

"Signaling Benign Intentions: The Wrong Turn for Structural Realism"

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An important disagreement exists within realism as to whether states can signal benign intentions and mitigate the security dilemma. This paper asks, can signaling intentions reduce security competition and push back against the inevitability of war in the international system? I argue that signaling is an improbable mechanism for producing peaceful relations among major powers. I specify three categories of constraints on effective communication of, interpretation of, and reliance on information about present and future intentions that undermine the logic of signaling: (1) miscalculation, (2) deception, and (3) future change. A signaling state's genuine belief in its own benign intentions and desire to communicate those intentions through any number of signaling behaviors do not matter, because the receiving state risks too much harm in making security decisions in reliance on its perception of another's benign intentions. The situation is exacerbated by international anarchy. These problems lead rational receiver states to make decisions independent of information about intentions gleaned from signals. Additionally, potential senders face disincentives to signal based on the high likelihood of misinterpretation and mistrust. As such, I argue in this paper that the defensive realist turn to mitigating the security dilemma through signals is misguided.

There's No Such Thing as a Free Lunch: The Dangers of America's Addiction to Informal Alliances

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American security policy has increasingly eschewed a classic instrument of international diplomacy: the formal mutual defense alliance. Although the U.S. has largely maintained its network of Cold War-era mutual defense pacts in Europe and East Asia, it has largely abandoned this practice since, particularly in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa. Indeed, one has to go back all the way to the 1960 Mutual Defense Treaty with Japan to find the most recent example of the United States ratifying a classic formal alliance. In its stead, the U.S. has relied on a host of essentially unilateral arrangements, such as the “major non-NATO ally” designation created in 1989, to facilitate security cooperation with regional partners around the world without imposing an explicit and institutionalized mutual obligation. Although seemingly a practical expedient in a world devoid of significant state-level threats on the scale of the former Soviet Union, the question becomes what risks might an informal approach to security cooperation pose to long-term American interests? Alliance theory (e.g., Snyder 1997) suggests the most obvious risk is the effectiveness, or credibility, of such alignments in the event of war or major conflict. However, recent research (e.g., Leeds & Anac 2005) suggests informal alliances are honored at comparable rates to more formal arrangements in such cases. Nevertheless, I argue this represents an excessively narrow criterion for alliance risk. Rather, I argue that informal alliances are: 1) more costly, due to a problematic “ratchet effect” that sets in, 2) more unstable, due to the “lack of domestic accountability” demanded of alliance partners, and 3) more provocative, due to the “opaque delineation of obligation” provided to extra-alliance observers. Taken together, this implies a reversal of the conventional wisdom: informal alliances are an inefficient, rather than ineffective, approach to security cooperation rather than the other way around. I plan to explore the argument through a series of case-studies on the formal alliance histories between the United States and France, Turkey, South Korea, and Japan, and the informal alliance histories involving the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt. In the end, the policy-implication of my analysis is that American interests would be more efficiently served not by reducing security commitments, but endeavoring to formalize them.