

Keeping Your Friends Close, But Acquaintances Closer: Why Weakly Allied States Make Loyal Coalition Partners

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Abstract

Why do states join wartime coalitions despite an absence of a salient national threat or strong ties to the coalition leader? We argue that states make unexpectedly high contributions to coalition warfare as a costly signal of their desire for a stronger relationship with the coalition leader. Conventional explanations for coalition warfare cooperation cannot explain why states without immediate security interests or strong ties to the lead state over-contribute relative to their capacity. Using newly compiled data on relative country-level troop contributions to the war in Afghanistan (2001-2014), we find that states are most likely to contribute a higher share of their armed forces when their current relationship with the US is weaker than one would expect given the consistency of that state's international security interests with that of the United States. Countries that are already closely aligned with the central coalition actors and those with a weak alliance relationship tend to under-commit troops relative to the largest contributors, whose moderate – but under-performing – alignments leave substantial room for subsequent gains to be had from signaling their commitment to the leading coalition actor.

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