The Illusion of Permanent Allies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the concept of permanent allies in international politics and explains why it remains a misleading guide. States often speak and act as if alliances reflect shared values, lasting trust, or moral commitment. In practice, alliances persist only as long as they serve concrete interests tied to power, security, and survival. The article argues that the belief in permanent allies obscures how states actually make decisions and leads policymakers to misread shifts in behaviour as betrayal rather than adjustment. Drawing on classical realism, structural realism, and selected historical cases, the paper shows that alliances function as temporary instruments shaped by threat perception, relative power, and domestic constraints. When these conditions change, alliances weaken, realign, or dissolve. The article also addresses how rhetoric, public diplomacy, and institutional frameworks can prolong the appearance of stability even as underlying interests diverge. This gap between language and behaviour creates policy risk, especially for smaller states that anchor their security planning on assumed loyalty from stronger partners. The discussion highlights cases where states maintained formal alliances while acting at cross purposes on trade, security, and regional influence. It also considers moments where rapid realignment occurred without ideological transformation. The article concludes that abandoning the notion of permanent allies improves strategic clarity. Policymakers who plan around interests rather than sentiment reduce surprise, manage expectations, and retain flexibility. The illusion of permanence may offer short-term reassurance, but it weakens long-term strategic judgment.

INTRODUCTION

When we think of alliances between nations, it is easy to imagine something permanent. We picture enduring friendships between countries, forged through shared interests and repeated gestures of trust. Treaties are signed with formal handshakes, military cooperation is announced with great fanfare, and leaders speak publicly of long-standing bonds that will last for generations. These gestures create the impression that once a state commits to an alliance, that commitment will never waver. It is comforting to believe that in an unpredictable world, there are constants we can rely on. Nevertheless, the reality is far more complex. Alliances are never truly permanent. They are fragile, conditional, and deeply influenced by changing interests and circumstances. What appears stable is often sustained by perception, ritual, and the repeated reinforcement of promises rather than by any immutable bond. The human mind craves stability and certainty, and in international politics, alliances provide both. They offer the sense that the world is organised, that threats can be managed collectively, and that there is a structure to the chaos of global affairs. States invest in alliances not only for practical purposes but also to signal continuity. Public ceremonies, annual summits, and repeated affirmations of loyalty serve to create an image of cohesion. These repeated signals convince citizens, leaders, and other states that the alliance is unbreakable. Leaders use this perception strategically. By presenting partnerships as permanent, they reassure allies, deter potential adversaries, and foster trust within the international system of relations. At the same time, alliances exist because they serve practical purposes. States enter them to advance security, economic, and political objectives. The moment these objectives shift, the alliance itself becomes vulnerable. What seems permanent can vanish when strategic priorities change. Nations often stay in alliances long after the original reasons for joining have altered because the perception of permanence creates a sense of stability. This perception is maintained through diplomacy, coordinated action, and the careful management of appearances. People and governments alike find it difficult to imagine that alliances can change quickly, as they have been conditioned to

view them as fixed. The illusion of permanence is reinforced by the way alliances are experienced. They are often obvious and ceremonial, giving a sense of continuity. They are reinforced through shared routines, cooperative programs, and the repeated performance of loyalty. Citizens internalise these symbols and come to believe that these partnerships are as enduring as the nations themselves. Leaders reinforce this belief through public statements, gestures of solidarity, and frequent demonstrations of coordination. In this sense, the stability of alliances is as much a product of social and psychological reinforcement as it is of practical necessity.

This article will attempt to examine why alliances seem permanent while remaining fundamentally contingent. It will explore the structural, strategic, and psychological mechanisms that create the perception of permanence. The discussion will focus on how states maintain the appearance of loyalty, manage trust, and navigate the tension between cooperation and self-interest. By the end, readers will understand that permanence in international alliances is essentially a narrative rather than a fact. Alliances are flexible instruments that reflect changing priorities, yet they are presented as lasting bonds because the world demands the comfort of continuity. Recognising this distinction is crucial for understanding the delicate balance between trust and pragmatism in international politics.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Alliances are central to the study of international relations, and understanding their formation, durability, and fragility requires grounding in theory. The survey of alliances cannot be reduced to lists of treaties or historical cases alone. Theoretical frameworks provide tools to interpret the behaviour of states, the incentives that drive cooperation, and the conditions under which alliances thrive or dissolve. Broadly speaking, three major perspectives dominate scholarly thought on alliances: realism, liberalism, and constructivism. Each offers distinct insights into why states form partnerships, why these arrangements are conditional, and how various drivers, including security, economics, domestic politics, and social norms, interact to shape outcomes. A theoretical foundation situates the study of alliances within broader analytical lenses, allowing for the interpretation of both the apparent stability and the underlying fragility of international partnerships.

The Realist theory has long dominated the study of alliances, rooted in the assumption that international politics is characterised by anarchy. States exist in a system with no overarching authority to enforce rules or guarantee security. In this environment, survival is the paramount goal, and alliances are primarily instruments for balancing power. Realism predicts that states will enter alliances when it serves to counter a common threat or to enhance relative power, but these alliances are inherently conditional (Tabak, 2025). If the danger disappears or a state's power increases to the point that it no longer depends on partners, the logic of self-interest may lead to a recalibration of commitments. Realism highlights three core dynamics of alliance behaviour: balancing, bandwagoning, and shifting coalitions. Balancing occurs when states unite against a rising threat, forming defensive alliances to maintain the status quo. Bandwagoning occurs when states align with a dominant power to share in its benefits and reduce the risk of confrontation. Shifting coalitions emerge when changes in the distribution of power or strategic calculations prompt states to reorient their alliances. From a realist perspective, the perception of permanence in alliances is essentially an illusion, sustained only as long as it aligns with the survival and strategic interests of the member states.

The Liberal theories on the other side offer a complementary perspective, emphasising the role of institutions, interdependence, and norms in shaping the behaviour of alliances. While realism focuses on power and security, liberalism draws attention to the ways that repeated interaction and shared rules can create more enduring cooperation (Freeden, 2024). From this perspective, alliances are not merely temporary instruments for survival, but mechanisms for creating mutual gains, reducing uncertainty, and stabilising expectations. Institutions such as treaty organisations, collective security arrangements, or formalised decision-making bodies help mitigate the inherent uncertainty of an anarchic system (Achen, 2024; Lefebvre, 2024). By establishing rules, procedures, and mechanisms for dispute resolution, alliances can achieve a degree of predictability and continuity. Liberal theory also emphasises economic and domestic drivers: trade interdependence, common regulatory frameworks, and shared political institutions can reinforce alliances by creating mutual incentives for cooperation that extend beyond immediate security concerns (Freedman, 2023). Conditionality remains present, but the liberal lens suggests that alliances can develop resilience through institutionalised norms, transparent procedures, and repeated positive interaction.

Constructivism adds another dimension by highlighting the social and ideational foundations of alliances. Constructivist theory suggests that the behaviour of states is shaped not only by material interests but also by norms, identities, and shared understandings. From this perspective, alliances are partly social constructs, sustained by trust, reputation, and the shared beliefs of the participants (Rachmad, 2025). States form alliances not only because of the material benefits they offer but also because of the expectations, historical experiences, and collective identities that shape their decisions. Constructivism explains why some alliances endure even when immediate strategic incentives weaken, emphasising the role of social and psychological factors in sustaining cooperation. Trust built through repeated interaction, norms of loyalty, and the symbolic value of partnership can reinforce commitments and create a sense of permanence that may not be justified purely by security or economic considerations. Conditionality still exists, but constructivism emphasises that perception, legitimacy, and identity can play a stabilising role in alliance behaviour (William, 2024).

Beyond these core frameworks, supplementary theories offer additional insights into alliance dynamics. Neoclassical realism, for example, combines structural realism with domestic political considerations, arguing that internal factors, such as leadership perception, bureaucratic politics, and societal pressures, influence alliance choices. States are constrained not only by the international system but also by the domestic environment in which foreign policy decisions are made. This perspective helps explain why alliances that seem strategically rational from a structural perspective may be maintained or dissolved for reasons rooted in internal politics. Similarly, rational choice and game-theoretic approaches offer tools for modelling the conditional nature of alliances. These models treat alliances as arrangements based on cost-benefit calculations, where trust, commitment, and cooperation are maintained through repeated interactions and the anticipation of reciprocity. They reinforce the idea that alliances are conditional instruments, existing as long as the expected benefits of participation exceed the costs of defection. Understanding alliance behaviour also requires attention to the drivers that these theories highlight. Security is the primary driver from a realist perspective, as alliances are fundamentally about survival and power balancing. Liberalism emphasises economic interdependence, institutionalised cooperation, and domestic political factors that reinforce alliances beyond immediate threats. Constructivism emphasises the social and psychological dimensions, highlighting trust, reputation, and shared identity as crucial stabilising forces. These drivers operate simultaneously and interact dynamically with one another. A state may join an alliance primarily for security reasons, but domestic political considerations, economic incentives, and social norms can also shape the depth, scope, and durability of its participation. The interplay of these drivers explains why alliances can appear permanent in public perception while remaining fundamentally conditional and adaptable in practice.

The theoretical foundation explains why the perception of permanence can be so compelling. Realist logic suggests that appearances of unity can deter potential adversaries, liberal theory underscores the reinforcing effects of institutions and norms, and constructivist perspectives highlight the role of trust and identity in sustaining cooperation. Together, these lenses show that permanence is often as much a product of perception, repetition, and signalling as it is a reflection of underlying material interests. Alliances persist not because they are guaranteed to endure but because states actively maintain the narrative of cohesion through diplomacy, ritual, and repeated coordination. At the same time, all three perspectives recognise the inherent contingency of alliances, reminding scholars and practitioners that change is always possible when interests diverge, circumstances shift, or trust erodes.

A theoretical understanding of alliances integrates insights from realism, liberalism, and constructivism, complemented by domestic and rationalist approaches. Alliances are agreements rooted in reciprocity and mutual benefit, yet they are conditional instruments shaped by security concerns, economic interests, domestic politics, and social norms. Realism explains their formation as tools of survival and power balancing. Liberalism emphasises institutions, interdependence, and the potential for durable cooperation. Constructivism draws attention to trust, identity, and shared expectations. Together, these frameworks illuminate both the appearance of permanence and the underlying fragility of alliances. Recognising the theoretical foundations of alliance behaviour enables one to interpret the complex, dynamic, and often paradoxical nature of international partnerships, providing a foundation for analysing how and why states cooperate in a world defined by uncertainty, contingency, and the ever-present pursuit of national interests.

Historical Patterns

The post-Cold War era brought profound changes to the landscape of alliances, illustrating once more the contingent and dynamic nature of partnerships between states. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991,

the bipolar structure that had dominated global politics for nearly half a century dissolved, giving way to a more complex and fluid international system. For decades, alliances had been mainly framed around the threat of ideological and military confrontation between East and West (Grajewski, 2022). The collapse of one pole of the system challenged the rationale for many existing arrangements, forcing states to reassess the benefits of traditional alignments and seek new partnerships that reflected emerging strategic realities. NATO, for example, transformed from a purely defensive alliance against the Soviet threat into a more flexible security organisation, expanding its reach into Eastern Europe and assuming roles in peacekeeping, crisis management, and collective security beyond its original mandate. The shift illustrates the central lesson of historical patterns: alliances endure only so long as they continue to serve the interests of their members, and even longstanding agreements require adaptation to remain relevant. At the same time, the post-Cold War period witnessed the rise of regional coalitions and strategic partnerships that emphasised economic cooperation, political stability, and collective security in response to localised threats. In East Asia, for instance, states sought both bilateral and multilateral partnerships to manage economic interdependence, territorial disputes, and security concerns. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) exemplifies the blend of formal and informal alliance structures that characterise modern diplomacy. ASEAN's approach emphasises dialogue, consensus-building, and collective engagement while allowing member states considerable autonomy in managing their own security and foreign policies. Here, alliance behaviour is shaped by pragmatism and the interplay of multiple factors: security, economic interests, and trust in shared norms and institutional frameworks. The conditionality observed across history persists, but it operates within a more sophisticated institutional setting, allowing states to coordinate action while maintaining flexibility.

In the Middle East, the post-Cold War environment produced a particularly vivid illustration of alliance fluidity. Traditional alignments, often rooted in Cold War patronage or sectarian dynamics, underwent significant shifts in response to changing regional power distributions, the rise of non-state actors, and evolving domestic priorities (Lemmons, 2025). States frequently recalibrated partnerships based on immediate threats, economic opportunities, and strategic ambitions. This environment highlights a recurring historical pattern: alliances are rarely fixed or permanent, and the perception of stability often conceals an underlying reality of continuous negotiation and recalibration. The Middle East also demonstrates that partnerships are multidimensional. They can be driven by security concerns, economically motivated, ideologically aligned, or shaped by historical ties, and states may participate simultaneously in overlapping networks of cooperation that are sometimes complementary and at other times contradictory.

Africa provides another eye-opening example of shifting alliance patterns in the post-Cold War era. Regional organisations such as the African Union (AU) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have sought to foster cooperative security arrangements to address civil conflict, insurgency, and cross-border instability. However, alliances within the continent remain highly contingent, influenced by the balance of power, economic considerations, domestic politics, and external interventions. States may form coalitions temporarily to address immediate security challenges or political crises. Still, the durability of these alliances depends on shared interests, the distribution of resources, and the perception of mutual benefit. Historical patterns show that even when institutional structures exist to facilitate cooperation, states maintain flexibility, adjusting commitments as circumstances change.

In Europe, the post-Cold War period also saw the evolution of alliances to accommodate both continuity and transformation. NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the integration of former Warsaw Pact states illustrate how alliances adapt to new strategic environments. While the organisation provided continuity of commitment among long-standing members, it also reflected the conditional nature of partnerships. Expansion was contingent upon the perceived security needs of member states, their willingness to integrate former adversaries, and the alignment of political, economic, and military interests. The European Union, though primarily an economic and political union, also highlights the interplay between formalised institutions and flexible partnerships (Del Sarto & Lecha, 2024). Its collective security initiatives, coordination on external policy, and development of defence cooperation illustrate that alliances in modern Europe combine stability, institutionalisation, and the enduring possibility of realignment when interests diverge.

The turn of the twenty-first century further emphasised the conditionality and pragmatism inherent in alliances. Globalisation, technological change, and the rise of new powers contributed to a multipolar system in which states constantly evaluate both traditional and emerging partnerships. The U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan and

Iraq exemplifies the formation of alliances centred on specific operational objectives rather than enduring bonds. States joined and left these coalitions based on domestic political considerations, strategic calculations, and assessments of costs and benefits. Similarly, in the Asia-Pacific region, states pursue overlapping security arrangements, such as U.S. bilateral alliances with Japan, South Korea, and Australia, alongside multilateral frameworks like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue. Each partnership responds to the specific strategic and political environment while remaining conditional on shared perceptions of threat and mutual advantage. The patterns here mirror those seen across history: alliances are flexible, contingent, and continuously recalibrated in response to the evolving context. Contemporary patterns continue to show the roles of non-state actors, economic interdependence, and emerging technologies in shaping alliance behaviour. Cybersecurity threats, energy security concerns, and trade disruptions compel states to engage in temporary or issue-specific alliances, further illustrating that the concept of a permanent partnership is largely aspirational. States frequently balance multiple overlapping networks of cooperation, prioritising different dimensions depending on immediate needs. Historical continuity is evident in the persistence of specific patterns: states remain pragmatic, evaluate partnerships based on perceived benefits, and manage alliances through signalling, diplomacy, and institutional frameworks. However, the post-Cold War environment adds complexity, as economic, technological, and transnational factors supplement traditional military considerations. Throughout these periods, a consistent theme emerges: alliances are instruments of interest, rather than immutable bonds. Across centuries, from premodern Europe to contemporary geopolitics, the factors driving alliance behaviour, security, economics, domestic politics, and social norms interact dynamically to shape the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of alliances. Historical patterns reveal that states consistently prioritise survival, advantage, and flexibility. Even when alliances appear enduring, their apparent permanence is often maintained through careful signalling, repeated coordination, and institutional reinforcement, rather than by immutable obligation. History demonstrates that alliances adapt to the prevailing strategic environment, respond to shifts in power, and adjust to changing domestic and international conditions.

The recurring patterns across these periods provide insight into the enduring lessons of alliance behaviour. First, alliances are inherently contingent, reflecting immediate and perceived interests rather than permanent commitment. Second, the appearance of permanence is often a strategic construction, sustained by ritual, signalling, and institutionalisation. Third, alliances are multidimensional, shaped simultaneously by security imperatives, economic incentives, domestic politics, and social or psychological factors. Ultimately, history demonstrates the adaptability of alliances, as states repeatedly recalibrate partnerships, form temporary coalitions, and dissolve agreements when their objectives change. These patterns suggest that while alliances are critical instruments for managing uncertainty and organising cooperation, their continuity can never be assumed. Scholars and policymakers alike must remain attuned to the dynamics of interest, perception, and strategic calculation that govern the formation and evolution of alliances.

The Shifting Alliances of Europe

The decades leading up to World War I are among the most instructive periods for understanding the fragility and conditionality of alliances among great powers. The complex web of treaties, agreements, and understandings that defined Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries vividly illustrates how alliances can appear permanent while remaining highly contingent, shifting in response to strategic calculations, domestic politics, and the perception of threats (Angell, 2022). The Triple Alliance, comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, and the Triple Entente, formed by Britain, France, and Russia, were not static blocs. Instead, they represented dynamic configurations of interest, vulnerability, and strategic ambition that ultimately shaped the course of global conflict. By examining these alliances, one can observe the interplay of security, economic, and political drivers that explain why alliances form, endure, and sometimes collapse.

The origins of the Triple Alliance can be traced back to Germany's strategic concerns in the decades following its unification in 1871. Under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck, Germany sought to secure its position in Europe by carefully managing the European balance of power. Bismarck understood that Germany, situated between France and Russia, faced a potentially hostile strategic environment. France, still resentful over its defeat in the Franco-Prussian War and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, continued to pose a persistent threat. At the same time, Russia's size and potential influence in Eastern Europe posed long-term uncertainties. To manage these risks, Germany pursued a policy of forming binding alliances that would isolate potential adversaries and deter conflict. The Triple Alliance, formalised in 1882, brought together Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy, each of

which had overlapping interests: Germany sought security against France, Austria-Hungary desired support in its Balkan ambitions, and Italy aimed to consolidate its position in the Mediterranean and counter French influence. The conditionality of this alliance became evident in its early years. Italy, while formally committed, had historically been at odds with Austria-Hungary over territorial claims in the Tyrol and along the Adriatic coast. Italy's participation was therefore contingent upon the perception that Germany and AustriaHungary would support its ambitions or at least not obstruct them. The alliance was maintained through repeated signalling of commitment, joint military planning, and a careful balancing of competing interests. However, the Tripartite Pact was never a guarantee of unwavering loyalty. Germany and Austria-Hungary were aware that Italian alignment could shift if circumstances changed, particularly if Italian national interest suggested a different path. The alliance, while formal and public, relied on calculated self-interest and continuous diplomatic management rather than inherent trust.

Across Europe, the other great powers responded to the formation of the Triple Alliance by seeking their own configurations of strategic security. France, still haunted by the loss to Germany, pursued rapprochement with Russia, which sought allies against potential German expansion. Britain, though historically less bound by formal alliances on the continent, grew increasingly concerned about Germany's rising industrial and naval power. This led to the gradual formation of the Triple Entente, formalised in the early twentieth century, linking Britain, France, and Russia through a series of agreements and understandings rather than a single treaty. The Entente was remarkable in that it represented a convergence of interest among powers with historically divergent priorities. For Britain, it was a pragmatic adjustment to the rise of Germany and the perceived threat to its naval dominance. For France, it was a means of deterring German aggression and securing its position against a potential two-front conflict. For Russia, the Entente offered support against Austria-Hungary and a mechanism to consolidate influence in the Balkans. The formation of the Triple Entente demonstrates the conditional nature of alliances among great powers. Unlike the Triple Alliance, which was formalised in a single treaty, the Entente relied on overlapping agreements, regular consultations, and shared strategic calculations. Its durability depended on the alignment of immediate interests rather than institutional enforcement. Each member could, theoretically, abandon the partnership if circumstances suggested that doing so would better serve national objectives. The Entente demonstrates that alliances can be as much about signalling and managing perception as they are about binding commitments. By presenting a united front, Britain, France, and Russia sought to deter Germany and stabilise the balance of power. However, the alignment was contingent on shared perceptions of threat and the belief that cooperation was advantageous.

The early twentieth century, however, exposed the limitations of these great power alliances. While both the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente appeared solid on paper, their coherence was continually tested by regional crises, domestic politics, and the ambitions of smaller states. The Balkans, in particular, became a crucible for testing alliances. Austria-Hungary's ambitions in the region, combined with Slavic nationalism and Russian support for Serbia, created recurring flashpoints. Germany's support for Austria-Hungary in these crises was contingent upon its calculation of risk, strategic benefit, and domestic political considerations. Similarly, Britain's and France's willingness to support Russia was influenced by perceptions of threat and the desire to maintain European balance without overcommitting militarily (Del Sarto & Lecha, 2024). These examples underscore the central lesson of alliance theory: commitments are conditional, contingent upon the alignment of strategic interests, and continuously renegotiated through diplomatic engagement. By the eve of World War I, the conditional nature of the alliances had become increasingly evident. Italy, still technically part of the Triple Alliance, began to hedge its commitments, pursuing diplomatic flexibility that would later enable it to join the Entente powers when the war broke out. Britain's obligations within the Entente were deliberately structured to be flexible, reflecting domestic political caution and the practical limitations of distant military engagement. Germany's insistence on unconditional support for Austria-Hungary placed tremendous pressure on the alliance system, revealing that rigid expectations could produce instability rather than security (Krainin & Schub, 2021). The outbreak of the war demonstrated that alliances are tools of strategic calculation, not unbreakable bonds. The alignment of interests that had once sustained cooperation quickly shifted as states responded to immediate threats, perceived opportunities, and national imperatives.

The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente also illustrate broader lessons about the interplay of material, domestic, and social drivers in alliance behaviour. Security concerns, particularly fear of aggression and the desire to balance power, were paramount. Economic considerations, such as trade competition and industrial growth, influenced the perception of strategic advantage. Domestic politics influenced leaders' willingness to commit

forces or resources, while social norms and historical narratives provided additional incentives to maintain the appearance of cohesion. Across all these dimensions, alliances were maintained not through inevitability but through continuous assessment, signalling, and negotiation. Historical analysis demonstrates that even among great powers with significant military and economic resources, alliances remain conditional instruments, subject to recalibration when circumstances change. Perhaps most strikingly, the experience of these alliances shows the fragility of perceptions. The appearance of permanence in both the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente fostered overconfidence among the powers and may have contributed to the escalation of tensions that ultimately led to World War I. Each side assumed a degree of stability and reliability that, in practice, proved to be provisional. Diplomatic correspondence, military planning, and public rhetoric all conveyed the impression of unbreakable solidarity, yet the underlying reality was far more fluid. The lesson is clear: alliances, regardless of their apparent strength or formal codification, are ultimately instruments of interest, maintained as long as they continue to serve strategic, political, and economic objectives.

The dissolution and realignment of alliances during and after the war further reinforce this pattern. Italy's shift to join the Entente, the collapse of Austria-Hungary and the German Empire, and the reconfiguration of European diplomacy all illustrate the transient nature of alliances and the primacy of conditionality in state behaviour. Great powers may form elaborate agreements and elaborate plans for mutual support, but these arrangements are never immune to change (Stoler, 2022). Strategic calculation, domestic pressures, regional contingencies, and evolving perceptions of threat all combine to determine the durability of partnerships. History demonstrates that alliances are simultaneously powerful instruments and inherently fragile constructs, whose continuity cannot be assumed but must be actively maintained and constantly recalibrated. The shifting alliances of pre-World War I Europe, exemplified by the Triple Alliance and the Triple Entente, offer profound insight into the conditionality and fragility of great power partnerships. These alliances were formed to address immediate security concerns, deter aggression, and maintain the balance of power; yet, their durability relied on the continuous alignment of interests, strategic calculation, and domestic and social factors. The apparent permanence of these alliances masked the underlying reality of contingency, signalling, and negotiation. Italy's hedging, Britain's cautious commitments, and the crises in the Balkans all underscore that alliances, no matter how formal or seemingly stable, are ultimately instruments of national interest. This case study demonstrates that understanding the behaviour of alliances requires attention to both material and non-material drivers, the interaction of multiple levels of influence, and the recognition that perceived stability is often provisional. The Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, with all their complexities and eventual unravelling, remain a quintessential historical example of the conditional nature of great power alliances and the enduring lessons they offer for the study of international relations.

The Little Entente

The interwar period in Europe offers an instructive perspective on the fragility and conditionality of regional alliances, particularly those formed by smaller states seeking security in a world dominated by great powers. The collapse of empires following World War I led to the creation of new states with acute security concerns. Many of these states faced both external threats from revisionist powers and internal pressures from diverse populations and fragile institutions. In this context, the Little Entente, an alliance among Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia, emerged as a defensive coalition aimed at deterring Hungarian territorial revisionism and preserving the postwar status quo established by the Treaty of Trianon. While the Little Entente presented a unified front against Hungary, its history vividly demonstrates that even small-state alliances are conditional, shaped by shifting interests, regional dynamics, and the constraints imposed by both domestic and international realities. The rise, adaptation, and eventual dissolution of the Little Entente provide critical insight into how smaller states navigate alliances in a world defined by insecurity and uncertainty.

The origins of the Little Entente date back to the post-World War I settlement of Europe. The Treaty of Trianon (1920) had drastically reduced Hungary's territorial extent, granting regions to newly established or expanded states, including Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. While these states gained strategically important territories, Hungary remained a revisionist power intent on reclaiming lost lands. This posed an immediate security threat, particularly for states with limited military capabilities relative to regional rivals. Recognising that unilateral defence against Hungary would be challenging, the three states sought to establish a coalition that would coordinate their military, diplomatic, and political resources. The alliance was formalised in a series of agreements beginning in 1920 and solidified by the early 1920s, combining both security guarantees and mutual

consultation mechanisms. From the outset, the Little Entente was a highly conditional alliance. Each member had different priorities and domestic pressures that shaped its commitment. Czechoslovakia, situated in Central Europe and surrounded by potential threats, was particularly invested in maintaining its containment of Hungary. Romania, with its own territorial acquisitions and a population that included ethnic minorities, sought to secure its borders and ensure that regional revisionism did not spill into its territory. Yugoslavia, newly formed from diverse ethnic groups, aimed to strengthen its legitimacy and secure its northern borders against potential Hungarian claims. The alignment of interests was therefore contingent, dependent on the persistence of a shared perception of threat from Hungary. While all three states benefited from collaboration, the depth and durability of their commitments were constantly evaluated against shifting domestic and regional dynamics. The operation of the Little Entente illustrates the interplay of multiple drivers in alliance behaviour. Security concerns were paramount, but economic and diplomatic factors also played significant roles in shaping the decision. Coordination of military plans, joint exercises, and intelligence sharing strengthened the perception of cohesion, yet resource limitations constrained operational capabilities. Economically, the member states had to manage trade relationships, border infrastructure, and economic integration to facilitate cooperation. Diplomatically, they had to navigate the broader European context, including relations with the League of Nations, France, Britain, and Germany (Choi, Kim & Kim, 2022). Each member sought to maximise security benefits while minimising costs, and this careful balancing of interests highlights the conditionality inherent even in alliances among smaller powers.

The Little Entente's reliance on external guarantees further underscores its contingent nature. France, eager to maintain influence in Central Europe and contain potential German resurgence, provided diplomatic backing and, to some extent, moral support to the alliance. However, this backing was neither unconditional nor robust enough to guarantee absolute security. The reliance on a distant great power meant that the Little Entente had to remain vigilant and self-reliant, constantly recalibrating its strategies and commitments in light of both internal constraints and external uncertainties. In practice, the alliance functioned as a flexible network of cooperation rather than a rigid pact; its members maintained the ability to adjust policies and commitments as circumstances changed, reflecting the pragmatic orientation that has characterised alliances across history. Despite initial successes in deterring Hungarian revisionism and coordinating regional security, the Little Entente's cohesion was repeatedly tested. Hungary's persistent revisionist ambitions, fluctuating domestic politics in the member states, and shifts in the broader European order created stress on the alliance. Political instability within Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, for instance, complicated the management of military commitments and threatened the perception of unity within these countries. Romania, while geographically positioned to contribute significantly to collective defence, occasionally pursued bilateral relationships or national interests that diverged from those of the other members (Crawford, 2024). These tensions reveal that even alliances formed for mutual security by smaller states are vulnerable to domestic pressures and strategic recalibration. The perception of cohesion, although publicly emphasised, depended on continuous negotiation, signalling, and adjustment.

The broader international environment further contributed to the conditionality of the Little Entente. The interwar period was characterised by significant power instability, the rise of revisionist states, and the failure of multilateral institutions, such as the League of Nations, to consistently enforce collective security. Italy's ambitions under Mussolini, Germany's revisionism under the Weimar Republic and later the Nazi regime, and the inconsistent policies of Britain and France all exerted pressure on the alliance. The Little Entente had to navigate these pressures carefully, striking a balance between the desire for regional security and the limitations imposed by external actors (Overy, 2024). The reliance on both internal coordination and external guarantees underscores the multidimensional nature of alliance behaviour, as security, diplomacy, and perception all intersect to shape outcomes. The eventual dissolution and marginalisation of the Little Entente illustrate the fragility of small-state alliances in the face of shifting regional and global dynamics. By the late 1930s, the rise of Germany and Italy, the appeasement policies of France and Britain, and the changing strategic priorities of the member states undermined the alliance's relevance. Czechoslovakia, facing direct threats from Germany, could no longer rely on the military capabilities of Romania or Yugoslavia to provide effective deterrence. Romania and Yugoslavia increasingly pursued national strategies responsive to immediate threats and opportunities, sometimes diverging from the collective objectives of the original coalition. The collapse of the Little Entente underscores the principle that alliances are conditional instruments: they endure only as long as the alignment of interests, perception of threat, and feasibility of cooperation persist. Once these factors shift, even carefully coordinated alliances among smaller powers can unravel.

Several recurring patterns emerge from the history of the Little Entente. First, the alliance demonstrates that the perception of permanence is often maintained through diplomatic signalling, public rhetoric, and coordination rituals, even when underlying conditions are fragile. Second, the alliance illustrates the interplay of domestic, regional, and external factors in shaping commitment and behaviour. Domestic instability, resource constraints, and leadership priorities all influence how small states navigate alliances. Third, the case highlights the limitations of small-state coalitions in the absence of credible external guarantees and sufficient military or economic capacity. Even with shared objectives, conditionality and pragmatism govern decision-making. Ultimately, the experience of the Little Entente underscores a broader historical lesson: alliances are instruments of interest, contingent upon continuous assessment and recalibration in response to changing circumstances. The Little Entente proves the significance of perception and signalling in alliance management. The public display of unity, coordinated diplomatic action, and military planning helped maintain deterrence, even when internal cohesion was less robust than appearances suggested (Johnson & Joiner, 2021). This dynamic reflects a broader truth about alliances: their effectiveness depends not only on material capabilities but also on the perception of credibility, commitment, and coordination. Smaller states, in particular, rely heavily on the symbolic and reputational dimensions of alliance behaviour to maximise security benefits without overextending limited resources.

The Little Entente provides a compelling example of the conditionality of small-state alliances. Formed to deter Hungarian revisionism and protect the territorial gains of the post-World War I settlement, the alliance initially succeeded in coordinating security and diplomatic action. However, shifting domestic, regional, and international conditions gradually eroded its effectiveness, ultimately leading to its marginalisation and collapse. The case illustrates that alliances, regardless of their size or strategic orientation, are inherently contingent instruments, maintained only as long as they serve the collective and individual interests of member states. Security imperatives, economic considerations, domestic politics, and external pressures all interact to shape the formation, maintenance, and dissolution of alliances. The Little Entente illustrates that the perception of permanence can mask underlying fragility, and that successful alliance management necessitates continuous negotiation, signalling, and adaptation. For scholars and policymakers, the history of the Little Entente highlights the enduring principle that alliances, whether among great powers or smaller states, are dynamic constructs whose stability is never guaranteed, yet whose management remains crucial to the pursuit of national and collective security.

Mechanisms Of Alliance Erosion

Alliances are often regarded as foundational pillars of international order; however, history repeatedly demonstrates that they are neither permanent nor guaranteed to endure. Even the most robust and seemingly cohesive coalitions, whether among great powers or regional actors, can fracture under the pressure of changing circumstances. Understanding why alliances erode requires attention to multiple mechanisms that interact in complex and often unpredictable ways. Leadership, domestic politics, power asymmetry, and external shocks are among the most salient factors driving the weakening and eventual collapse of alliances. Each operates at different levels of analysis, from individual decision-making to structural systemic pressures, and together they reveal the contingent nature of international cooperation (Alberque & Schreer, 2022). An examination of these mechanisms sheds light on the fragility inherent in alliance structures and provides insight into the recurring patterns that have shaped international relations throughout history.

Leadership is a critical determinant in the formation, maintenance, and erosion of alliances. The vision, perception, and risk appetite of national leaders shape how states interpret threats, perceive opportunities, and allocate resources to cooperative arrangements. Leaders serve as both architects and managers of alliances, crafting agreements, signalling commitment, and coordinating collective action. However, their personal priorities, ideologies, assessments of national interest can also undermine cohesion. Historical examples abound. In the early twentieth century, the leadership of Kaiser Wilhelm II in Germany and Tsar Nicholas II in Russia exemplified how individual decisions and misperceptions can destabilise established arrangements. Wilhelm's aggressive posturing and inconsistent diplomatic messaging strained Germany's relationships within the Triple Alliance, while Nicholas's reactive and sometimes erratic policy decisions influenced the coherence of the Triple Entente. Leadership failures, whether due to overconfidence, misjudgment, or a lack of strategic foresight, can therefore introduce uncertainty and erode trust within alliances. Leadership also shapes the credibility of commitments. Alliance partners rely on the expectation that leaders will uphold agreements and

respond predictably to crises. When leaders signal doubt, hesitation, or self-interest, the perceived reliability of the alliance diminishes, prompting partners to hedge or reconsider participation. This dynamic is evident in both great power and small-state alliances. For example, the Little Entente depended heavily on coordinated decisionmaking among the leaders of Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Yugoslavia. When divergent national priorities or cautious leadership behaviour emerged, the perception of solidarity weakened, reducing deterrence and the effectiveness of collective action. Leadership, therefore, functions not only as a mechanism of alliance formation but also as a potential point of fragility, with personal and political choices cascading into systemic instability.

Domestic politics further complicate alliance stability. Governments operate within political systems, constrained by institutional structures, party politics, public opinion, and elite competition. Alliances that serve elite strategic interests may face resistance from legislatures, political parties, or domestic constituencies, creating friction between international commitments and internal pressures. Domestic political considerations often dictate whether states can or will honour their obligations (Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, 2022). In interwar Europe, Romania and Yugoslavia occasionally recalibrated their commitments to the Little Entente in response to domestic concerns, including public support for national priorities, economic constraints, and political rivalries. Similarly, Italy's defection from the Triple Alliance before World War I reflected domestic calculations about national opportunity, territorial ambitions, and political legitimacy rather than simple betrayal. These examples illustrate that alliances are never insulated from internal dynamics; shifts in leadership, public opinion, or political coalitions can profoundly influence the willingness and ability of states to maintain commitments.

Economic and social pressures within states also play a role. Alliances often require financial investment, mobilisation of military resources, or economic coordination, all of which can strain domestic capacities. When the perceived costs of participation outweigh the benefits, domestic political actors may advocate for recalibration or withdrawal from the issue. Economic crises, such as the Great Depression, highlight how resource scarcity and domestic instability undermine alliance cohesion. Governments facing internal turmoil may deprioritise external commitments, leaving partners uncertain about the reliability of support. These dynamics underscore the intersection between domestic politics and alliance erosion, revealing that internal constraints frequently translate into external fragility.

Power asymmetry among alliance members is another critical mechanism of erosion. When one member dominates economically, militarily, or politically, disparities in influence can create resentment, reduce perceived equity, and destabilise cooperative arrangements. Smaller or weaker partners may feel constrained, subordinated, or exploited, while dominant members may grow impatient with partners' limitations. In the context of great power alliances, Germany's leadership role within the Triple Alliance created both cohesion and tension; AustriaHungary relied heavily on German support, but Germany's assertive diplomacy occasionally alienated Italy. In small-state alliances, asymmetries are equally significant. Within the Little Entente, Czechoslovakia's relative economic and military capacity positioned it as a central actor, influencing strategic decisions while leaving Romania and Yugoslavia with less autonomy. Such imbalances require careful management, often through negotiation, symbolic equality, or institutional mechanisms; however, failure to address perceived inequities can erode trust and prompt partners to reconsider their participation.

Power asymmetry also interacts with the perception of threat. Dominant members may perceive weaker partners as liabilities, while weaker members may fear abandonment. The perceived ability or willingness of partners to contribute meaningfully to collective security becomes a central factor in sustaining alliances (Blankenship & Lin-Greenberg, 2022). When partners doubt each other's commitment or capabilities, the alliance's deterrent effect diminishes, prompting hedging strategies, recalibration of commitments, or outright withdrawal. The interplay of power disparity and perceived reliability highlights the conditionality of alliances: survival and advantage, rather than abstract loyalty, govern behaviour.

External shocks constitute a further and often decisive mechanism of alliance erosion. Wars, economic crises, technological transformations, or the rise of new powers can disrupt established calculations, forcing alliances to adapt or dissolve. External shocks alter threat perceptions, redistribute capabilities, and introduce uncertainty into cooperative arrangements. The interwar period provides a clear illustration: the rise of revisionist powers such as Germany and Italy, combined with inconsistent policies from Britain and France, created pressures that the Little Entente could not withstand. Similarly, the outbreak of World War I exposed the latent fragility of the

Triple Alliance and Triple Entente, as previously conditional commitments were tested against immediate existential threats. External shocks magnify existing vulnerabilities, often triggering cascading failures in alliances that were previously stable.

All four mechanisms, leadership, domestic politics, power asymmetry, and external shocks, interact dynamically with one another. Leadership decisions may be constrained or influenced by domestic politics; power asymmetry affects both the capacity and perception of commitment; and external shocks can exacerbate weaknesses or shift strategic priorities. These factors operate at multiple levels simultaneously, creating a feedback loop in which uncertainty, distrust, and recalibration reinforce one another. Alliances erode not simply because of one factor but because of the interaction of multiple pressures that compound over time. Historical patterns underscore that the erosion of alliances is rarely abrupt or unidimensional. In many cases, the decline is gradual, marked by hedging, signalling, reduced coordination, and selective participation. Allies may continue to cooperate in certain domains while withdrawing in others, reflecting pragmatic adaptation rather than outright collapse. For example, during the interwar period, the Little Entente continued to coordinate diplomatically even as its military credibility diminished. Similarly, great power alliances have historically maintained symbolic unity while internal disagreements and strategic recalibration quietly undermined cohesion. These patterns demonstrate that alliance erosion is a multifaceted process, influenced by both observable actions and perceptions of reliability, trust, and capability.

Perception plays a critical role throughout the erosion process. Alliances depend not only on material capabilities but also on the belief that commitments are credible and enduring. Even minor signs of hesitation, conflicting priorities, or unequal contribution can prompt partners to question the reliability of the arrangement. Once doubts emerge, they tend to amplify; uncertainty fuels hedging, reduced cooperation, and eventual fragmentation. Scholars of international relations emphasise that perception and signalling are often as important as material strength in maintaining alliances. Misaligned expectations or miscommunication between leaders, parties, and states can accelerate erosion, transforming conditionality into functional breakdown. The mechanisms of alliance erosion underscore the limitations of formal treaties and institutional arrangements. While written agreements provide frameworks for cooperation, they cannot eliminate the underlying dynamics of conditionality, selfinterest, or strategic calculation. Alliances are social constructs that depend on trust, repeated interaction, and credible commitment. The failure to manage leadership transitions, domestic pressures, power disparities, and external shocks undermines these foundations, regardless of formal codification. This insight applies to both historical and contemporary alliances, among great powers and smaller states alike.

Alliances break down through a combination of interconnected mechanisms. Leadership shapes strategy and credibility but may introduce instability through miscalculation or conflicting priorities. Domestic politics influence both the willingness and capacity of states to maintain commitments, while economic and social pressures amplify constraints. Power asymmetry generates tension, perceived inequity, and doubts about reliability. External shocks, whether wars, financial crises, or the emergence of new powers, test alliances against unforeseen conditions, often revealing latent vulnerabilities. These mechanisms operate simultaneously, creating dynamic interactions that can gradually erode even seemingly robust partnerships. Historical patterns, from the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente to the Little Entente and beyond, demonstrate that alliances are instruments of interest, contingent on continuous alignment of objectives, perception of threats, and capacity to cooperate. Understanding the mechanisms of alliance erosion is therefore essential for both scholars and policymakers: it emphasises that alliances are never permanent, that stability must be actively managed, and that conditionality is an enduring feature of international cooperation.

Implications For Small and Middle Powers

For small and middle powers, alliances present both opportunity and risk. Unlike great powers, which can rely on their own capabilities to deter adversaries or project influence, smaller states often depend on coalitions to secure their interests and ensure survival in an anarchic international system. Alliances can provide access to security guarantees, economic partnerships, diplomatic support, and legitimacy. Nevertheless, they also expose states to vulnerabilities, including overdependence on a more powerful ally, entanglement in conflicts that do not serve national interests, and susceptibility to shifts in significant power priorities. Historical and contemporary experience demonstrates that small and middle powers must approach alliances with a careful balance of pragmatism, foresight, and strategic flexibility. Understanding the risks and adopting strategies such

as hedging, diversification, and maintaining autonomy are critical to navigating the complex dynamics of international cooperation.

The risks of alliance dependence are multifaceted. First, smaller states often confront asymmetry of power. When a great power dominates an alliance, the smaller member may have limited influence over decisions, policies, and operational priorities. Its interests may be subordinated to those of the dominant partner, potentially leading to unwanted entanglement. For instance, during the interwar period, members of the Little Entente relied on each other and on France for security; however, this dependence also constrained their freedom of action and exposed them to pressures from both revisionist neighbours and their guarantor. Similarly, during the Cold War, many U.S. allies, including South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey, had to navigate strategic dependence while accommodating Washington's priorities, which sometimes diverged from their own national objectives (Zajak & Haunss, 2022). The asymmetry of power creates a structural risk: the smaller ally may be compelled to act against its interest or endure neglect when the dominant power recalibrates its commitments.

Second, alliances carry entanglement risk. States that tie their security to others' fortunes may become involved in conflicts that do not directly threaten their core interests. Such entanglement can be costly militarily, economically, and politically, especially if the alliance partner suffers setbacks or pursues policies that provoke broader conflict. The experience of Italy during the early twentieth century illustrates this danger. While formally committed to the Triple Alliance, Italy assessed that its national interests were better served by shifting sides in 1915, thereby avoiding automatic involvement in a war that would initially have disadvantaged its territorial ambitions. This case illustrates the practical considerations that small and middle powers must undertake: loyalty to an alliance must be weighed against national interest, potential costs, and strategic opportunities.

Third, alliances are vulnerable to external shocks. Smaller states may rely on partnerships for deterrence, but changes in the international environment, such as the rise of new powers, economic crises, or sudden shifts in the strategy of great powers, can rapidly alter the benefits of membership. The disintegration of the Little Entente under the pressures of rising Germany and Italy shows that even well-coordinated small-state coalitions cannot always withstand systemic shocks. Similarly, during the post-Cold War period, smaller European and Asian states had to navigate the unpredictable transformations in U.S. and Russian foreign policies, often recalibrating their commitments and security strategies to adapt to new realities. External shocks thus pose a constant risk to smaller states, highlighting the importance of strategic flexibility.

Given these risks, small and middle powers have developed a range of strategies to hedge against uncertainty, diversify partnerships, and maintain autonomy. Hedging involves pursuing alliances and cooperative arrangements while simultaneously preparing for scenarios in which the ally may fail, withdraw, or pursue divergent objectives. Hedging can include building independent military capabilities, cultivating multiple diplomatic relationships, and maintaining the option to pursue alternative security arrangements. In practice, hedging enables small and middle powers to reap the benefits of alliance membership without relinquishing total control over national decisions. For example, during the Cold War, Japan developed a robust domestic defence industry and maintained limited independent military capacities while relying heavily on the U.S. security guarantee. This approach allowed Tokyo to hedge against the risk of U.S. disengagement while benefiting from the broader alliance framework. Diversification is closely related to hedging and involves establishing multiple, overlapping alliances or partnerships to reduce dependence on a single actor. By spreading commitments across different networks, smaller states can mitigate the impact of any one alliance's failure or strategic shift. ASEAN's approach to regional security in Southeast Asia exemplifies diversification: member states maintain bilateral relations with external powers such as the United States, China, and Japan while participating in multilateral frameworks that enhance regional stability. Diversification ensures that smaller states are not overly constrained by a single partner and retain flexibility to navigate shifting geopolitical landscapes.

Autonomy, meanwhile, represents the pursuit of independent decision-making capacity within or alongside alliance structures. Maintaining autonomy requires careful calibration: states must signal their commitment to allies to sustain credibility while ensuring that participation does not compromise their ability to act in their own self-interest. Autonomy can be reinforced through investment in military capabilities, economic resilience, and diplomatic networks. Switzerland, though famously neutral, illustrates the principle of autonomy in a broader sense. While it avoids formal alliances, its capacity for self-defence, economic stability, and diplomatic engagement allows it to secure interests without over-reliance on external actors (Gunn, 2020). For small and

middle powers in more conflict-prone regions, autonomy often involves striking a balance between alliance participation and the capacity to pivot or adapt in response to changing circumstances.

The strategic interplay of hedging, diversification, and autonomy also requires careful attention to signalling and credibility. Smaller states must maintain the trust of alliance partners while preserving flexibility, a challenge that necessitates transparent communication, clear strategic priorities, and calibrated commitments. Overcommitment can be dangerous, exposing the state to entanglement risk, while undercommitment can erode credibility and reduce the deterrent effect of alliances. The skilful management of signalling thus becomes a central mechanism for preserving both security benefits and strategic independence. Historical patterns illustrate the effectiveness of these strategies when properly managed. The Little Entente's eventual collapse was partially due to limited hedging and diversification: member states depended on each other and on France, leaving little room to adjust to rising regional threats. Conversely, small and middle powers that combined alliance membership with independent capabilities and diversified partnerships often weathered periods of systemic instability more successfully. For instance, during the post-Cold War period, states such as Singapore and South Korea cultivated alliances while maintaining robust domestic capacities, ensuring that strategic recalibration remained possible in response to shifts in U.S. or regional policy. These cases reinforce the principle that alliances are instruments to be actively managed, not guarantees of security.

Economic and soft power strategies further enhance autonomy and hedging. Smaller states often invest in economic resilience, trade diversification, and diplomatic engagement to reduce vulnerability to alliance failures. For example, the Baltic states after 1991 cultivated both NATO membership and robust economic ties with the European Union and regional partners, hedging against the risk of incomplete protection from a single great power. Similarly, in Africa, countries within ECOWAS maintain alliances for security purposes while seeking multilateral economic and political engagement to prevent overdependence on any single partner. These strategies demonstrate that small and middle powers can leverage non-military tools to preserve strategic autonomy and reduce the fragility of alliance dependence. The implications for small and middle powers are clear. Alliances are indispensable instruments for navigating an anarchic international system, yet they carry inherent risks. Dependence on a dominant partner, vulnerability to entanglement, and exposure to external shocks demand that smaller states approach alliances with careful planning, continuous assessment, and strategic flexibility. Hedging, diversification, and autonomy provide mechanisms to manage these risks, allowing states to benefit from collective security without surrendering control over their core interests (Tabak, 2025). The management of these strategies requires sophisticated diplomacy, investment in domestic capacities, and careful signalling to maintain credibility while preserving strategic options.

History demonstrates that the successful navigation of alliances is less about formal treaties than about dynamic adjustment to shifting circumstances. Small and middle powers that recognise the conditionality of alliances, anticipate potential erosion, and cultivate multiple avenues of security and cooperation are better positioned to survive and thrive in an uncertain world. Conversely, states that rely too heavily on a single partner, neglect independent capacity, or fail to hedge against systemic change are exposed to profound vulnerabilities. By understanding the risks inherent in alliance participation and adopting deliberate strategies to maintain flexibility and autonomy, small and middle powers can maximise the benefits of alliances while minimising the dangers of dependence.

Alliances present both opportunity and danger for small and middle powers. While providing essential security guarantees and strategic leverage, they also expose states to vulnerability, entanglement, and dependence. The risks inherent in alliance participation can be mitigated through careful management strategies, including hedging, diversification, and maintaining autonomy. These strategies enable smaller states to maintain flexibility, adapt to shifting threats, and navigate an anarchic international system without compromising control over national priorities. Historical and contemporary experience demonstrates that successful alliance management for small and middle powers requires balancing commitment with flexibility, credibility with strategic independence, and cooperation with self-reliance. In a world where alliances are inherently conditional and subject to erosion, these strategies are not optional; they are essential instruments of survival and security.

Assessing And Managing Alliances

Alliances are among the most critical instruments that states use to navigate the uncertainty of international politics. In a world without a central authority to enforce rules, states rely on partnerships to secure their interests,

deter threats, and amplify influence (Petel, 2024). However, alliances are inherently conditional. Even the most durable-looking coalitions can falter when circumstances change, when power imbalances emerge, or when leadership and domestic politics shift. Understanding how to assess potential alliances and manage existing ones is therefore essential for both great powers and smaller or middle powers seeking to protect their security and strategic autonomy. This requires a multifaceted approach, combining careful evaluation, strategic foresight, flexible implementation, and continuous monitoring.

The first step in managing alliances is assessing the alignment of interests. States should determine whether potential partners share common security concerns, political objectives, and economic priorities. Misaligned objectives, even when masked by superficial agreement, can create vulnerabilities. For instance, the Triple Alliance and Triple Entente before World War I illustrate how formal alignment does not always guarantee operational coherence. At the same time, Germany and Austria-Hungary appeared united against France and Russia; however, Italy's divergent territorial ambitions created conditions within the alliance. States must therefore go beyond formal agreements and evaluate the depth of shared interests, considering both present circumstances and likely future scenarios (Tjemkes & Burgers, 2023). This assessment should incorporate intelligence, historical behaviour, and careful evaluation of partners' strategic culture. Aligning with a state whose interests diverge or whose commitments are uncertain may entangle a country in conflicts that do not serve its national objectives, eroding both credibility and security.

Closely tied to alignment is the importance of credible institutional frameworks. Alliances require mechanisms for coordination, dispute resolution, and operational oversight. Formal treaties and consultative bodies provide a structure, but their effectiveness depends on active participation and adherence to them. Historical alliances, such as the Little Entente, relied on consultative mechanisms to signal unity and coordinate policy; however, the absence of robust enforcement mechanisms limited their long-term durability (Nalapat, 2023). In contemporary practice, states can strengthen alliances through regular joint exercises, intelligence sharing, operational planning, and the establishment of institutionalised channels for negotiation and dispute resolution. By building credibility into the alliance structure, states enhance predictability, reduce uncertainty, and create a framework for managing disagreements before they escalate into crises.

Leadership continuity and quality play a critical role in the assessment and management of alliances. Leaders shape the perception of commitment, make strategic decisions, and influence the reliability of partnerships. Misjudgment, erratic decision-making, or divergent priorities can erode cohesion, while visionary leadership can strengthen trust and reinforce shared objectives. Kaiser Wilhelm II's aggressive diplomacy strained Germany's alliances, illustrating the risk posed by overconfident or unpredictable leadership. Conversely, stable and strategically minded leadership can sustain alliances even under stress. To mitigate the risks associated with leadership change, states should institutionalise strategic continuity, maintaining institutional memory, doctrine, and processes that endure beyond electoral cycles or leadership transitions. This includes formalised channels for intergovernmental coordination, permanent liaison offices, and strategic planning units that preserve the coherence of alliance commitments.

Power asymmetry is another critical factor in alliance management. Alliances frequently involve states with unequal capabilities. Dominant powers often bear a disproportionate share of responsibilities, while smaller states may have limited influence over decision-making. Asymmetry can produce tension, resentment, and doubts about commitment, which may lead to erosion of the alliance. Effective management requires mechanisms to balance influence and ensure equitable participation (Rynning, 2024). This might involve proportional representation in decision-making forums, recognition of the contributions of smaller states, and careful assignment of responsibilities that reflect each member's capabilities (Vormedal & Meckling, 2024). In the case of the Little Entente, Czechoslovakia's dominance required careful negotiation to maintain the trust and engagement of Romania and Yugoslavia. Modern alliances similarly benefit from structures that acknowledge differences in capability while ensuring fairness, which strengthens cohesion and reduces the likelihood of defection.

Hedging and diversification are essential strategies for managing alliances, particularly for small and middle powers. Alliances are never guaranteed to provide absolute security, and states must prepare for scenarios in which partners fail to act, withdraw, or pursue divergent interests. Hedging involves maintaining independent military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities in addition to alliance commitments. Diversification involves

cultivating multiple partnerships to reduce reliance on any single actor. For example, during the Cold War, Japan relied on U.S. security guarantees while simultaneously investing in domestic defence capabilities and diplomatic engagement with regional partners. ASEAN members today pursue a form of strategic diversification, balancing engagement with multiple great powers while participating in multilateral regional frameworks. These strategies reduce exposure to alliance failure and enhance strategic autonomy, allowing states to navigate uncertainty without overcommitting or compromising national interests.

The anticipation and management of external shocks is another crucial aspect of alliance management. Wars, technological change, economic crises, and the emergence of new powers can quickly shift the strategic landscape, testing the resilience of alliances. The interwar period demonstrates how alliances that initially appeared stable, such as the Little Entente, could unravel under the pressure of rising revisionist powers and systemic shifts. States should incorporate scenario planning, strategic reassessment, and contingency planning into alliance management practices. Regular evaluation of threats, periodic review of commitments, and adaptive planning ensure that alliances remain relevant and practical in an evolving environment. Signalling and perception are crucial to maintaining credibility within alliances. Alliances succeed not only through material capacity but also through clear communication of intent, commitment, and capabilities. Misalignment between signalling and capability can undermine trust, prompt hedging, and erode cohesion. Policy-makers must carefully calibrate messaging, demonstrating both reliability and flexibility. This includes clarifying the scope of obligations, reinforcing deterrence through visible readiness, and maintaining consistency in communication with both partners and potential adversaries. Strategic signalling preserves trust, ensures coordination, and enhances the deterrent value of alliances.

Institutionalised review and evaluation mechanisms further strengthen alliance management. Alliances are dynamic, and continuous assessment is necessary to identify vulnerabilities and adjust commitments. Structured review processes, including regular strategic consultations, joint exercises, and operational assessments, provide transparency and allow for proactive adjustments. By embedding evaluation into alliance practice, states can anticipate challenges, address inequities, and reinforce cohesion before problems escalate. This is particularly important in alliances involving diverse members or complex geopolitical contexts, where misalignment of objectives or capabilities can otherwise go unnoticed until a crisis emerges. Economic and soft power strategies complement traditional security arrangements. Alliances that integrate trade, investment, and diplomatic engagement strengthen mutual dependence and reduce the likelihood of defection (Lanoszka, 2022). Soft power, through cultural diplomacy, shared norms, and multilateral engagement, enhances trust, fosters cohesion, and reinforces shared purpose. For example, European integration demonstrates how economic interdependence can supplement security guarantees, creating a broader matrix of incentives for alliance durability. Combining hard security commitments with economic and normative cooperation enhances the resilience of alliances in the face of both internal friction and external shocks.

Historical awareness is crucial for the practical assessment and management of alliances. States must study past successes and failures to understand patterns of conditionality, mechanisms of erosion, and strategies for resilience. Lessons from partnerships such as the Triple Alliance, Triple Entente, and Little Entente highlight that formal treaties alone are insufficient; sustained attention to leadership, domestic politics, signalling, and external shocks is critical. Incorporating historical insight into strategic planning enables states to anticipate challenges, design adequate institutional arrangements, and avoid repeating mistakes that have previously undermined alliance cohesion. Effective management of alliances necessitates striking a balance between commitment and flexibility. States must be credible and dependable to maintain deterrence and partner trust, yet they must also retain the capacity to adapt commitments in response to changing threats or opportunities. Overcommitment can lead to entanglement in conflicts that do not serve national interest, while undercommitment can erode credibility and reduce deterrence. Strategic flexibility allows states to maintain security benefits while protecting autonomy, reinforcing the conditionality inherent in alliances.

Assessing and managing alliances is a complex and multidimensional task that requires deliberate and proactive engagement. States must rigorously evaluate alignment of interests, design robust institutional mechanisms, manage leadership and signalling, address power asymmetries, hedge and diversify strategically, adapt to external shocks, integrate economic and soft power considerations, institutionalise review processes, and learn from historical experience. Alliances are not permanent guarantees; they are instruments whose durability depends on continuous assessment, management, and adaptation. States that approach alliances with both

strategic foresight and operational pragmatism are best positioned to navigate the uncertainties of international politics, preserve autonomy, and maximise security in a dynamic and often unpredictable world.

CONCLUSION

Alliances have long been central to how states navigate the uncertainties of international politics, offering both security and strategic leverage. However, the study of historical and contemporary alliances demonstrates that they are never permanent, guaranteed, or unconditional. Whether among great powers or smaller states, alliances are shaped by the dynamic interplay of leadership, domestic politics, power asymmetry, and external shocks. Even the most seemingly robust coalitions can erode when circumstances change or when underlying interests diverge. This conditionality is a fundamental reality of international relations, and understanding it is crucial for any state that seeks to safeguard its security, autonomy, and long-term interests.

Throughout history, the rise and fall of alliances reveal recurring patterns. Great powers may enter coalitions that reflect immediate strategic necessity but fail to endure because of misaligned priorities or shifting threat perceptions. Small and middle powers often depend on alliances for security but remain vulnerable to entanglement, overreliance, and neglect. In both cases, alliances require careful assessment, ongoing management, and adaptive strategies to ensure their success. The lessons are clear: alliances cannot be treated as static guarantees; they are instruments to be actively calibrated in response to changing circumstances. The practical takeaway for states is that strategic foresight, flexibility, and continuous management are essential for sustaining alliances. States must rigorously assess partner alignment, institutionalise mechanisms for coordination and dispute resolution, manage power asymmetries, hedge against uncertainty, and maintain autonomy even while participating in cooperative frameworks. Leadership credibility, signalling, and the integration of economic and soft power tools further enhance alliance resilience. By combining these approaches, states can maximise the benefits of alliances while minimising the risks of erosion, entanglement, or overdependence.

The central argument is that alliance permanence is an illusion. Security arrangements, no matter how formalised, are conditional, contingent, and responsive to context. Recognising this reality allows states to approach alliances not with complacency, but with deliberate strategy, informed judgment, and proactive management. The successful state navigates the tension between commitment and flexibility, between cooperation and autonomy, and between immediate interests and long-term security. In a world defined by uncertainty and complexity, alliances are invaluable tools, but only when they are understood, assessed, and actively managed. The study of alliances teaches a timeless lesson: stability is not given; it is earned. Alliances endure when states are vigilant, adaptive, and pragmatic. They falter when interest, trust, and commitment misalign. For policymakers and strategists, the message is both clear and actionable: anticipate change, manage relationships, hedge wisely, and never assume that any alliance is permanent. By internalising this lesson, states, large and small alike, can harness the power of partnerships while safeguarding their sovereignty, security, and strategic autonomy in an increasingly complex international landscape.

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