

Summary of Reiter, "Learning, Realism, and Alliances"

In this article, Reiter seeks to test realist predictions for alliance behavior against those of learning theory, which proposes that states make alliance policy in accordance with lessons drawn from formative historical experiences.

The learning hypothesis has its basis in decision theory of social psychology, which portrays humans as making judgments based on knowledge structures and judgmental heuristics. Knowledge structures are schemata in which data are organized for retrieval: they are often used for the attribution of causation. Judgmental heuristics are used for inferences. Social psychologists maintain that belief systems tend to acquire inertia, making them unlikely to change to incorporate new information without a crisis or vivid experiences which forces a change in knowledge schemata.

Reiter hypothesizes that states will draw lessons from such formative events which then will guide their future policy decisions, until the occurrence of the next crisis. He defines "formative event" as a systemic war and limits his analysis to the alliance choices of minor powers. Reiter predicts that if a minor power experiences failure in its alliance policy during a formative event (World War I and II in his analysis), then it will innovate and change its future policy.

Reiter's Success/Failure Definitions:

- If a minor power was neutral and was not invaded = SUCCESS
- If a minor power was neutral and was invaded = FAILURE
- If a minor power was allied, was on the winning side, and was not invaded = SUCCESS
- If a minor power was allied, was invaded, but won more population in the postwar settlement than it lost in the war = SUCCESS
- If it was allied and on the losing side = FAILURE
- If it was allied, on the winning side but did not recover enough population in the postwar settlement to cover its wartime losses = FAILURE

Reiter draws two predictions from learning theory:

- 1) If a minor power experiences failure in its policy of alliance or neutrality with a great power in a systemic war, it will change policies. If it experiences success, it will continue with the policy.
- 2) A systemic war will produce a system-wide lesson on the effectiveness of alliance with a great power based on the experiences of all minor powers. Minor powers will then adopt policies congruent with this lesson.

Reiter then turns to a description of realist work on alliances and proposes that his article test a balance of threat prediction, the notion that probability of alliance is positively correlated with presence of external threat. He derives several hypotheses from this literature:

- 1) A minor power is more likely to prefer alliance with a great power if it perceives systemic war as imminent.
- 2) Given #1, if the minor power perceives a military disadvantage vis à vis the revisionist great power, it will prefer great power alliance.
- 3) If the minor power is geographically exposed and war is imminent, it is more likely to prefer great power alliance
- 4) If great powers have nonalliance defense commitments to the minor power, it is less likely to prefer alliance.
- 5) The level of perceived direct threat to the minor power is positively correlated to its preferences for alliance.
- 6) The more a minor power can count on minor power alliances or nonalliance great-power commitments, the less likely it will be to seek alliance.

Data Analysis:

- Analyzes cases of minor power alliance policy following World Wars I and II, using the Correlates of War data set
- Uses observations of foreign policy preferences taken at six year intervals after the crises ended

Logit analysis showed that the coefficients on the individual learning and the system learning hypotheses were statistically significant. The individual learning hypothesis correctly predicted most cases, and thus seemed the stronger of the two hypotheses. The variables for level of perceived direct threat were not statistically significant, leading to a rejection of hypotheses 5 and 6. However the presence of some threat at the systemic level did seem to have a significant effect. In this sample, however, Reiter finds that geographically exposed minor powers, when faced with a systemic threat, are less likely to prefer alliance. Reiter concludes that "individual experiences are powerful determinants of alliance preferences, and that variations in external threat, in contrast to the predictions of balance of threat realism, have very little effect."