

Stephen M. Walt. 1987. *Origins of Alliances* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, Chapters 1,2, 5.

**Summary:** This book presents **balance of threat theory** as a reformulation of balance of power theory to explain interstate alliances.<sup>1</sup> States ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone. Although the distribution of power is an extremely important factor, the level of threat is also affected by geographic proximity, offensive capability and aggressive intentions. The power of other states can therefore be a liability or an asset, depending on where it is located, what it can do and how it is used.

A central question is **how states respond to threats** – by balancing (allying with others against the prevailing threat) or bandwagoning (alignment with the source of danger). Walt asserts that, “for the states that matter, balancing is the rule.” He surveys the diplomatic history of the Middle East between 1955 and 1979 and discovers that balancing is far more common than bandwagoning. When bandwagoning does occur, it is among weaker states – both because they are “more vulnerable to pressure” and because their resources are inconsequential - when allies are unavailable and when leaders believe that potentially threatening states can be successfully appeased. In addition, Walt concludes that ideological similarities and state-sponsored instruments of increasing alliance commitment, such as foreign economic and military aid, are subordinate to security preferences in alliance formation.

In terms of the Middle East, Walt claims that the different sources of threat help explain why superpowers (the U.S. and the Soviet Union) do not cause a regional balancing alliance – the superpowers are sought as allies because other regional states present more imminent security threats. Differentiating between types of threat explains why Egypt and Israel have frequently been the targets of balancing alliances – they are the most powerful regional actors, have extensive great power support, possess considerable offensive capabilities and have been perceived as seeking to expand at the expense of others.

Whether states balance or bandwagon in the face of threat – and whether ideology or policy instruments can sway alignment choices – is important because it determines whether states are generally secure or not. If balancing is more common than bandwagoning, then states are more secure, because aggressors will face combined opposition. If bandwagoning is more common, the states are insecure, because aggressors will attract more allies, increasing their power while reducing that of their opponents. Walt sees this difference as crucial to evaluating the prospects for continued U.S. security during the Cold War.

### **Summary of Hypotheses on Balancing and Bandwagoning**

#### **Hypotheses on Balancing**

- 1) *General Form:* States facing an external threat will align with others to oppose the states posing the threat.
- 2) The greater the threatening state’s aggregate power, the greater the tendency for other to align against it.

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<sup>1</sup> An alliance is defined as a formal or informal relationship of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states. Assumes some level of commitment and an exchange of benefits for both parties.

- 3) The nearer a powerful state, the greater the tendency for those nearby to align against it. Therefore, neighboring states are less likely to be allies than are states separated by at least one other power.
- 4) The greater a state's offensive capabilities, the greater the tendency for other to align against it. Therefore, states with offensively oriented military capabilities are likely to provoke other states to form defensive coalitions.
- 5) The more aggressive a state's perceived intentions, the more likely others are to align against that state.
- 6) Alliances formed during wartime will disintegrate when the enemy is defeated.

### **Hypotheses on Bandwagoning**

- 1) *General form*: States facing an external threat will ally with the most threatening power.
- 2) The greater a state's aggregate capabilities, the greater the tendency for others to align with it.
- 3) The nearer a powerful state, the greater the tendency for those nearby to align with it.
- 4) The greater a state's offensive capabilities, the greater the tendency for others to align with it.
- 5) The more aggressive a state's perceived intentions, the less likely other states are to align against it.
- 6) Alliances formed to oppose a threat will disintegrate when the threat becomes serious.

### **Hypotheses on Conditions Favoring Balancing over Bandwagoning**

- 1) Balancing is more common than bandwagoning.
- 2) The stronger the state, the greater its tendency to balance. Weak states will balance against other weak states but may bandwagon when threatened by great powers.
- 3) The greater the probability of allied support, the greater the tendency to balance. When adequate allied support is certain, however, the tendency for free-riding or buck-passing increases.
- 4) The more unalterably aggressive a state is perceived to be, the greater the tendency for others to balance against it.
- 5) In wartime, the closer one side is to victory, the greater the tendency for others to bandwagon with it.

### **Summary of Hypotheses on Ideology and Alliance Formation (40)**

- 1) *General form*: The more similar the domestic ideology of two or more states, the more likely they are to ally.
- 2) The more centralized and hierarchical the movement prescribed by the ideology, the more conflictive and fragile any resulting alliance will be. Therefore, Leninist movements will find stable alliances more difficult to sustain than will either monarchies or democracies.
- 3) The more secure a state perceives itself to be, the greater the impact of ideology on alliance choices. Therefore, ideological alignments are more likely in a bipolar world. And therefore, the greater the advantage to the defense in wartime, the greater the impact of ideology on alliance choices.
- 4) State lacking domestic legitimacy will be more likely to seek ideological alliances to increase internal and external support.

- 5) The impact of ideology on the choice of alliance partners will be exaggerated; statesmen will overestimate the degree of ideological agreement among both their allies and their adversaries.

#### **Summary of Hypotheses on Foreign Aid and Alliance Formation (46)**

- 1) *General form:* The more aid provided by one state to another, the greater the likelihood that the two will form an alliance. The more aid, the greater the control by the donor over the recipient.
- 2) Foreign aid is a special form of balancing behavior. Therefore, the greater the external threat facing the recipient, the greater the effect of aid on alignment.
- 3) The greater the donor's monopoly on the commodity provided, the greater its leverage over the recipient.
- 4) The greater the asymmetry of dependence favoring the donor, the greater its leverage over the recipient.
- 5) The greater the asymmetry of motivation favoring the donor, the greater its leverage over the recipient. Because the recipient's security is usually more precarious, however, asymmetry of motivation will usually favor the recipient.
- 6) The weaker the domestic political decision-making apparatus of the donor, the less leverage it can exert on the recipient.

#### **Summary of Hypotheses on Penetration and Alliance Formation (49)**

- 1) *General form:* The greater one state's access to the political system of another, the greater the tendency for the two to ally.
- 2) Penetration is more effective against open societies.
- 3) Penetration is more effective when the objectives are limited. Therefore, the more intrusive the act of penetration, the greater the probability that it will have a negative effect on alignment.
- 4) Penetration is more effective when other causes contribute to the alliance.