfully blends the strategic considerations and normative concerns of states throughout the international system.

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³ A related prospect is that security cooperation activities between the United States, Japan, Australia, and India – often referred to as the Quad – could become the basis for Asian version of NATO. The logic of Kuo's argument casts some doubt on this possibility, however. Because of the highly integrated and institutionalized character of today's core alliance, NATO, the startup costs for a new multilateral alliance (especially one that includes a state like India that is not formally allied with its other partners) are extremely high.