

*Learning, Realism and Alliances: The Weight of the Shadow of the Past*

Dan Reiter

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Review by Bill Burke-White

Reiter's central claim is that "alliance choices of minor powers in the twentieth century were determined mainly by lessons drawn from formative national experiences, and only marginally by variations in the level of external threat" (526). The article tests "realist predictions for alliance behavior against those of learning theory." 490).

Reiter begins by exploring learning theory. In short, this theory assumes that "decision makers draw lessons from past experiences to help cope with difficult choices." (491). Social Psychology version of learning implies that schemas will be recalled to "present an explanation for the phenomenon in question." (492). The organizational behavior version of learning suggests that decisions will be based on target oriented, history dependent routines.

Next, Reiter defines the key terms and concepts, restricting the scope of his inquiry. He defines alliances narrowly, as "a formal mutual commitment to contribute military assistance in the event of one of the alliance partners is attacked" (495). Likewise, he limits his inquiry to minor powers alliance choices vis-à-vis great powers. Next, he develops binary specifications for learning from past events. He determines that if a minor power chose neutrality and was not invaded, the choice was successful. Likewise, if a minor power chose alliance and was on the winning side or acquired additional territory after the war, the decision was a success. On the other hand if the minor power chose neutrality and was invaded or chose alliance and was on the losing side, the decision was a failure.

These specification lead to two hypotheses of learning theory to test:

- (1) A minor power can attempt either alliance or neutrality with a great power in a systemic war. If it experiences failure, it will switch policies following the war; if it experiences success, it will continue that policy
- (2) A systemic war will produce a systemwide lesson on the effectiveness of alliance with a great power based on the sum of experiences of minor powers in the war. All minor powers will adopt policies in congruence with the systemwide lesson in the years following the war.

Reiter then explores traditional realist understandings of alliance formation and raises a number of criticisms of balance of power and balance of threat realism, without rejecting the fundamental realist assumptions. Specifically, he contends that neutrality must remain a valid category. He then provides six hypotheses based on different variants and aspects of realism to test against his learning hypothesis. These include alliance decisions based on perceptions of the likelihood of war, the revisionism of the great power, geography, non-alliance defense commitments, perceived direct threat, and minor power alliance formation.

A data set is then developed for states after WWI and WWII based on four data points in six year intervals after each war.

Reiter's results indicate that "individual learning is a powerful explanation." In other words, states tend to base their alliance decisions on events which happened to them specifically and not on overall systemic lessons of the war. The traditional realist hypothesis appear to have less explanatory value. Reiter then discusses a few regional cases—Scandinavia and the Middle East – to demonstrate how individual learning may have influenced alliance decisions in Scandinavia but does not fully explain decisions in the Middle East.