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IT'S A TRAP!

Security commitments and the risks of entrapment

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How likely is it that the United States will become entrapped by its alliances? The answer to this question is critical not only to international relations theory, but also to the conduct of US grand strategy. In this chapter, we argue that the risk is higher than many have assessed. Both the logic and the evidence supporting claims that entrapment is rare are flawed. A more restrained US grand strategy is the surest way to prevent America's entrapment in unwanted conflicts.

Since the Cold War, commitments to others in the form of both informal and formal alliances have been central to US grand strategy. Policymakers from across the political spectrum believe formal alliances in Western Europe and East Asia, as well as more informal commitments in the Middle East, serve as the clearest and most credible indicators of American interests. Conventional wisdom treats these alliances as crucial to the maintenance of international security and to the avoidance of the types of deterrence failures and insecurity spirals that often contribute to wars and crises. Simply put, the United States' extensive alliance commitments are believed to help states escape anarchy and its associated dangers. They are thought to be an essential tool for protecting America's interests as they allow the United States to signal its interests around the world (Clinton 1994; Goldgeier 1998; Bush 2002; Bush 2006; Obama 2015; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012).

Crucially, this perspective assumes that the political and military costs to the United States of maintaining these commitments are small, especially in comparison to the costs of war and instability that would attend any change in American policy. Despite the growth of regional tensions attendant on the rise of China and resurgence of Russia, advocates point to a body of research suggesting that alliances perform a security-dampening function: they allow the United States to reassure its partners and prevent insecurity spirals, while still affording the US exit options that limit the likelihood that it will be entrapped into conflicts it would rather avoid (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Beckley 2015; Kim 2011). Alliances, in short, function as a silver bullet that reassure friends, deter foes, and leave the United States unexposed.

Increasingly, however, skeptics question this conventional wisdom. Part of the case for a US grand strategy of "restraint" is that American security commitments risk entrapment (Posen 2014; Wright 2015). In this view, the alliance commitments of the US must involve *some* risk of war that is not purely in the United States' interest; otherwise, and as Thomas Schelling suggested long ago, American allies would have no reason to trust American security guarantees (Schelling 2008). Security commitments, in other words, cannot be unvarnished goods: for them to influence allies and adversaries, there must be some risk of the United States coming to allied assistance when, all things considered, it would prefer not to do so.

These contending arguments raise a number of questions: Is committing to various countries around the world in the United States' interest because commitment only requires burdens the United

States will willingly accept? If not, is it time to pull back from committing to those who are now able to look out for their own security or which are so indefensible that the US runs great risks for uncertain benefits? More generally, when should *any* great power be worried about entrapment into others' conflicts – under what conditions do the risks of entrapment start to outweigh the value of the security commitments themselves?

In this chapter, building on the foundational work of Jack Snyder and Thomas J. Christensen (Snyder 1984; Christensen and Snyder 1990), we contend that the risks of entrapment for the contemporary United States are significant. More specifically, we make two arguments. First, much of the entrapment debate thus far has been a game of shadow boxing. As elaborated below, current efforts to study the frequency and risks of entrapment have virtually defined the problem away by treating entrapment as solely occurring when one ally goes to war for the sake of a partner when the first ally would prefer to avoid conflict. Although this is indeed the most concerning form of entrapment, it misses that entrapment does not necessarily manifest in an either/or choice in which a state clearly takes a step it avowedly prefers to avoid. Instead, entrapment can also manifest in critical decisions states make when confronting an adversary that involve the *timing* of confrontation, the *relative resources* contributed to the effort, and the *objectives* involved. These different decisions on the road to deterrence and reassurance – and war – are crucial, as they help explain why states can be entrapped even if they agree that confronting an opponent is generally in their “national interest.”

Second, all forms of entrapment are more likely to occur in today's unipolar world, and to be especially prevalent if and when unipolarity begins to wane. This is significant because evidence that entrapment is uncommon – and thus current US grand strategy sustainable – has almost exclusively been drawn from the bipolar world of the Cold War. Yet, because the two great powers in bipolar systems do not *need* allies to establish a workable balance, the Cold War is among the least likely of all situations for entrapment to occur (Waltz 1979).

Instead, alliances in multipolar and unipolar systems are likely to carry greater entrapment risks. Multipolar entrapment is easily understood (and much studied) – needing allies for a workable balance of power, states are entrapped into costly foreign adventures out of fears of being isolated and left strategically vulnerable. Studies of Europe's pre-World War I system make this point (Snyder 1984: 471–483; Schroeder 1972; Van Evera 1984: 96–101). Unipolarity, on the other hand, is less determinant but, on balance, we argue that it generates entrapment risks falling between unipolar and bipolar systems. Here, and although unipolarity limits a great power's need for allies for balance-of-power reasons, it reifies the need for allies to forestall the emergence of new great powers. In the process, unipolar alliances make moral hazard – the tendency for allies to adopt progressively riskier policies in contravention of the formal or informal terms of an alliance with a stronger actor – particularly likely (Kuperman 2008). Unipolar alliances thus carry real entrapment risks, as a hegemon may need to go to war for allies to sustain its current dominance in the international system. The net result, therefore, is a situation where the United States' large power advantages over allies and prospective rivals may make it especially vulnerable to entrapment.

Together, these dynamics bolster the case for a more restrained US grand strategy and help undercut a key prop used by those advocating for primacist or “deep engagement” strategies. Alliances are not a free lunch for the United States. Although the United States' alliances may be good for many things, helping the United States avoid conflicts is not one of them. Alliances carry greater entrapment risks than often appreciated. Ultimately, even if some crises are deterred or foreclosed, the process of doing so creates new potential conflicts.

The remainder of this chapter develops in five parts. In the next section, we review the debate over the risks and benefits of US security commitments. Second, we lay out the reasons why such security

commitments are riskier under unipolarity than they were under bipolarity. Third, we focus on the indirect risks of security commitments under unipolarity, focusing heavily on the particular danger of alliance moral hazard. Fourth, we present some preliminary evidence to support our case drawn from recent developments in East Asia. Finally, we conclude by briefly discussing the implications of the analysis for both international relations theory and US grand strategy.

The debate over engagement

Over the last few years, Russian actions in Ukraine and Chinese assertiveness in the South China Sea have raised the prospect of a return to great power politics, and, with it, a consideration of the role the US should play in those politics (for an overview see Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Posen 2014). Given the protections offered by both the United States' geography and its massive military capability, US leaders have often thought about grand strategy in terms of the commitments made to others.¹ Since the Cold War, the most important US national interests might be best measured by the alliances it has maintained for most of the last seven decades: those with Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Israel, and – albeit to a purposefully opaque extent – Taiwan.² Indeed, policymakers often speak in these terms, with, for instance, Vice President Joseph Biden announcing in 2009 that “The United States of America remains committed to our alliance with Europe, which we Americans believe, and continue to believe, is the cornerstone of American foreign policy.” Conversely, then-candidate Donald J. Trump faced intense criticism for suggesting that American alliances in Europe and Asia were not sacrosanct (Mosk 2009; Lind 2017; Shiffrin 2017). In short, US alliances are widely seen as more or less permanent expressions of the United States' interest in foreign affairs, and the United States' underlying interests in US allies as invariable.

Lost in the discussion, however, is a fundamental question of whether these alliances are “worth it” to the United States. Even at the height of the early Cold War, with the Red Army breathing down the neck of Western Europe, no less a figure than George Kennan questioned whether the United States needed to extend formal alliances to Britain, France, and other states now seen as core American allies (Ireland 1981). After an initial flurry of “Whither NATO?” debates in the wake of the collapse of the U.S.S.R., consideration of the value of these alliances in a post-Cold War world mostly receded (Posen and Ross 1996). To many analysts, at a minimum there seemed to be little cost in maintaining what was already created; at a maximum, US-led alliances were seen as a vehicle for incorporating other countries into the presumably peaceful and democratic West while buttressing the United States' post-Cold War dominance (Joffe 1984). The debate over NATO's future – whether to maintain it or, as was ultimately decided, expand it – turned on precisely these questions, with advocates ultimately carrying the day with arguments about how NATO enlargement would expand the zone of security in Europe (Goldgeier 2010; Asmus 2002).

Today, questions about the value of these security commitments are once again being asked. Proponents of sustaining an assertive US grand strategy, including what has been labeled either “deep engagement” or primacy, see US involvement around the world as critical to the maintenance of peace and security. An active United States, committed to its and others' security, is generally seen as a positive presence in world affairs (Brooks and Wohlforth 2016; Lieber 2012). Advocates of this position are skeptical that such commitments are likely to involve the United States in conflicts that it would otherwise prefer to avoid. Moreover, so the argument goes, the United States can moderate the foreign policy of its allies, lessening the likelihood that they will get involved in conflict in the first place (Pressman 2008). Such commitments entail direct costs in the basing of troops overseas, but those costs are relatively minimal if the benefit is preventing new conflicts that would have adverse

consequences for US national and economic security (Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012; Wright 2015).

In contrast, advocates for a more restrained US grand strategy argue that the United States should pull back from most of its overseas security commitments. They see American commitments as placing the US in harm's way, exposing the United States to conflicts it might prefer to avoid, or even causing conflict (Posen 2013; Layne 2016). Moreover, they argue, US allies are generally the richest and most developed states in their regions, American allies should have the wherewithal to pay for their security on their own. By this logic, winding down the United States' formal and informal alliance network will reduce alliance free-riding while limiting the military and political costs paid by the United States. Because the US' overseas military presence might be causing or exacerbating some conflicts, lowering its risk of entrapment would foster a more stable international system, too (Posen 2014; Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky 1997; Itzkowitz Shiffrinson and Lalwani 2014).

Which of these arguments is correct turns heavily on the risk of entrapment. Holding the potential benefits of American alliances – a contentious topic – aside, one way to evaluate the relative merits of these grand strategic approaches is to examine the downsides of American alliances (Drezner 2013; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012). Since the direct military costs of foreign commitments are acceptable, the question becomes: what are the diplomatic and political costs of existing American security commitments? After all, if the US can commit overseas with little risk of becoming entrapped in unwanted conflicts, then the costs of maintaining peace are relatively low. On the other hand, if the risks are high, then retrenchment is a better option.

The logic of entrapment

To answer this question, it is worthwhile to first examine and define what we mean by “entrapment.” The term emerged in the post-1945 world as the discipline of security studies expanded. Still, statesmen and policymakers since antiquity have understood that alliances require states to risk engaging in crises and fighting wars they would otherwise avoid. Early mention of this phenomenon comes from Thucydides' discussion of the Peloponnesian War – Sparta and Athens came to blows not because of an Athenian attack on Sparta or vice versa, but because Athens challenged a Spartan ally and Sparta, not wishing to risk its allies' confidence, took steps leading to war (Thucydides 1972). In more modern times, scholars have suggested that a series of entrapments caused World War I, while policymakers during the Cold War worried that certain hot spots – especially Germany – could lead to a local crisis that would ensnare the United States and Soviet Union (Sagan 1986; Christensen and Snyder 1990).

As these examples suggest, entrapment has commonly been used to describe a situation where one state, wishing to remain allied to another, exposes itself to political and military conflicts that benefit its ally but that it, left to its own devices, would otherwise not encounter. The source of this dynamic is seemingly simple: as Glenn Snyder argued, states risk entrapment out of fear of abandonment as concerns over losing a valuable ally lead a state to accept increased risks in world affairs and foreign policy (Snyder 1984). This process can lead to a state fighting wars on behalf of its partners – if a state does not want to risk the credibility or durability of an alliance, then it may need to fight on behalf of an ally against another party even if it shares no underlying interest in its ally's conflict in general, or prefers to address the threat to the ally through other means (e.g., through deterrence rather than defense).

This logic implies that the more a state values an alliance, the more likely it is to be entrapped. Especially valuable are alliances that ensure states are able to establish a balance of power against

foreign threats (Snyder 1984; Walt 1985). Although the factors that influence whether a balance of power is easy or difficult to obtain vary, states that ultimately lack the will or ability to unilaterally address an external threat tend to need allies – otherwise, a balance will not form and state survival will be imperiled (Walt 1985; Morrow 1993).

In doing so, states risk entrapment. Knowing that its partner *needs* it (or believes it needs it) to maintain a balance of power gives an ally significant leverage over its partners' foreign policy. The ally can compel concessions on a host of issues – diplomatic support, military cooperation, and even war – by threatening to exit the alliance or suggesting the alliance would become unworkable unless it receives assistance. Indeed, this dynamic applies even if all members of an alliance need one another to establish a workable balance since, as long as some members in a security-seeking alliance are more risk-acceptant than others, entrapment remains a possibility.

When and how does entrapment manifest

Still, we should be careful not to think of entrapment as purely an either/or decision whereby one ally that was previously wholly at peace with a third state mobilizes and goes to war out of the blue for the sake of an ally that has a conflict with the third state. To be sure, existing studies of entrapment focus exclusively on the question of whether states are compelled to fight unwanted wars on behalf of allies solely to maintain the alliance. For these studies, entrapment thus occurs if and only if allies end up on the same side in a conflict with one another even if one or more members of that alliance does not share a preference for that conflict (see e.g., Beckley 2015). Such an event would indeed be noteworthy and an obvious case of entrapment, but we should also expect it to be relatively rare. Rational states are not expected to fight wars that are against their national interests, and as skeptics of entrapment have claimed, leaders of those states are more likely to walk away than commit national blood and treasure to a patently unwise war (Waltz 1964). This standard thus sets a theoretically problematic high bar, suggesting that states are sufficiently concerned about their security that they form alliances, yet sufficiently unconcerned about their security that they will roll the iron dice for non-vital interests. It virtually defines away the very phenomenon of interest.

Instead, it is worthwhile relating entrapment to the process by which states tend to end up in crises and war with one another. In the modern world, international events and matters of high politics that may lead to conflict are rarely discrete events. Decisions that lead to war often occur in a series of escalatory steps. In stylized fashion, we can think of this as, first, the emergence of international tensions between two or more states, followed by a response by the threatened states and/or their allies, followed by further escalation on the part of the parties to the dispute, followed by further intra-alliance negotiation, and so on. In the process, states are also likely to put their domestic houses in order by mobilizing public support and sidelining officials who disagree with expanding a confrontation with an opponent or deepening allied support. During and after the Cold War, for instance, the United States and its allies crafted a number of institutional pathways whereby, if and when tensions with the Soviet Union heated up, NATO members would be able to consult, coordinate, and graduate responses to Soviet moves and countermoves; thus, even if states are not entrapped into a war that policymakers decry as against their interests, the conflict itself may still witness entrapment as states are pushed by allies to fight at particular times and places, and for certain objectives, that they would otherwise avoid – entrapment can shape the nature of state participation in conflicts even without causing the underlying source of confrontation. Ultimately, if an ally acts in a way that forces the state to alter its behavior in a costly and meaningful way, then it is reasonable to conclude that the state was entrapped by the actions of its ally.

Accordingly, entrapment is both more likely to occur and more likely to be clearly manifested on finer-grained inter-allied decisions related to the use of force both before and during a conflict. These “entrapment dynamics” reflect the fact that allies, even if they share similar preferences on which other states in the international system need to be opposed – and thus on whether war may be necessary – can still share divergent preferences over the nature of that opposition. More precisely, allies can differ profoundly across three key areas related to the use of force, namely (1) the timing of a war against a common threat, (2) the goals of that conflict, and (3) the relative size and nature of the contributions each state makes in the course of a conflict. Since allied preferences can diverge over these issues even though states value the alliance itself, they create propitious conditions for allies to entrap one another into fighting wars at times, in support of objectives, and with greater contributions over which they disagree with their partners. In short, by breaking war down into these different elements, entrapment becomes evident at different levels aside from the largest question of whether a state was drawn into a war it would otherwise have preferred to avoid. We treat each issue in turn.

Timing entrapment

Timing entrapment refers to a situation where members of an alliance disagree over the optimal moment at which to confront a common opponent. Weaker members of an alliance, for example, may feel proportionally more threatened by an adversary at an earlier date than proportionally stronger members of an alliance, and so be more inclined than stronger members of an alliance to adopt hardline policies that increase the likelihood of war at an earlier date. Likewise, unsettled domestic politics may give some members of an alliance incentive to go to war sooner than its allies prefer if a ruling coalition seeks to resolve an external threat but fears being turned out of office before its allies are prepared for joint action. Under these circumstances, even if Ally A would eventually be willing to fight alongside Ally B against a common opponent, B may initiate the conflict at a time that state A finds unattractive. Put differently, Ally A left to its own devices, might prefer to continue balancing an external threat without resorting to war, feeling it has the capacity to wait or hoping that war can be avoided through deterrence or a negotiated settlement; nevertheless, Ally B may behave in ways that make war more likely in the short term for fear that time is no longer on its side and, even if war came in the future, its ability to obtain desired ends would no longer be feasible.

States seeking to entrap partners into conflict at times when its partners would rather avoid it can do so in a number of ways. Some states, for instance, may spoil negotiations with an opponent designed to settle outstanding disputes so that a diplomatic standoff festers or escalates. More directly, other states may engage in provocative behavior over disputed issues designed to trigger an attack by an opponent that merits a response. And, in extremis, states can simply begin hostilities despite allied opposition, thereby “daring” its partners not to back it up. In all these situations, Ally A is then faced with the choice of either being drawn into an escalating crisis or war, or abandoning B. When A chooses to support, entrapment occurs. To not act, despite the ill-advised timing of B’s provocations, would potentially leave B weakened and vulnerable to a defeat in the face of a seemingly pressing threat that, in the end, may be far worse for State A.

As an example of timing entrapment, consider the case of Austro-German relations before 1914. By most accounts, Austria-Hungary wanted to punish Serbia for its role in assassinating Austro-Hungarian Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand, but was unwilling to do so at the risk of war with Russia (Serbia’s principal ally) at that particular moment. However, Germany – Austria-Hungary’s own powerful patron – saw a closing window of opportunity for a continental war that would help settle European great power relations once and for all; 1914 was the last, best opportunity for

Germany to strike and, since Austria-Hungary was relatively weak without German backing, it could not easily afford to ignore German demands. Accordingly, as the July 1914 crisis escalated, Germany pushed Austria-Hungary to reject Serbian-Russian proposals that would settle the growing diplomatic crisis. The resulting negotiating failure – spoiled by Germany – saw Austria-Hungary entrapped into a general European war that few Austrian leaders wanted (Stone 1966; Copeland 2000).

Goal entrapment

The second type of entrapment is goal entrapment. Ally A may be willing to fight alongside Ally B, but the two states may diverge in their preferences for the goals and terms for settling any resulting war. This can occur through two different pathways. First, if Ally A has more modest goals than Ally B, A may become entrapped in the more ambitious goals of its ally once a war begins simply by B's refusal to end a conflict when A desires. In this situation, A's only alternative is to abandon its ally, a risky proposition in the middle of war that raises the possibility of battlefield defeat and political infighting between A and B that would render the entire war effort for naught. Again, entrapment dynamics extend beyond a simple decision about whether to go to war on behalf of an ally or not, to the ways in which the subsequent conflict is resolved.

The US intervention in Vietnam illustrates this type of entrapment. At various stages of the conflict, the US favored a diplomatic resolution and entered into serious negotiations designed to settle the dispute. A negotiated settlement, however, repeatedly proved anathema to the United States' South Vietnamese ally – seeking to minimize the possibility of North Vietnamese and Communist involvement after hostilities ended, South Vietnam repeatedly engaged in diplomatic obfuscation and battlefield aggression to scuttle peace talks. Facing an ally that refused to settle on its terms, the US faced the difficult decision of remaining in Vietnam and fighting, or withdrawing and risking its ally's likely defeat. Ultimately and repeatedly, the United States chose to sustain and expand its support even when its goals and those of its allies no longer agreed.

Second, and closely related, one ally may entrap another by expanding the scope of a conflict. In wartime, it is possible that Ally B might seek postwar gains and so carry a war into new venues or geographic areas. This move risks entrapping Ally A, as failure to back B may result in B's defeat, the loss of crucial resources, and opening up inter-allied political fissures that may dissolve the alliance in the midst of a fight. During World War II, for instance, many US military leaders felt that British calls for an American landing in North Africa – where British forces were already fighting Axis troops – constituted a British effort at entrapping the United States into helping Britain maintain its colonial footholds in Africa and the Middle East.

Means entrapment

Finally, means entrapment describes a situation in which Ally A is maneuvered by Ally B into committing more resources or types of resources to an intervention than it otherwise desires. This is distinct from goal entrapment: even if A and B agree on their strategic objectives, B may still end up entrapping A into a costlier commitment than intended by underproviding the capabilities required and requiring A to make up the difference. This situation can either be intentional – where B withholds available resources from a contest in order to deploy them elsewhere and/or shift the burden onto its partners – or unintentional – where B underestimates the capabilities required to achieve a specified end and, lacking the requisite resources, turns to A. In either case, A is compelled to intervene for fear of harming the alliance's credibility, prestige, and future functions. Metaphorically, and occasionally literally, B calls for A's cavalry to ride over the hill to its assistance.

Although poorly catalogued, means entrapment is likely the most common form of entrapment. States, after all, regularly promise one another the military tools required for joint military action, only to change course and leave their partners high and dry. During the opening days of World War I, for example, Austria-Hungary reneged on agreements to deploy most of its forces against Russia while Germany attacked France, exposing Germany to Russian assault and requiring Germany to shift forces to the Eastern Front earlier than intended. Similarly, Soviet and Chinese officials only agreed to back North Korea in the Korean War when assured by North Korea that the contest would be quickly won and limited in scope; when this assumption proved overly optimistic following the American-backed intervention in June 1950, the U.S.S.R. and China were eventually forced to commit their own forces. More recently, meanwhile, the 2011 allied intervention in Libya illustrates the trend. While the US reluctantly agreed to participate in the intervention, it found that its capabilities were increasingly necessary for success to be possible in the intervention, as allied forces – which were supposed to dominate the fight – rapidly proved wanting. Once committed, the US was either going to be trapped by its allies' inability to succeed with their own capabilities or escape from that trap and accept the likelihood that the intervention in Libya would fail (even sooner than it failed with US participation). As President Obama has admitted, the US went along grudgingly for fear that the alternative was worse.

Entrapment and strategy

Combined, the net effect of these entrapment dynamics is a situation where states are rarely overtly entrapped into conflicts on behalf of their allies, but are often quietly entrapped by their partners on less obvious strategic issues. Indeed, as Snyder's work implies, states that take on allies have to adjust their strategies to accommodate these allies, and it is on this level that allies gain leverage over one's foreign policy. Rich and powerful states like the United States can often accommodate these strategic adjustments without bankrupting the state or risking war to a needlessly large degree, but the adjustment cost is rarely zero – entrapment still occurs and poses problems. As importantly, even rich and powerful states may confront growing dangers from their commitments over time as (1) opponents mobilize and arm to confront one's own alliance, and (2) states take on more security commitments, thereby exposing themselves to more possible situations that can lead to conflict.

Structure and entrapment

In sum, entrapment is more common than often acknowledged. Its frequency does, however, vary in important ways as the international distribution of power waxes and wanes over time: because different distributions of power influence states' need to balance and opportunities for doing so, whether a system has several, two, or only one great power directly affects the risks of entrapment. As we argue in this section, entrapment of all kinds is most common in multipolar worlds, least common in bipolar settings, and fairly common in unipolar settings. As significantly, entrapment is likely to become increasingly prevalent in unipolarity both the longer unipolarity endures and if unipolarity begins to wane (Morgenthau 1954; Waltz 1979).

Multipolarity

Multipolar systems, where there are several great powers of roughly similar strength such that none is dominant, are the most entrapment-prone. In multipolarity, great powers generally cannot deter or defeat one another through internal means alone – they need allies for a workable balance. Indeed, the

more each state is of similar size and capability, the larger the need for allies. With several states each seeking friends to offset prospective foes, the risks of entrapment increase.

In multipolar systems, two different pathways can lead to conflict. First, states which feel that their alliance affords them an extra margin of security against potential threats – for instance, if two states ally against a third before the third can find its own partners – may be emboldened and engage in reckless behavior that antagonizes other states. As the risk of war increases, allies thus find themselves on the horns of a dilemma: go to war for an ally over the ally's interests, or fail to support the ally and risk the dissolution of the alliance.

Second, entrapment can occur out of fear of abandonment. If one member of an alliance fears that an ally is soon to defect, it might provoke a foreign conflict to forestall the looming vulnerability. In this type of preventive entrapment, the ally considering defection can have these plans scuttled as the new conflict presents it with an unpalatable choice: to defect under such circumstances risks an ally's defeat and the prospect of facing a newly empowered competitor on its own, while to back the ally requires going to war. To return to the World War I case, for example, German leaders worked during the July 1914 crisis to encourage Austria-Hungary opposition to Serbia (and Russia) out of fear that Austrian leaders would opt for a diplomatic settlement rather than war; in effect, Germany entrapped Austria-Hungary into war out of fear that Austria-Hungary would conciliate Serbia rather than sustain Austro-German collaboration.

Bipolarity

Two features of bipolar systems, where two great powers predominate, make them the least likely to see great power entrapment. First, since the two great powers in bipolarity are both significantly stronger than all other states in the system, allies are, generally, not necessary to maintain a balance of power. Allies still have uses, such as aiding one's geographic reach, defraying military costs, expanding one's influence, and helping great powers establish reputations for resolve. Nevertheless, and as Kenneth Waltz (1979) argued long ago, balancing in bipolarity is principally a matter of great powers' internal efforts, as alliances with relatively small states can do little to meaningfully shape the military balance. Second – and as importantly – the fact that the two great powers themselves constitute the clearest threats to one another's security helps focus policymakers' attention and avoid miscalculations over this basic issue: because the costs of conflict with the other side are clear and there is no confusion over which states are one's opponents, the limited importance of allies to great powers' well-being is singularly transparent.

These two factors combine to lower the risk of entrapment. When an ally threatens to ensnare one of the great powers into a conflict with the other great power, the costs of doing so are unambiguously large. Hence, unless the great power seeks war itself, or policymakers are unable or unwilling to take a hard line with client states, it is unlikely to play along. The latter dynamic was regularly on display in the Vietnam War as South Vietnam regularly launched diplomatic and military offensives to scuttle peace talks to settle the conflict, forcing the United States – unwilling to coerce South Vietnamese compliance – to continue fighting. Moreover, even when an ally threatens to ensnare a great power into a conflict in which its great power rival is absent, the great power generally cannot act for fear of diverting finite resources to secondary conflicts and leaving the other great power unchecked. Entrapment is likely in bipolarity only if a great power significantly miscalculates the consequences of backing an ally – but here, given the stakes involved, such miscalculation is unlikely. The Korean War illustrates the point. American policymakers entered the fray partly out of concern that the North Korean invasion of South Korea was directed by the U.S.S.R. to test American willingness and resolve

to defend its allies. Had the United States known that the conflict was not truly part of a Soviet-led offensive against the West, however, it is debatable whether it would have become involved; after all, faced with the option of escalating the conflict by carrying the war into China and inviting Soviet retaliation, American policymakers demurred, with Army Chief of Staff General Omar Bradley remarking that it would be the “wrong war, at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy” (Quoted in Bernstein 1981: 266). Ultimately, bipolarity may encourage a state to act because it thinks its reputation is at stake but, given the stakes involved, these incidents are likely to be fewer and further between than entrapment in other scenarios.

Unipolarity

What of unipolarity, where one power is dominant, as is the case with the United States today? *Prima facie*, entrapment should be extremely rare in unipolarity. Allies are unlikely to materially affect the unipole’s security given the presumed material predominance of a unipolar power; hence, the sole great power around does not need to go to war on its allies’ behalf. If pressed, a unipolar power can simply cut the ally off and treat it as any other state.

On further investigation, however, the uniquely advantageous strategic situation that unipoles find themselves in can paradoxically increase the likelihood of entrapment. Because unipolarity is such an advantageous position for a state, a unipolar power has a powerful temptation to roam the system and prevent other great powers from rising and winnowing down its position. Assuming the unipole will not itself engage in preventive wars to stop future competitors, it can either ally with local actors in order to use them as proxies against a future threat, or ally with a prospective challenger itself in order to influence it (Gavin 2015; Ikenberry 2008). Such behavior may be particularly characteristic of waning unipoles that are increasingly wary of the threat posed by other rising great powers.

Both options allow the unipole’s allies to gain leverage over its foreign policy, and therefore risk entrapment. In the first case, the unipole may need to back up allies in their disputes with other relatively small states in order to ensure their help against the prospective challenger. In the latter case, the unipole may need to work at the prospective challenger’s behest to keep the potential challenger from opposing the unipole’s dominance. In either case, shifting power can lead to a unipole’s entrapment. On one level, shifting power dynamics can increase an ally’s leverage over a unipole’s foreign policy. In particular, if a unipole is on the verge of seeing its dominance disappear altogether, allies take on a growing importance in helping slow or stop the rise of new peer competitors. Hence, any given ally can threaten to defect from the unipole’s coalition and hinder the unipole’s ability to address the looming threat unless the waning unipole fights on behalf of the ally. Put differently, a prospective challenger’s threat of defection may undermine a unipole’s dominance, making costly sacrifices for an ally more attractive than would otherwise be the case. The more a unipole seeks to prevent the rise of new great powers – something most unipoles want – the greater the risk of entrapment (Monteiro 2014).

Shifting power also increases the risk of moral hazard – a situation in which an actor behaves recklessly, knowing that they have an insurance policy that will cover any losses they incur. In the case of alliance politics, smaller allies may act aggressively if they know that their more powerful ally will come to their aid. Because some allies are uniquely powerful or important to their partners, many security commitments can end up being disproportionate to the threat they address. Though any alliance can face moral hazard problems – witness American concerns over European recklessness during the Cold War – they are likely to be particularly problematic in unipolar settings. Because unipoles are uniquely powerful, the security commitments they hold exist in the absence of a

compelling military threat to the unipole itself. However, the same may not apply for the unipole's allies. For them, the international system remains a competitive environment in which other states may challenge their security and other interests. This asymmetry is asking for trouble. For a unipole's allies, the best way to guarantee victory in any conflict is to ensure the unipole enters the contest on their behalf. In this sense, an alliance with a unipole is the best kind of insurance policy, Allies of a unipole have strong incentives to lie, cheat, and steal to convince a unipole to come to their aid. Because the unipole itself may see through the smokescreen, they also have incentives to manipulate events to force a unipole's hand.

In turn, shifts in power increase the unipole's exposure to moral hazard. Because power shifts can also work to the disadvantage of a unipole's allies and – crucially – are likely to affect their security *earlier* than they affect a unipole's security, the risks of an ally seeking to cash in the unipole's insurance policy loom large. That is, since a unipole's allies are unlikely to want to wait for a power shift to occur before the unipole comes to their aid, they have reason both to try to convince the unipole that a rising state endangers international security and to create a situation that buttresses this line of reasoning. The goal of such efforts is to increase the value of the alliance to the unipole and short-circuit the unipole's own calculations regarding the distribution of power. Moral hazard and power shifts can thus create a vicious cycle.

TABLE 2.1 Entrapment in different distributions of power

| <i>Multipolarity</i> | <i>Bipolarity</i> | <i>Unipolarity</i> |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Risk of entrapment: large | Risk of entrapment: small | Risk of entrapment: medium |
| Mechanisms: | Mechanism: | Mechanisms: |
| - Emboldenment | - Miscalculation | - Forestalling the rise of peer competitors |
| - Preventive action | | - Moral hazard |

The United States, the unipolar era, and the risk of entrapment

The preceding discussion (summarized in [Table 2.1](#)) has large implications for the United States. During the Cold War, bipolarity constrained the importance of allies, limiting the risk of entrapment. Moreover, the prospect of nuclear war discouraged risky behavior by the superpowers and their allies. Today, however, the risk of entrapment born of moral hazard and states' search for security is larger and possibly increasing. As long as the US continues to make commitments overseas and fear the emergence of a peer competitor, American partners will be tempted to act in risky ways, expecting that Washington will feel compelled to come to their rescue should they get into trouble.

Insofar as the United States opposes Chinese or Russian aggression, smaller states will be tempted to provoke China or Russia to garner growing American support. If the United States is opposed to the emergence of great power peer competitors, then it may well opt to come to the aid of smaller states threatened by those potential competitors. This also means that countries that have limited or no explicit security commitments from the United States may try to profit from the insurance policy offered by the United States by provoking conflicts and expecting the United States – whose interests are clear – to ride to their defense.

In the next section, we take a preliminary look at some evidence to test these claims. We focus on events in East and Southeast Asia over the last few years. Some have characterized Chinese aggression in recent years as reactionary. That is, China has felt compelled to respond to perceived provocations

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from smaller Asian nations such as the Philippines and Vietnam. Even though the US does not have formal security commitments to either country, Washington subsequently feels compelled to signal to these countries that it will stand up to Chinese aggression.

China, Asia, and the risks of entrapment

Recent events in Asia illustrate the logic of our argument. Though China has certainly not been innocent in recent events, US alliance politics helped spur tension in Southeast and East Asia. As Thomas Christensen writes, “Beijing – with a few important exceptions – has been reacting, however abrasively, to unwelcome and unforeseen events that have often been initiated by others” (Christensen 2015: 265). Short of this position, one might also see Chinese behavior as part and parcel of a burgeoning insecurity spiral as Chinese actions beget Japanese, Filipino, and Vietnamese reactions, and vice versa. The key here is not who is to blame but how alliance politics factors into the recent escalation of tensions.

Entrapment has contributed to rising tensions between the United States and China. There are two aspects to this dynamic. First, and since the end of the Cold War, the United States has been worried about China’s potential power and uncertain long-term intentions. This concern has only grown over time, to the point where many policymakers and some analysts worry China may be emerging as a regional hegemon (Legro 2007). Though American policymakers offered lip service throughout the 1990s to the notion of reassuring all states – including China – in the post-Cold War era, when forced to choose the United States has long prioritized backing other countries against China. For evidence, one need only look at the US decision to retain the US–Japanese alliance after 1991 while quickly forgetting that China itself served as a *de facto* ally against the U.S.S.R. (Christensen 2006). More importantly, countries like Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam are aware of the American preference. Towards the end of the 2000s and in the early 2010s, this knowledge afforded East Asian elites a tool with which to pressure the United States to become more involved, both diplomatically and militarily, in East Asia (Bader 2012).

Early in the Obama administration, for example, a meeting of US and Japanese policymakers and analysts saw Japanese delegates voice concerns that the United States was not keeping pace with the rise of China amid broader concerns over “how the US would respond in the event of an attack against Japan.” One Japanese commentator went so far as to bluntly warn that “US naval [sic] is losing preponderance in the western Pacific” and allowing China to expand its sphere of influence; another implicitly underlined the United States’ own need for Japanese help against China, arguing that “The nature of relations that US has with China and Japan are very different [...] It is important that the US not appear to be conceding too much, or siding with China too deeply, especially in the area of its military buildup” (Glosserman 2009).

South Korean officials voiced similar concerns, arguing that US military commitments elsewhere might diminish the US presence on the Korean Peninsula at a time when there was a real need to “deter Chinese intervention” in the area (Korea Society-Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center 2008). Vietnamese leaders expressed interest in cooperating with the United States at a time when concern with the P.R.C. was growing; Malaysian leaders did the same (Qiang 2015; Manyin 2014; Kuik 2013). The Australian Ministry of Defense noted in its 2009 Defence White Paper that American commitments elsewhere might leave the US ability to project power in Asia “constrained,” pushing the United States “to seek active assistance from regional allies and partners,” at a time when Australia itself saw its security “best underpinned by the continued presence of the United States” (Australian Government Department of Defense 2009: 33, 43; Dewar undated). Association of Southeast Asian

Nations (ASEAN) Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan told then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her first overseas trip that, “Your visit shows the seriousness of the United States to end its diplomatic absenteeism in the region” (Manyin 2014).

Asian policymakers were simply doing what was eminently reasonable from their perspective: seeking firmer US security guarantees as the distribution of power moved against them. The consequence of doing so, however, was to enmesh the United States into simmering regional conflicts. Questions over American credibility in Asia played a major role in spurring what we now know as “the pivot” or “rebalance” to the region, as policymakers reacted to the perception that “a lack of diplomatic focus had not been good for the region” (Quoted in Hemmings 2013; see also Obama 2011; Murphy 2014; Manyin et al. 2012). As Assistant Secretary of State Kurt Campbell explained, the pivot was only partly driven by objective shifts in the distribution of power brought about by China’s economic and military rise. More important was the perception that the United States needed to “provide reassurance of its lasting commitment” to East Asia. And here, the “first priority” involved “strengthen[ing] the US alliances that are the foundation of [US] engagement in the region” – in other words, reacting to allied concerns over American credibility in the face of a rising China and a sense of American disengagement (Campbell and Andrews 2013). Then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton echoed this theme in a prominent 2011 article, noting at a time when states were asking whether the United States could “make – and keep – credible economic and strategic commitments” that the turn to Asia was an unequivocal statement that it could and would (Clinton 2011). President Obama sought to link the pivot to allied concerns, explaining when announcing the policy that while some countries “have wondered about America’s commitment” to protecting the status quo in East Asia, the United States was wedded to doing so and would refocus on cooperating with allies to achieve its desired ends (Obama 2011). Allied questions over American credibility, in sum, drove the United States to signal renewed diplomatic and military attention to Asia.

To be sure, the United States has an interest in East Asian stability and may well want to prevent China from dominating Asia. However, these goals themselves can be achieved through a variety of means, not all of which involve buttressing allies. In fact, allies in the late 2000s voiced concern that the United States would pursue its own interests by directly collaborating with China in a “G-2” condominium that would isolate and ignore traditional American allies (Bush 2011). Instead, the substance, the timing, and the subsequent evolution of the pivot cannot be explained without addressing the role of allied pressures – all of which amounts to American entrapment.

Since its 2010–2011 announcement, the pivot has inserted the United States into a host of Asian political and military disputes with China involving ownership of contested maritime space and islands in the South and East China Seas. Though there may be economic resources beneath the surface around some of these locales, neither the United States nor its allies have an intrinsic interest in ownership of contested areas. Instead, the contested maritime domains are worrisome to US allies for what they suggest about China’s territorial ambitions. They are therefore important to the United States for the signal American actions send to allies over American credibility. Thus, the United States has moved to back its allies in their disputes with the P.R.C. by rhetorically portraying China as the principal aggressor, clarifying that US commitments to the allies would cover the maritime areas under dispute, and – above all – has dispatched its own military forces to enforce what the US and its allies define as the “status quo” in contravention of China’s own interests (Russell 2014; White House 2014; US Pacific Command 2015; Valencia 2016; LaGrone 2015; Panda 2016). Whatever the legitimacy of these actions, their effect is to create a self-perpetuating cycle: the more the United States stands by its allies in opposing potential Chinese ambitions, the nominally more credible the American resolve to defend its allies, the more the allies are inclined to act aggressively toward China,

and the greater the likelihood of a direct US–Chinese confrontation. In other words, treating American support for its allies as a litmus test of the alliances themselves requires the United States to take steps on behalf of its allies that risk conflict with China.

This is entrapment of the purest sort. The United States could readily provide security to its friends in East Asia, maintain Asia’s political status quo, or more generally limit the rise of China without involving itself in Asian maritime disputes. To the extent that the United States simply wants to preserve East Asian stability, it could negotiate directly with the P.R.C. to settle conflicts of interest on a bilateral basis. To the extent that the United States wants to prevent China from becoming an Asian hegemon or engaging in military action beyond its borders, it could simply surge forces to the region as crises develop or build up the military forces of its clients (Itzkowitz Shifrinson and Lalwani 2014; Glaser 2015; Mirski 2013). That these options are treated as insufficient suggests entrapment at play. Even if protecting Japan, South Korea, and other regional partners is in the United States’ interest, only entrapment explains the timing and form of the American response.³

The second driver of entrapment comes from the response by East Asian countries themselves. It will be some time before we have detailed evidence on what was said to whom that convinced the Obama administration to pivot to East Asia. Nevertheless, the East Asian response since 2010–2011 suggests that moral hazard is increasing risks for the United States. One of the most striking trends in East Asia since the pivot is the renewed assertiveness of East Asian states in dealing with China (Johnston 2013; Associated Press 2015). This trend includes independent action by the Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, and other military forces to take a forward-leaning stance on maritime disputes that, at minimum, helps to justify a Chinese response. Japan, Korea, and others lobbied for the pivot for the express purpose of having the United States help them manage the rise of China – the implication being that, without an active American role, they would either bandwagon with China or engage in increasingly aggressive policies with a large risk of war.

As things stand, East Asia is already witness to an arms race and militarized interstate disputes: Japan is taking increasing military measures to confront Chinese incursions into the disputed Senkakus, including regularly confronting Chinese aircraft flying over the disputed region (Gady 2015; Reuters 2016a; Kazianis 2016; Reynolds 2015); Vietnam and the Philippines have grown increasingly willing to confront China in the South China Sea while deepening military ties with other countries challenged by China (Torode 2015; Vietnam Right Now 2015; Bowcott 2015; Reuters 2016b); and even Australia – which has no maritime disputes with China – has taken to militarily challenging Chinese maritime claims (Defense News 2015; News.com.au 2015). Independently, none of these countries (except perhaps Japan) has the wherewithal to defeat China. These actions are almost certainly born of the expectation that the United States will come to their aid if a dispute escalates to war.⁴ Thus, unless the pivot has had no effect on allied behavior, then its main influence has been to (1) avoid bandwagoning, but (2) allow the very assertiveness the United States nominally sought to avoid in the first place! To put the issue differently, the claims employed by Asian allies and partners to push what became the pivot strongly suggest that it encouraged their over-assertiveness. This is moral hazard: take away the United States’ post-pivot policy, and the East Asian allies would almost certainly not be tilting with China to the same extent. Some smaller allies, in fact, might bandwagon altogether. If so, this suggests the extent to which entrapment dynamics are at play.

In sum, entrapment is alive and well in terms of both the arguments employed and the policies adopted by the United States and its allies since the late 2000s. No war has occurred, but crises are ongoing, and the intensity of American backing for its East Asian clients is growing. This is a recipe for miscalculation. As American forces continue to move into the region, as American diplomacy continues to take an anti-China flavor, and as allies simultaneously spur and build upon these trends,

the United States is approaching active involvement in the wrong conflicts, at the wrong time, and in the wrong place. The United States has an interest in maintaining Japan and other major states as independent actors friendly to the United States, noting their particular island disputes with China. Entrapment is alive and well as the United States mistakes the latter for the former. And, importantly, even if the United States decides at some point that conflict with China is necessary to protect its national interests, the US could still be entrapped by its allies into fighting that conflict at an unwelcome time with unattractive goals and using extraordinary means. In short, the US need not be drawn into a wholly unwelcome war for entrapment to nonetheless occur.

Conclusion

Existing studies of entrapment have not appreciated the degree to which the risks of entrapment vary based on the structure of the international system and the threats that states face. They also have failed to recognize that entrapment appears in more forms than simply the question of whether a state gets drawn into an unwanted war. A more comprehensive theory will explain both why the risks of entrapment were relatively low during the bipolar Cold War and why they are now relatively high in the unipolar post-Cold War era. In contrast to those who see little risk in the continuation and expansion of American security commitments around the world, the logic of our argument suggests that the risks of entrapment are considerable at the moment. For the United States, a more restrained grand strategy would reduce the risk of all kinds of entrapment.

Notes

- 1 Indeed, even at the height of international tensions during and immediately after World War II, American strategy debates turned largely on whether and to what extent the United States should ally with other countries (Stoler 2003; Ireland 1981).
- 2 Some might contend that only formal treaty commitments constitute an “alliance,” while less-formal commitments are part of a more nebulous “alignment” category. This position is patently absurd, as a brief example illustrates: the United States has formal treaty commitments with nearly every state in South and Latin America, yet lacks a formal alliance with Israel. Israel, however, receives billions of dollars in annual military assistance and enjoys among the strongest diplomatic relations of any state with the US government; conversely, not only do a host of South and Latin American states enjoy little American military largesse, but US relations with such “treaty allies” as Bolivia, Cuba, and Venezuela have often been strained (sometimes in the extreme). Clearly, politically meaningful alliances exist irrespective of the formal or informal nature of the interstate cooperation. For US treaty allies, see Department of State (2016).
- 3 An exchange between Senator Lindsey Graham and PACOM Head Admiral Samuel Locklear captured the extent to which less-assertive policies are constrained by alliance politics:

LOCKLEAR: I think any signal that we send that we’re less interested in the Asia-Pacific on the security side than we currently are would be an invitation for change in the region, and that China would be interested in pursuing.

GRAHAM: Do our allies in the region, are they beginning to hedge their bets? What’s their view toward our footprint and where we’re headed?

LOCKLEAR: Yes. I don’t think they’re necessarily unsatisfied with our military footprint. I think what they’re concerned about most is the growing divide between what they see as the economics in our gravity, which is predominantly Asia or more and more around China, and the securities in our gravity, which is around us. So that creates a conundrum for them as they have to deal with strategic decision-making. You know they want us as a security granter because they believe where we’re – I mean, they see us as a benevolent power. And they like how we operate. But they also see us as a diminished economic power in the region that they have to deal with that.

US Pacific Command (2015); see also the exchange between Graham Allison and Senator Richard Blumenthal in United States Senate Committee on Armed Services (2015).

- 4 The United States has given allies good reason for this. For example, President Obama affirmed in 2014 that the US–Japanese alliance covered disputed territory in the Senkaku Islands, while elsewhere moving to buttress Vietnam via arms sales and military exercises in its disputes with the P.R.C. (see LaGrone 2015; Panda 2014).

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