

Power Disparity and External Threats: The Patterns of Soviet Union's Alliance Behaviors

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ABSTRACT

This Paper Introduces The Cases Of The World Anti-Fascist Alliance During The Second World War And Sino-Soviet Alliance During The Cold War During The Cold War As Examples And Gives Close Examinations. By Examining The Two Cases And Studying The Establishment And Collapse Of Other Soviet-Led Alliances, The Following Patterns Are Discovered. The Wider The Power Gap Between Soviet Union And Its Potential Allies Became, The Less Likely The Alliance Was To Form. And The Existence Of An Imminent Threat Would Prompt The Soviet Union To Align With Other States To Counter The Threats. This Essay Wishes To Explore The Regular Patterns Of The Alliance Behaviors Of The Soviet Union And Proposes a Theoretical Framework That Could Be Applied To Explain The Alliance Behaviors Of The Soviet Union During The Ww2 And Cold War Period. Two Important Factors Are Mentioned: The Power Disparity And The Existence Of The Imminent Threat.

Keywords: *Soviet Union; Alliance; Cold War*

1. INTRODUCTION

The alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union largely determined the trend of international relations in the 20th century, for the Soviet Union fought Nazi Germany and eventually won WW2 as a member of the allies and walked into a cold war against the US with its communist satellite states. In a word, the Soviet Union could be seen in almost all major international affairs in the 20th century. The study of alignment theory and alliance behaviors is one of the most developed areas in the theoretical research of international relations. However, those studies mainly focus on the abstract analysis of the conditions, bargaining process, and defects within an alliance. If a case study comes out, it would be most likely discussing cases in Das alte Europa and the US. Few attempts have been seen on studying the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union. However, the Soviet Union is a case that is too important to be ignored, for it possesses distinctive idiosyncrasies that are worth examining: first, compared with its counterparts west of the Dnieper, the Soviet Union tends to exert direct control on its allies; second, the alliance that revolves around the Soviet Union is often fragile, especially ones that include countries in the rimland, for the relative changes of power would incur the suspicion and a sense of insecurity form

the side of the Soviet Union; third, unlike the United States strived to maintain NATO after its rival-the Soviet Union disintegrated, the Soviet Union is unlikely to form alliances with other countries unless under tremendous international pressure, that is, alliances that are formed during peacetime or without a targeting rival are hardly seen on Russia. This essay aims to answer the question of the fundamental factors that play decisive roles in determining the Soviet Union's alliance behaviors, and wishes to provide explanations for these characteristics introduced above.

This essay will focus on exploring how two factors, power disparity and external threats, drive the Soviet Union to join or form an alliance and investigate the circumstances under which the Soviet Union would consider defecting an alliance or realign. Two cases will be selected in this essay to test and examine the proposed traits of the Soviet Union's alliance behaviors and theoretical framework that explains the conditions under which the Soviet Union would consider joining an alliance. The first one would be the alliance formed in the 1940s when the Soviet Union and the rest of the world faced severe threats from Nazi Germany. The second would be the Sino-Soviet alliance during the initial stage of the cold war. By studying the case of the Soviet Union, the behavior pattern and the expected policies that the

Soviet Union would most likely adopt in an alliance might be discovered, thus being applied to the studies that try to explain the international acts of modern-day Russia.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The alliance theory in International Relations studies has been a highly developed field. Some realism theorists attributed the formation of alliances to the “system structure” and depreciated the roles that states play.[1]The precedented studies have chiefly focused on the operating mechanism of NATO and the inherent burden-sharing problem within it.[2]The most successful work that tries to reveal the policy-making in NATO was NATO and the Range of American Choice. In particular, Kirsten Rafferty (2003) discussed in his article, An Institutional Reinterpretation of Cold War Alliance Systems: Insights for Alliance Theory, that institutionalization could improve the performance of an alliance and better coordinate members’ behaviors.[3]As for other case studies, they mainly tell the rise and fall of specific alliances formed in history and focus on the historical empirical details but contain less theoretical contents, which is the process of alliance making. Many cases adopted to explain the alliances took form in the age of the concert of Europe—a time period characterized by multipolarity. Also, in most current research, the vital state actor of the Soviet Union has been largely ignored. Even if mentioned in one or two, it acted as a role of the imagined enemy against the alliances discussed in these works, and few in-depth analyses of its alliance behaviors were made. The exception was Shen Zhihua, a professor from East China Normal University, whose works discussed the Sino-Soviet alliance during the cold war. He explained that during the 1950s, the alliance relationship between the two countries was influenced by the common communist ideals and the comradeship between the ruling parties by referring to declassified files from the two countries. Therefore, the Sino-Soviet alliance is not an entirely realistic one, and the traditional realism paradigm based on power politics possess little explanatory power to analyze this alliance.

Scholars have been trying to theorize and generalize alliance behaviors since the 1990s, and they have made great progress. Glenn H. Snyder gave us insight into a systematic analysis on the formation and dissolution of alliances and the conditions under which a member would consider to defect or realign in his work in 1990.[4] After the cold war ended, when an unprecedented unipolar world emerged, Stephen M. Walt predicted how the US-led alliance would respond and operate under such a background.[5] However, a case study that could provide explanations of theoretical patterns of the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union is still needed. Whether these hypotheses and theories could be applied to it is still yet to be tested, and there have been unique idiosyncrasies of it.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Since the founding of Soviet Russia, strategists and policymakers in the world have been obsessed with explaining the behavior patterns of the Soviet Union and seeking to predict how it would react towards specific issues. The policymakers in the west had been brooding over how to weaken this alliance for the whole latter half of the century. For example, after careful examination and contemplation over the strategic behaviors of the Soviet Union, George F. Kennan wrote the famous Long Telegram and came up with some instructive principles. As more archives of the cold war have been declassified and theories of the alliance have been modified, it becomes possible to theorize the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union. In this essay, the factors of power disparity and external threats that determine the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union are examined, hoping to provide a framework to analyze the Soviet’s alliance in history.

First, The Soviet Union was less likely to consider allying with the potential partners unless there was a significant power disparity. To be more specific, the concept of power here includes military power, economic power, ideological appeal, cultural power, institutional power, and many more forms that could allow a nation to manipulate the behaviors of other nations, thus compelling them to the wills of the hegemon. The first three are the most important, because they are the direct reflections of the powers of a state. The relationship between the disparity of powers and the likelihood that the Soviet Union would consider forming an alliance turned out to be inverse. The relations between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union is an example. Shortly after the WW2 ended, Yugoslavia had quickly recovered from the war and made a noticeable economic growth rate at 6.2% per year on average. The Tito-led Yugoslavian communist party took a path that was widely different from Stalinism and generated attraction to the satellite states of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union felt threatened by the ever-growing influence of Tito, therefore expelling Yugoslavia from the Cominform after diatribes.[6]

The reason behind this is that the narrowing disparity of power makes the Soviet Union sense threats to its dominant position, no matter from what fields the potential challenge comes. Also, in history, Russia was dedicated to expanding its sphere of influence, plundering territories and acquiring access to the sea. Its everlasting aggressive gesture often incurred antagonism and worries from its neighboring countries in history. Although such a trend was compromised by a series of failures and setbacks during the Anglo-Russia great games, the aggression tendency and distrust in its neighboring countries were nevertheless rooted in its culture. Russia’s geopolitical position as a country stretching over the Eurasia continent indicates that it is often too close to its allies and makes it easily project

power on them or interfere with their internal affairs. Allies of the Soviet Union (often on the Eurasia continent) would live in fear, because the Soviet Union might annex them or turn them to the satellite countries. Therefore, when they grow more robust, and the bargaining power becomes more extraordinary, they tend to introduce a counterweight (usually the US and sometimes China) and show strong centrifugal force. Correspondingly, the Soviet Union would give little tolerance to the disloyalty of its allies. Depending on the width of the power disparity, the Soviet Union would use punishment (case of Poland and Hungary), or directly expel the challenging state out of the alliance (case of China and Yugoslavia).

Another important factor was the existence of imminent threats and pressure posed by possible challengers. Unlike other countries, the Soviet Union is reluctant to maintain an alliance during peacetime or without a clear rival. Once the opponent is defeated or vanished, the Soviet-led alliance would likely fall apart. Because the Soviet Union's distrust in neighboring countries was so entrenched and most of its allies were in closest geographical proximity, which indicates a straightforward projection of Soviet's power over them, it would take extra political capital to eliminate discrepancies and coordinate the policies in the alliance.

Also, the economic aid asked by its allies often posed economic pressure on the Soviet economy. Because its allies are mostly from less developed regions, they needed financial support from the Soviet Union to process industrialization and secure the regime. When the confrontation is less severe, and both the Soviet and its allies sensed fewer threats, the Soviet and its rival (usually the US, sometimes China) might often need to bid for the loyalty of lesser states. Such competition increased unnecessary expenses and caused an extra economic burden. Besides, the internationalist ideology and logic of the Soviet regime that supporting worldwide revolution had become an important source of legitimacy, urged the Soviet Union to provide the necessary support for the "national liberation movement". Such assistance is mainly out of comradeship, and economic return is hardly seen. This phenomenon does not contradict the

argument that the Soviet Union would be reluctant to maintain an alliance during peacetime or without a clear rival, because such assistance took place under the background of the cold war, which means the US was the imminent threat.

Another reason that could explain the Soviet Union's preference of making alliances only when a clear rival exists is the relatively low chance of defecting during wartime. During the cold war, when a bipolar system emerged, as Glenn Snyder argued, "The allies of superpowers either have no incentive to realign with the opposite superpower, or if they do, they will be prevented from acting upon it by their own patron." [7] So, for the formal allies (mostly the communist states) of the Soviet Union, there was no alternative power they could align with against the US-led alliance. Therefore, the resources that the Soviet Union used during the cold war to maintain the loyalty of its formal allies were kept low because of the existence of NATO and the US. The newly-liberated countries in the second half of the 20th century could be used as perfect examples to illustrate this point. For these third world countries, the US often acted as the supporter of their old oppressors. To maintain and secure their independence, they found no one to turn to for assistance but the Soviet Union, because the US and the old metropolitan states were threatening their liberty all the time. In this scenario, the Soviet Union felt less necessary to worry about their defections, for the threats of the common enemy was so prominent.

According to the correlation between the two factors, the possible circumstances are classified into four categories: the wide power disparity and the existence of an imminent threat; the wide power gap and the non-existence of an imminent threat; the relatively narrow power gap and the existence of an imminent threat, and the relatively narrow power gap and the non-existence of an imminent threat. The second and the third circumstances will receive further examination in the coming part because the two situations need more interpretation and nuanced tests. When the two factors appear to be an inverse relationship, we wish to examine which factor is more decisive.

Table 1. power disparity and imminent threat

		Power disparity	
		High	Low
External threats	High	Strong alliance	Unstable alliance (Distrust and Discords)
	Low	Affiliated/control (Extra burden may emerge)	No alliance

3.1. Situation one: high external threats, low power disparity

When the fear of the threat posed by the rival

outweighs its worries of too close power distance between it and its potential allies, the Soviet Union would nevertheless consider aligning. Because no matter how much distrust there might be between the Soviet Union and its potential allies, the basic logic rooted in state actor

demands a state to react to the impending threat and maintain the national security, even oversensitive as the Soviet Union cannot violate such law. If the challenging state seems too aggressive or the option to reach a peace contract or appeasement no longer exists (in many cases, they can be attractive alternatives), then the Soviet Union would be more likely to consider aligning with its suspicious allies. Also, as the power of the common threat grew stronger, the more strain it would pose on the international system, then the Soviet Union might feel more obliged to form an alliance to confront the challenger. As WW2 showed us, even though the UK and the US were no weaker than the Soviet Union and there was entrenched distrust among them, they ultimately formed ally forces when Hitler's Nazi Germany seemed unstoppable.

3.2. Situation two: low external threats, high power disparity

When the power gap is relatively wide without imminent threats, such a picture of affiliation often reflected the relationship between the Soviet Union and the lesser states in Africa and the American continent. Soviet needed to win their loyalty, sometimes even needed to bid for it. The competition between China and the Soviet Union to win the support and friendship of Kim il-sung was an example. Both countries made a series of promises and provided economic aid and industry assistance, trying to win North Korea on their side (back then, the Soviet Union and China had not broken up with each other). However, the relative weaker forces of the blue-sea navy and projection power of the Soviet Union constrained it from exerting influence towards the lesser states on other continents, so the Soviet Union often felt less obliged to align under such circumstances. Also, such "alliance" could be largely one-way support from the Soviet Union, and the Soviet Union could profit from few tangible benefits but the escalation of international reputation and the enforcement of its leadership in the socialist camp from this one-way ally. More than that, the Soviet Union might find itself dragged down by endless requests for economic aid. Besides that, the Soviet Union might need to be on guard against their possible treachery or drifter behaviors. Because of the long-distance and the existence of the US, it would be difficult to punish them for disloyalty.

4. TEST OF THEORY

4.1. Case one

In 1930s, because of the strike of the great recession, the fascist rule was established in these countries. In 1937, Italy became the last contract party of the anti-Comintern pact that was initially signed by Nazi Germany and Japan in 1936, implying the formation of the axis power. Early in 1935, the Soviet government had discerned the

aggressive ambition of Hitler's Germany. Litvinov delivered a speech in the League of Nations, advocating the establishment of a kind of collective security. Soviet's attempts had witnessed some initial success, France and Czechoslovakia signed a treaty of mutual defense with the Soviet Union on guard of the possible intrusion of Nazi Germany. At least during the mid-1930s, world leaders in Europe had well discerned the insidious danger. Later in 1939, another major attempt that aimed to form an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance was made, but this negotiation eventually failed because of three reasons: the lasting influence of appeasement policy, the mistrust and disbelief among these parties, and the discord and dissension sowed among them by Nazi Germany.[8] To make it more precise, the Soviet Union was afraid of the possibility that the UK and France would make peace with Hitler unitarily because they had enough bargaining chips to persuade Hitler to attack the Soviet Union and secure their own status of independence by giving their promises of non-interventions. And they might be able to carve Europe up with Nazis after the Soviet Union fell. Such a picture deeply terrified the Soviet. However, soon after, the international situation deteriorated. Nazi Germany declared war on Poland and occupied most of Europe within two years. As the threats of the Nazis had become more imminent and dangerous, the Soviet Union eventually overcame its mistrust and worries towards western countries and began to take steps to form a united front.

From 29 September to 1 October 1939, UK, USSR and US held talks in Moscow, discussing the issues of supporting the Soviet Union in the patriotic war. On 1 October 1939, the first supply protocol to the Soviet Union was signed at the conference, symbolizing the emergence of coordination among major powers to concert their policies and behaviors in the war against the Axis. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the US officially declared war on the Axis powers. On 1 January 1942, Declaration By United Nations was signed in Washington. All contract parties promised to "use all of its resources, whether military or economic, against the members of the Triple Alliance and their dependents fighting against that government" and "pledged to cooperate with the Governments of the signatories to this Declaration and not to conclude separate armistice agreements or peace treaties with the enemy." These sincere efforts made by western countries had dispelled the doubt that had been troubling Soviet Union's decision making. The World Anti-Fascist Alliance was therefore officially established. Giving a careful examination of the history of the formation of the World Anti-Fascist Alliance, we might be able to discover the principles and clues of the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union. During the first few years of the Nazi rule, threats from the Nazis began to emerge. However, Hitler's stance was confusing. People were not sure whether his Nazi Germany was hoping to change unjust situations or a

country with aggressive ambition and imperialist policies. Therefore, the external threats were not clear and difficult to discern back then. Also, the policy of appeasement still had a strong influence on decision-making in France and UK. Therefore, the Soviet Union were afraid of becoming the bargaining chip of Anglo-German negotiations and the victim of the compromise and quite suspicious of the true intentions of France and the UK. So, the Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance was never established. However, when Nazi Germany declared war on Poland and France fell shortly after, Hitler's threats became imminent and not to be ignored. After France fell and the UK was severely hit, the UK officially abandoned the policy of appeasement after Churchill was elected PM and was willing to give substantive assistance to the Soviet Union when Hitler launched attacks on the east front. The power disparity decreased, as the UK has lost much of its combat force and economic potential, therefore, lost the power to bargain with Hitler. And the external threats also pushed the Soviet Union to align with its counterparts. The major anti-fascist powers finally came together in 1942, an alliance against the Axis powers was established.

4.2. Case two

After the WW2 ended, tensions grew between the Soviet Union and its wartime allies. The US and its western allies were alert about Soviet Union's expansion in East Europe and the aggressive communist ideology while the Soviet Union found itself besieged by hostile capitalist states. The cold war started, and the Soviet Union felt obliged to look for allies in the far east. The establishment of the Sino-Soviet alliance in 1950 seemed inevitable concerning the factors that could influence the alliance behaviors of the Soviet Union. China was a newly established communist country, it had almost no heavy industry or decent infrastructures, but China's geographical position was important and it shared a common enemy with the Soviet Union. Taking all these factors into consideration, China just seemed born to be the right ally to the Soviet Union. After both governments approved the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, the Soviet Union started to give China substantial assistance, including providing low-interest loans, helping construct the industrial system, developing bilateral trade, dispatching Russian experts.[9] The all-encompassing assistance from the Soviet Union helped China industrialize rapidly and laid the foundations of two five-year plans. The Soviet Union and China concerted their actions in the Korean War and stopped the offensive of the US successfully. But this "unbreakable alliance" finally broke down in 1950s. How could this happen? According to a memorandum from secretary Dulles,[10] the US had started to try to alienate the Sino-Soviet alliance by increasing pressure on communist China and forcing it to make requirements to the Soviet Union that could not be all satisfied in 1953. His ideas worked out in

the late 50s, boosted by a series of dramatic events. During the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Khrushchev was desperately in need of support from the CPC for his criticism of Stalin. And Mao generously gave his support. He wrote a report that introduced China's stance on the "secret report" for People's Daily which was soon repeated by the Pravda.[11] Shortly after the conference, rebellions against Soviet control burst out in Poland and Hungary. China played a conspicuous role in this series of crises. China lent moral support to the Soviet Union in suppressing the rebellions in Hungary while mediating the relations between the Polish and Soviet Communist parties and restricting the Soviet Union from adopting tougher options. When the crisis ended, dual leadership began to take form in the world revolution and international communist movement.[12]

Since then, many communist party leaders have recognized Mao and China party as the most authoritative and been eager to learn CPC's opinions on important issues.[12] Although at this time, China's newly established industrial system and military forces were still fragile compared with the Soviet Union's prominent superiority in almost all spheres that could be taken into the evaluations of national strength, China's ideological appeal was on the rise because of China party's unimpeachable responses towards previous crisis and Mao Zedong's insightful comments on the path of socialism. Previous high-pressure rules imposed by the Soviet Union on other socialist states had already aroused dissatisfaction, and resentment was growing within and out the ruling communist parties in the socialist camp.[12] Mao Zedong seemed to become a counterweight to Soviet Union's unchecked power when leaders of other communist parties examined China's huge population, vast land, and more importantly, the ability to challenge Soviet Union's dominant position in socialist ideology—all these could transform into huge hegemonic potential. And there is no reason for the Soviet Union to overlook the undercurrent. Also, even the disparity in material power was narrowing quickly. China had made tremendous success in industrialization.

Mao felt more confident when he turned down Khrushchev's proposals of "joint fleet" and "longwave radio" proposals and censured him right on his face. Although the common enemy still existed, China had already started to challenge Soviet Union's leadership in the socialist camp and began to gain more authority than the Soviet Union itself. The Soviet Union would not allow an ally to bring potential danger to its predominant position to stay in the alliance. As the first country that established socialist rule, the Soviet Union had been proud of its leading position in Marxist studies and strived to maintain its monopoly on the interpretations of Marxist theory, which had already become an important source of legitimacy of its leadership in the socialist camp. Therefore, China's rising ideological authority had

become intolerable. Khrushchev's secret reports no doubt established his personal authority within the communist party of the Soviet Union but at the same time undermined Soviet Union's prestige in the socialist camp. Meanwhile, Mao's rising authority and charisma that far exceeded him had made Khrushchev uneasy, so he began to worry about the possibility that China might take over the leadership of the world revolution. Now, the breakup of the Sino-Soviet alliance seemed unstoppable.

5. CONCLUSION

This article presents two factors used to explain the Soviet Union's alliance behavior: the external pressure and the size of the power gap between the Soviet Union and its potential allies. The article focuses on two scenarios in which these two factors vary in opposite directions. Finally, the article tests the hypotheses constructed in the article through the formation of the Allies in World War II and the formation and collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance in the Cold War. The author believes that the article's analysis of Soviet alliance behavior is equally relevant to the interpretation and prediction of Russia's strategic behavior in the present.

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