American allies in times of war: the great asymmetry

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the border never did “close,” not even temporarily, though it obviously slowed down and, for many, has become ever since more “hardened” than it had theretofore been. One might also quibble with Bow’s insinuation (on p. 141), in respect of the bilateral tension occasioned by the onset of the Iraq war in early 2003, that Canadian opposition to the stance of the Chrétien government was largely motivated by a worry that the United States would retaliate against Canada economically. Such worry did exist, of course, but I think what Bow misses is the split in English-Canadian opinion on the war’s merits, especially once Baghdad had fallen and Saddam Hussein had been chased from power. For a short time in the spring of 2003, many in English Canada did lament that Canada had failed to go into combat alongside its traditional “Anglosphere” partners.

On the main points, though, there can be no doubt that Brian Bow has gotten things right, and that he has done so in a highly original manner. This book will not, in the nature of things, be the last word on the politics of bilateral bargaining in North America, but from now on it will be impossible for anyone to work in this area without using Bow as their point of departure.

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References


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With the recent wiretapping scandal branded as yet another “crisis” hitting North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies and the near-intervention in Syria, the matter of American allies’ cooperation has been at the forefront of political events. However, neither the sometimes overblown rhetoric of the media nor the current general International Relations (IR) theories provide a well-crafted analysis of the factors relevant to explaining the behavior of American allies. For instance, realist scholars who look at how the powerful states shape alliances have a hard time explaining why weaker states do not always join the coalitions of the willing. In a similar way, there is a debate in the literature on soft-balancing versus soft-bandwagoning, but these frameworks have difficulty accounting for variance in the behavior of allies.
Filling this gap is the task set out by Stéfanie Von Hlatky in *American allies in times of war: the great asymmetry*. The author provides a sound theoretical basis to account for the behavior of secondary powers in asymmetric alliances (Ch. 2). Her argument, best located in the theoretical school of neoclassical realism, identifies two levels of factors intervening in the decisions made by secondary powers to engage in military cooperation. First, at the international level, they must consider matters of alliance reputation and threat perception. Allies will want to maintain their reputation as a reliable alliance partner, but may have different appreciations of threats than the dominant power. Second, at the domestic level, actors’ abilities to commit vary according to the autonomy and cohesion of foreign policy executives (FPE) – the individuals responsible for foreign policy decision-making – on the one hand, and their current military capabilities on the other. In order to participate in military operations, FPE in democratic states need to mobilize support within their societal and institutional domestic context. They also require a sufficient amount of military forces that are suited for the task at hand. Military cooperation can reach its full-scale form when the leaders have a high degree of autonomy-cohesion and strong forces; it will be limited in cases when only one of these elements is present, and there is likely to be no or very little involvement when there is neither.

To show how states may retain some choice and resist pressure despite an important asymmetry in an alliance, the author also lays out the different strategies used by the secondary powers. Indeed, because of tension between alliance considerations and domestic constraints, these powers will try to minimize the course of action they take. First, if the ally commits to military cooperation, it will try to reap as much benefit as possible from its high commitment. This strategy is known as leveraging. Second, a government might delay decision making by strategies of hedging, such as not announcing a clear decision or insisting on due process being followed in some international organization (IO). We see that for the author, IOs can be useful in the secondary powers’ strategies, but are not an independent variable in themselves. Finally, states often use strategies of compensating when they do not commit. For instance, they can support the dominant power on other issues, or promise to join in for later efforts, like reconstruction. In the same way, if they commit, they are likely to water down their efforts when presenting them to their domestic audience (pp. 18–24).

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 of the book, the author makes an in-depth case study of the factors leading to military cooperation of the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia with the United States in the decisive moments from 2001 to 2003 for the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These states are tough cases for the author’s theory because they are countries with special relationships with the United States, and they stand to lose more if they do not follow the leader. Von Hlatky’s findings are broadly consistent with the predictions of her approach. For instance, in Chapter 4, she argues convincingly that her approach identifies the relevant factors to explain Canada’s behavior. Canada does not share the Americans’ global ambitions, but it is closely linked to its neighbor for its own economic prosperity and security. After 9/11, the unity in the government allowed leaders in Ottawa to commit to the best of their military capabilities. However, in the case of Iraq, the Liberal government of Chrétien lacked cohesion, with Martin stepping up as an increasingly important contender for the prime minister seat, and strong domestic opposition in the population. Also, Canada was already involved in Afghanistan, which limited its military capacities to simultaneously operate elsewhere. The Canadian government, after some hedging over pinning its own decision to the need for a resolution at the United Nations, announced its decision to opt out and tried to compensate so as to minimize the consequences to its standing in the alliance. Canada later rallied to the United States, still cooperated with the United States through its naval task force and military personnel on exchange and promised to play a role in the reconstruction of Iraq (p. 107).

The author also provides an interesting explanation for Australia (Ch. 5), a country that supported the United States from the beginning for both Afghanistan and Iraq, and had a similar
perception of threat. Australian cohesive FPE backed the United States despite limited military capacities and regional security concerns. This early commitment by Canberra to support the United States – although it was limited rather than full-scale – gave Australian leaders privileged access to Washington, a strategy of leveraging that allowed them to push for a free trade agreement deal with the United States (p. 135).

The only instance where the book’s theory provides a less successful explanation is for the large-scale commitment of the United Kingdom in the case of Iraq (Ch. 3). Blair took the risk of this commitment despite important disagreements in his Cabinet – two ministers resigned over the issue – a strong domestic opposition and worries of overstretching the British forces. In spite of these elements running against the theoretical predictions, Von Hlatky shows that many factors within the same approach can account for what happened. Blair deeply shared the same perception of threats as did President Bush, and thus was able to maneuver outside of due process to retain a lot of autonomy and, despite some defections in his own rank, could count on the support of the Conservative opposition in London. This unusual array of circumstances seems to account well for Blair’s foreign policy decisions, even if they were still risky decisions for the future of his political career (pp. 144–145).

Many factors can impact the domestic constraints of autonomy and cohesion for FPE: regime type, the presence or absence of upcoming elections, division or unity within the government, a minority or majority status government, etc. (pp. 45–46). As the case of the United Kingdom’s cooperation over Iraq illustrates, it is not always clear how to weight the importance of these factors and which one prevails, especially when they have contradicting effects. The theory would benefit from further specification of its variables. The study would also benefit from extending the cases studied outside of the countries in the “Anglosphere”. Even if the cases are well justified, the reader feels as though other important insights could be drawn from cases such as France or Germany, to further strengthen the theory.

Despite these few questions, American allies in times of war is a success on every level. It brings to light factors relevant to the study of asymmetric cooperation, and integrates them in a coherent framework bridging IR and Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) theories. Not only does it contribute to explaining cooperation between asymmetric allies, but it also explains how secondary states employ different strategies to deal with their situation. The book rests on an impressive review of the literature on the subject at hand, and a sound analysis through a detailed and comprehensive study of cases. These elements make the book a must-read for scholars of IR and FPA, especially those interested in matters of alliance and foreign interventions.

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