

# On the International Structure and the Degree of Freedom of Allied Countries

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**Abstract:** Alliance is one of the core issues in contemporary international politics. It is not only an important means to effectively obtain the support of major powers, but also an important channel for major powers to control small countries. The study of the interactive relationship between large and small countries in the alliance helps us to have a deeper understanding of the development of relations between countries. The international structure is one of the important factors affecting the internal relations of the alliance countries. The interactive relationship between the alliance countries under different international structures is significantly different, which also helps us to carefully explore the interactive relationship between the international structure and the alliance.

**Keywords:** International Pattern, Alliance, Freedom.

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## 1. Introduction

Alliance is an important phenomenon in international politics and an effective means for countries to gain power and interests. Since the formation of the international system, the struggle between alliances and checks and balances between countries has run through human history. The rise and fall of countries are related to the vertical and horizontal alliances and the confrontation between alliances. The changes in the alliances between major powers have a profound impact on the shaping of the international pattern in the corresponding historical period, and even directly determine the direction of international relations. The academic community has conducted a lot of research on the formation, maintenance, management and disintegration of alliances, but there is still a lack of in-depth research on the degree of freedom of countries with different strengths in alliances under different international patterns. This article hopes to use the international pattern as an independent variable and explore the degree of freedom of major countries, medium countries and small countries in the alliance through a comparison of multipolar, bipolar and unipolar international systems.

## 2. International Situation

The international pattern is an important concept in international politics and the basic basis for us to judge the international situation. It refers to "a relatively stable interactive structure and state formed by the countries or groups of countries that play a leading and dominant role in international relations based on the relationship of power comparison". [1] The premise of the existence of the international pattern is the anarchy of the international system, which is an objective existence relative to the domestic hierarchical society. Waltz, a representative of structural realism, believes that the international pattern has three levels: anarchy, national identity and distribution of national capabilities, among which national strength, especially the distribution of relative capabilities, is particularly important. [2] In the international pattern, the dominant big country is called a "pole". It can express power beyond its borders

because of its high level of military capabilities, pay attention to the balance of regional and global power, and is more arbitrary than small countries in defining and defending interests. [3] According to the number of poles, the international pattern can be divided into multipolar, bipolar and unipolar patterns. The international pattern during the Napoleonic Wars and before World War I was a multipolar pattern, and a bipolar pattern was formed after World War II. After the end of the Cold War, it entered a unipolar world dominated by the United States. Once formed, the international pattern is objective and exists objectively independently of subjective and human factors; it is relatively stable and difficult to change in the short term; it has a certain structural hierarchy, and only major powers constitute the basic fulcrum of the international pattern; it is global and is the overall state on a global scale. [4]

## 3. The Alliance and the States Participating in it

1. The concept of alliance. Although the practice and research of alliance has a long history, there is a lack of a widely recognized concept of alliance. The main reason is that scholars have proposed various standards according to their own research needs and preferences. For example, those who focus on the actual situation have relatively broad requirements for the concept of alliance, while those who focus on quantitative analysis have relatively strict requirements for the concept, requiring a formal treaty, etc.; some scholars value the formal form of the alliance, while others value the essence of the alliance.

Strict concepts, such as the American scholar Arnold Wolfers, believe that "an alliance is a commitment made between two or more sovereign states to provide mutual military assistance". This commitment is different from those loose cooperation agreements. Once a military agreement containing a commitment is signed, the country formally promises to fight against common enemies with other countries. [5] The definition of the ATOP database is also stricter and more detailed: a written agreement signed by official representatives of at least two sovereign and independent countries, including a commitment to assist

allies in military conflicts, to remain neutral in conflicts, to stop military conflicts with other countries, or to maintain cooperation and consultation in international crises that could lead to potential military conflicts. [6]

Broad concepts such as: Walter believes that an alliance is a formal or informal arrangement between two or more sovereign states in terms of security cooperation. [7] He attaches more importance to the essence of the alliance, and regards informal security arrangements as a form of alliance. He believes that the conclusion of a formal treaty or agreement is not a necessary condition for establishing an alliance. Because in reality many countries are unwilling to conclude formal treaties with their allies, if the research is limited to formal alliances, a large number of valuable research cases will be lost. The most typical example is that there is no formal alliance treaty between the United States and Israel, but no one doubts their commitment to each other; and the signing of the Soviet-Egyptian Friendship and Cooperation Treaty in 1971 is actually a sign of the deterioration of relations between the Soviet Union and Egypt, rather than a strengthening of the mutual commitment of both parties.

Despite various differences in the definition of alliances, scholars still believe that they have the following common points: First, the main body of the alliance is sovereign states, rather than various forms of international organizations and NGOs. Second, the alliance is most concerned with the solemn commitment and cooperation of member states in the fields of national security and military. It usually requires member states to have the obligation to use or consider the use of force in specific circumstances to ensure mutual security. This distinguishes it from economic and sports organizations such as OPEC and the Olympic Committee, and also from political organizations such as the Commonwealth. Third, the alliance has clear goals and targets other specific countries or groups of countries, regardless of whether these countries are clearly defined. This distinguishes the alliance from universal collective security organizations such as the United Nations, the African Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. [8] According to the needs of the research, this article adopts a broad concept of alliance.

2. Types of countries in the alliance. Alliances can be divided into two-country alliances and multinational alliances based on the number of countries participating in the alliance. According to the distribution of strength, the countries in a two-country alliance may be of equal strength and equal status, but in more cases, there is a distinction between dominant countries and subordinate countries due to differences in strength, such as the US-Japan alliance, the US-South Korea alliance, and the Sino-Soviet alliance, where the status of the two countries is obviously unequal. In multinational alliances, the phenomenon of unequal status due to differences in strength is more common. According to the distribution of national strength in the alliance, it can be divided into major countries, i.e. dominant countries, medium-sized countries, and small countries; for example, the United States is the dominant country in NATO, and although Britain and France are world powers, they can only play the role of medium-sized countries in the alliance. Others such as the Netherlands and Luxembourg are naturally small countries because of their weakest strength, and both medium-sized countries and small countries are subordinate countries.

3. The degree of freedom of the alliance countries. The

degree of freedom of the alliance countries refers to the power of the participating countries in the alliance, including the decision-making power on the affairs of the alliance, the freedom to withdraw from the alliance and the opportunity to choose to join other alliances.

#### **4. International Structure and the Degree of Freedom of Allied Countries**

In different international situations, the size of the choice space of the countries in the alliance is different, and their degree of freedom is also different. Generally speaking, the more poles there are in the international situation, the greater the space for the subordinate countries in the alliance to choose, the more concessions the dominant country makes to the subordinate countries, and the freer the small countries are.

Under a multipolar structure, subordinate countries in an alliance may join a hostile alliance due to competition or the solicitation of a hostile alliance, thus having a larger choice space and a stronger bargaining power within the alliance; during World War I, Italy delayed sending troops to help Germany after the outbreak of the war, and later withdrew from the alliance to join the Allies. In addition to worrying about the betrayal of subordinate countries, the dominant country is also worried that subordinate countries will stir up trouble and "drag themselves into the water" and get involved in conflicts and wars. Therefore, it needs to give subordinate countries some benefits to win over the latter, such as promising to give more economic benefits and making concessions in favor of the latter in the distribution of territorial spoils after winning the war. During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain provided a large amount of economic assistance to organize the anti-French alliance many times; before World War I, Britain also actively coordinated with Tsarist Russia's colonial expansion in Iran and other places to win over the latter to join the anti-German alliance; during World War I, France also gave Russia a large amount of loans to encourage it to join the war. Of course, it is not ruled out that the big countries in the alliance under the multipolar structure abandon small countries to appease potential opponents, such as the Munich conspiracy before World War II, when Britain and France sacrificed Czechoslovakia to meet the requirements of Hitler's Germany. However, doing so will greatly enhance the opponent's strength and bring huge risks to oneself. During World War II, Britain and France were attacked by Germany and reaped what they sowed.

Under the bipolar structure, the strength of subordinate countries has little impact on the international structure, and the choice space is limited. They mainly implement the strategy of following the dominant country, hoping to get the latter's protection and "get a share" when there are benefits. France's withdrawal from NATO in the 1960s and then returning to NATO is a typical example; the impact of subordinate countries' withdrawal from the alliance on the dominant country is mainly political image rather than overall strength. For example, Yugoslavia's withdrawal from the alliance with the Soviet Union in the Tito era had little impact on the Soviet Union's strength; even the breakdown of Sino-Soviet relations did not change the nature of the bipolar confrontation. Therefore, the dominant country in the bipolar structure has greater freedom than the multipolar structure, does not worry about the betrayal of subordinate countries, and has greater intervention power over subordinate countries.

For example, the United States forced Britain and France to withdraw from the invasion of Egypt in 1956; Sino-Japanese economic relations recovered quickly after World War II, and an important reason why Japan was reluctant to establish diplomatic relations with China was that it was worried about the intervention of the United States, but US President Nixon carried out "over-the-top diplomacy" without notifying Japan and announced a visit to China; even if Japan's economy later ranked second in the world, it did not change the situation of "the United States is the master and Japan is the follower" in the US-Japan alliance. [9] This fully demonstrates the autonomy of the dominant country and the passivity of the subordinate country.

Under the unipolar structure, the dominant country enjoys the greatest freedom because it has no power constraints. It can freely choose allies and establish various temporary alliances as needed. Even if some allies strongly oppose it, the United States resolutely promotes "unilateralism", relies on military strikes to resolve international conflicts, and brazenly launched a series of wars such as the Iraq War. The choices of subordinate countries are relatively limited. In addition to actively or passively following the dominant country, there are no more options. For example, in the process of fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan was forced to join the US-led alliance. [10] As Brzezinski said: "The United States' supreme position in the world is supported by a sophisticated system of alliances and coalitions that truly covers the world." [11] Alliances have become a low-cost means and tool for the United States to maintain its hegemony. [12]

## 5. The United States and the Alliance: A Typical Case Study of the Impact of Changes in the International Landscape

The history of the growth of the United States' power and its attitude towards alliances help us understand the impact of the international situation on alliance members. After independence, when the United States was mediocre in strength, it followed the advice of its founding father Washington and pursued a long-term policy of isolationism. Relying on the two natural barriers of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, it avoided being involved in the disputes of the old continent of Europe so as not to affect national security, and looked down on other countries with an aloof attitude of "God's chosen people". At the end of the 19th century, the United States' economic strength jumped to the first place in the world and became one of the poles in the multipolar world, but it still tried not to intervene in European affairs. Even though it briefly joined the Allies to defeat the Central Powers in World War I, the United States quickly retreated to an isolationist state. After World War II, the United States became one of the poles in the bipolar structure and established a huge alliance system: it established "NATO" in Europe, and in East Asia, in addition to establishing alliances with Japan and South Korea, it also established the "Southeast Asian Treaty Organization" with Britain, France, Australia, Pakistan and Thailand.

After the end of the Cold War, the United States has been at the top of the global hierarchy as a superpower [13], and the world has entered a unipolar world dominated by the United States. Paul Kennedy pointed out that more allies are not necessarily better, [14] but in the United States' view, more allies are necessarily better. Its alliances have not died

out as many scholars such as Waltz expected, but have instead embarked on a path of continuous expansion and increasing role: NATO has actively expanded eastward, encroaching on Russia's strategic space; the situation in East Asia is similar: in April 1996, Japan and the United States issued the "Japan-US Joint Declaration on Security Guarantee", redefining Japan-US security. In September 1997, the two countries launched a new "Japan-US Defense Cooperation Guidelines", and the Japan-US alliance was further strengthened. With the United States' "return to the Asia-Pacific", its alliances in East Asia and the Western Pacific have been comprehensively strengthened. It seems that the more prominent the United States' position in the world pattern and the more obvious its relative advantages are, the less secure it is. Is it the weak but ubiquitous al-Qaeda elements that make it insecure, or is it the rise of China and Russia's nuclear weapons that make it insecure? The answer is obvious: it is not the world that makes the United States insecure, but the United States that makes the world insecure. The root cause is that in addition to the rapid rise of the United States' strength, the change from a multipolar to a unipolar international structure has also created more and more free space for the United States to move in the alliance and in the world.

## 6. Conclusion

Under the unipolar structure, the United States has such a prominent relative advantage, but it is increasingly like what traditional realism says: focusing on power, increasing power, showing power, and even pursuing unlimited power. Waltz asked himself, why don't other countries check and balance the United States when it is so rampant? The reason is that in a world with only one major power, it is difficult to check and balance, which leads to the lack of checks and balances. Mastandono said that in the end, "power will check power", when? [15] Due to the stability of the structure, this situation is difficult to change in the short term. Future development depends on two factors: one is whether the emerging powers can adopt the right strategy for rising, and the other is whether the United States continues to make major strategic mistakes. [16] For China, the key is to "practice internal skills" and significantly improve its comprehensive national strength, which is very likely to change this situation.

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