



Your Submission to the British Journal of Political Science: Decision

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Date Wed 11/13/2024 8:32 AM

To Minhas, Shahryar <minhassh@msu.edu>

Ref.: Ms. No. BJPOLS-D-24-00716

Decisive or Distracted: the Effects of United States Constraint on Security Networks
British Journal of Political Science

Dear Dr. Shahryar Minhas,

Thank you for sending us your manuscript entitled "Decisive or Distracted: the Effects of United States Constraint on Security Networks" (Bjpols-D-24-00716). I have sent out your paper to two referees for comments and we now their reports, which you will find below and attached.

In sum, the reviewers see the merit in the paper, but it is also the case that further clarifications are needed. Both referees raise points that need to be addressed. Reading their comments, I agree with the suggestions, and you should try to incorporate them fully in a revised submission.

If you choose to resubmit, as I hope you will, please include a memo detailing the changes you made and how you have addressed each referee's comments. You are not obliged to agree with every comment, of course, but if and where you disagree, please provide some explanation. I will send the revised manuscript back to the original referees together with the revision memo. Therefore, please make both the revised manuscript and the revision memo anonymous.

To submit a revision, go to

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While I do find the manuscript promising, I cannot make any commitments at this stage.

Thank you again for your submission and I look forward to receiving your revised manuscript. Should you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact me.

Best wishes,

Tobias Böhme
Executive Editor
British Journal of Political Science

Reviewer #1: In this project the authors study how US involvement in conflicts around the world affect countries' alignment with China. They test the hypothesis that distraction on the part of the U.S. leads countries to align more closely with China. They find support for this hypothesis, especially among states with non-democratic regimes.

The theoretical argument is presented coherently, and a rigorous test of this theory offers an important contribution to the literatures on international relations and political networks. The data the authors use also seem appropriate for testing their hypotheses. I do, however, see needs for improvement on the use of the data to derive relevant measures. I have a few recommendations on this front.

From what I follow, the authors are using the dyadic projection of the latent factors in the LFM with respect to China as the dependent variable in the regression model. The LFM is fit to a similarity matrix, in which the outcome variable is the co-voting percentage in UN roll call votes. The problem with this measure is that it ignores attributes of the votes. That is, if two countries vote together on two votes on which all other countries vote the opposite way is far more informative about connectivity than if two countries vote together on votes in which the vast majority of other countries vote along with them. Votes will vary systematically on their informativeness regarding states' positioning and similarity to China. This, of course, is a dynamic that is captured and accounted for in established embedding methods for roll call voting (e.g., DW-Nominate, Martin-Quinn scores). One way to define the DV with this data would be to calculate states' positions with roll call votes, and then calculate the linear distance between a state and China. I don't see the need to further filter this data with a method that accounts for network dependence, as the "accounting for" does not occur within the model used to draw inferences in the analysis. Typically, we would use a network model that accounts for dependence AND includes the terms about which we want to draw inference.

Another approach that the authors could consider, which is closer in spirit to network analysis, but also would account for features of the votes, is backbone extraction. The authors study a bipartite network (states connected to UN votes), and then collapse that network via the simple percentage co-voting measure. If you read the work on backbone extraction by Zach Neal (Michigan State Psychology) and colleagues, you'll see that simple projection methods such as this discard a lot of valuable information about connectivity. The way backbone projection works, is that probabilistic null models are used to define the null distribution of covoting rates, and then the actual co-voting rate is compared to this to create a simulated significance value of the tie between nodes. This simulated significance value of each country with China could be used as the DV.

I do not have a strong reason to expect the conclusions in this study to differ based on using these more established methods. Rather, the methods I recommend are more consistent with how this sort of data is used in the literature, and I don't see the reasoning for using the LFM in the way the authors do it here. I recommend using the current LFM-based measure as a robustness check in the appendix, and using one of these recommended methods in the main text.

I have one final comment, and that is that the model of affinity to China seems to have a fairly small number of covariates, and is perhaps underspecified. What is the explanatory power in these models? It would improve the identification strategy to include country fixed effects in these models, and address concerns about the otherwise fairly small number of variables.

Reviewer #2: I found this article interesting and, overall, well executed. The study's focus on how third-party countries respond to the US' preoccupation with waging war is a timely topic. The authors' introduction of a measure to capture US distraction and the use of network-based indicators to report other states' diplomatic (dis)alignment with China is a novel approach. This research has the potential to contribute to on-going debates about the shifting balance of power in the international system.

I have a few recommendations for revision for the authors to consider:

(1) I encourage the authors to consider a different framing for the introduction. The authors spend several pages discussing the merits, but also difficulties, of studying interstate conflict. They do this to motivate their study of cooperation. Cooperation, however, is not necessarily understudied in IR. Yet the introduction is much more about the availability/observability of cooperation than it is about why we should study the relationship between one country's foreign policy / war behavior and others' alignment. The latter seems more specific and interesting (i.e., where the bottom of p.3 picks up).

(2) Given this article is submitted as a research article and is submitted to a general journal, the authors might spend more time fleshing out the theory and concepts. Perhaps the authors could replace the brief section, 'for instance' (p.7) with real-world examples. I think there is also related work on the UN that echoes the same intuition described here, see for example work by Dmitriy Nurullayev as well as Kevin Galambos (ISQ article on military cooperation specifically). Similarly, I wondered how this paper related to other work on hierarchy and cooperation in IR (such as Beardsley et. al 2020). As for H2, how does this hypothesis relate to the work on IR & resolve & reputation?

(3) Is diplomatic cooperation here the same thing as alignment? What is an example of an 'alignment decision' (p.1). Is it all encompassing or something more tangible? The examples leading up to p.8 include everything from trade to war, but it seems the actual concept is defined by conflict and 'us force commitments.' The sweet spot for connecting this more clearly together might be in the middle of p.10 where the authors begin to unpack the relationship between simple alignment and motivations for said alignment.

Figure 3 is neat! But I was confused what 'different types of cooperation' referred to in the caption and the figure label says 'diplomatic alignment.'

The analysis is sound and well presented. I think the MS can be further improved mostly through clarifying concepts and theory.

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