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Tripolarity and the Second World War

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This essay seeks to offer a new structural account of the outbreak of World War II and a more determinate balance-of-power theory based on two modifications of Kenneth Waltz's theory of international politics. First, the distribution of power in the international system is more precisely specified. Instead of simply counting the number of Great Powers to determine system polarity, units are divided into poles and middle powers and weighted according to their relative power capabilities. Second, states are coded as either status quo or revisionist. The revised theory more accurately reflects the twin foci of classical realist thought: the power and interests of states. Several deductions from the model, however, contradict basic tenets of balance-of-power theory. At the theoretical and empirical levels, the theory is used to examine the dynamics of tripolar systems and to explain the alliance strategies of the seven major powers (three of which were poles) shortly before and during the Second World War.

Introduction

Although it is widely believed that systemic constraints and pressures played an important role in the origins of the First World War, scholars typically do not associate structural factors with the outbreak of the Second World War. The common image of World War I pictures statesmen hopelessly goaded on the horns of a structural dilemma, unable to prevent a war that none of them wanted, whereas that of World War II evokes a tragic drama driven by a unique cast of deplorable characters.

Reinhard Meyers suggests that the problem with the standard historical account of World War II is that "the actors in the drama appear only as personified images, no longer as real persons. . . . The drama has a villain (Hitler) and a sinner (Chamberlain)—what more does one need to explain the outbreak of war in 1939, especially when the supporting roles are played by lesser villains such as Mussolini and Stalin, and lesser sinners like Beck and Daladier" (quoted in Richardson, 1988:305).

Most students of international relations also employ a villain/sinner image to explain the origins of World War II. The father of neorealism himself, Kenneth Waltz, at least partially endorses it:

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A small-number system can always be disrupted by the actions of a Hitler and the reactions of a Chamberlain. . . . One may lament Churchill's failure to gain control of the British government in the 1930s, for he knew what actions were required to maintain a balance of power. (1979:175–176)

Likewise, prominent game theorists such as Emerson Niou and Peter Ordeshook “sympathize . . . with the analyses that interpret Hitler’s personality . . . as critical to the outbreak of World War II rather than some breakdown in traditional balance-of-power forces” (1990:1231). And John Mueller argues that Hitler alone caused World War II: “It almost seems that after World War I the only person left in Europe who was willing to risk another total war was Adolf Hitler” (1988:75).

Seeking to shed new light on an important case which scholars have come to think of as familiar, in this essay I attempt to show that system-level factors played a crucial role in the outbreak of the Second World War. I argue that in 1938 the system was tripolar—not multipolar (5 or more poles) as claimed by Waltz (1979), Posen (1984), and Christensen and Snyder (1990)—and that this explains much of the alliance patterns and foreign-policy strategies of the major powers prior to and during the war.

One reason nonsystemic explanations have dominated the literature on World War II is that the predictions of balance-of-power theory—the most widely accepted structural theory of international relations and the cornerstone of realist theory—are often indeterminate and thus not very useful (see Haas, 1953; Gulick, 1955; Claude, 1962; Liska, 1962:26–27; Wolfers, 1962:ch. 8). In *Theory of International Politics* (1979), Waltz attempts to solve this problem by recasting classical realism in a more rigorous and deductive mold. Operating at a high level of abstraction, Waltz’s theory addresses broad questions: why balances recurrently form after their disruption; what degree of stability is to be expected of international systems of varying structures; and how the constraining effects of structure reduce the variety of behaviors and outcomes so that balancing behavior results even when no state seeks balance as an end.

Waltz’s ideas have been both the intellectual springboard for important research within the structural-realist paradigm (Posen, 1984; Walt, 1987; Grieco, 1988; Christensen and Snyder, 1990; Mearsheimer, 1990) and the main target of neorealism’s detractors (Kaplan, 1979:1–89; Rosecrance, 1981; Keohane, 1986; Wendt, 1987; Dessler, 1989; Milner, 1991). Some critics of Waltz’s theory charge that in its sacrifice of richness for rigor structural realism winds up being a caricature of classical realism rather than a model of it (Ashley, 1984).¹ Others admire the power and elegance of Waltz’s theory but complain that, as a systemic-level theory, it is too abstract to generate useful hypotheses about specific foreign-policy behavior, as Waltz readily admits (Keohane, 1983:512–527; Ruggie, 1983:267–268; Keohane, 1986; Nye, 1988:245; Christensen and Snyder, 1990). By sacrificing some of Waltz’s parsimony, however, it is possible to turn his theory of international politics into one of foreign policy.

The aim of this essay, then, is twofold: (1) to offer a new structural interpretation for the origins of World War II, and (2) to devise a systems theory that yields determinate balance-of-power predictions. The article opens with two modifications of Waltz’s theory: (1) the distribution of capabilities is measured not only by the number of Great Powers but also by their relative size, and (2) states are identified as either status quo or revisionist powers. The theory is then applied to analysis of tripolar dynamics, to a discussion of alliance patterns, and to an explanation of the alliance strategies of the Great Powers during the period 1938–1945.

¹Though far more sympathetic to Waltz’s work than Ashley, Glenn Snyder (1991:123, 138) raises similar concerns in his critique of Walt (1987) and Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose (1989).

The essay concludes by suggesting implications of the analysis for the post-Cold War world, which may be becoming tripolar.

Two Modifications of Waltz's Systems Theory

The Distribution of Capabilities

Waltz offers a tripartite theoretical definition of system structure: (1) the ordering principle, either anarchy or hierarchy; (2) the functional differentiation of units; and (3) the distribution of capabilities. He claims that because international politics take place within an anarchic realm and that "as long as anarchy endures, states remain like units," international systems differ only along the third dimension, the distribution of capabilities (Waltz, 1979:93). Waltz operationalizes this dimension by simply counting the number of Great Powers in the system; the total number of Great Powers defines the polarity of the system.

Historically, however, the resources of the Great Powers have varied considerably, and these imbalances often prove decisive in explaining their individual foreign-policy strategies (Tucker, 1977). The key question is, Does it matter that Waltz abstracts considerably from reality?

For Waltz, the answer is clearly no; his theory pertains to the properties of systems, not individual states. For those who would use his theory to explain foreign policy (*e. g.*, Posen, 1984; Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 1990), however, it does pose a problem, as Christensen and Snyder correctly point out (1990:138). To turn Waltz's ideas into a theory of foreign policy, the descriptive accuracy of the theory must be improved to account for power inequalities among the major actors.

Not surprisingly, recent attempts to apply Waltz's theory to analysis of the post-Cold War system have focused on power asymmetries among the Great Powers. For instance, Mearsheimer states: "Both [bipolar and multipolar] systems are more peaceful when equality is greatest among the poles" (1990:18). Many analysts, however, strongly disagree with this proposition (Organski, 1958:271-338; Wagner, 1986; Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose, 1989; Niou and Ordeshook, 1990). Niou and Ordeshook conclude that system stability does not require "either a uniform or a highly asymmetric resource distribution" (1990:1230). And Wagner (1986) and Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose (1989) maintain that the most "peaceful distribution" is one in which one actor controls exactly half of the system's resources.

To specify more fully the distribution of capabilities, I employ a two-step process. First, each Great Power is weighted according to its relative share of the total resources of the major-power subsystem. This measure captures the relative power disparities among the Great Powers and drives the analysis. By itself, however, it is too unwieldy to be useful as a way to classify different types of systems. To solve this problem, I further divide the Great Powers into two tiers: poles and second-ranking Great Powers (hereafter called middle powers). To qualify as a pole, a state must have greater than half the resources of the most powerful state in the system; all other Great Powers are classed as middle powers. This conception of polarity accords with the commonsense notion that poles must be Great Powers of the first rank. Middle powers can play important roles as kingmakers or stabilizers, but the behavior of the poles, due to their size, has the greatest effect on the system.

The Character of the Units: State Interest

Waltz assumes that states are "unitary rational actors, who, at a minimum, seek their own preservation and, at a maximum, drive for universal domination" (Waltz, 1979:118). He further asserts that, for his theory to work, it need not be assumed

that “all of the competing states are striving relentlessly to increase their power,” only that some states continue to maintain an interest in preserving themselves (1979:118). While acknowledging that units may differ according to their power-seeking interests, Waltz does not incorporate this unit variation in his definition of international structure—it simply washes out of the analysis. States are described instead as like units. This is important for two reasons.

First, the characteristic balancing behavior of Waltz’s self-help international system is triggered precisely by states that wish not simply to survive but to weaken and destroy other states, and, at a maximum, to “become so powerful as to be able to coerce all the rest put together” (Friedrich Gentz, quoted in Gulick, 1955:34). Since Waltz makes no attempt to determine the extent of a state’s goals from its structural position in the system, the catalyst driving his theory must come from outside the boundaries of his system (see Snyder, forthcoming; Wendt, 1992:395). Second, Waltz’s theory assumes that systems of the same polarity behave similarly despite differences in the power interests of the units. Walt (1987) convincingly shows, however, that states ally to balance against threats rather than against power alone. Thus, changes in unit interests alone can drastically alter system dynamics and stability.

For these reasons, I treat the power preferences of the actors as a model-based feature that differentiates both the units of the system and, as a result, systems of the same structure. For the sake of parsimony, the continuous concept of state interest will be reduced to a dichotomous variable; units are identified as either status quo or revisionist.

Status quo powers are usually those states that won the last major-power war and created a new world order in accordance with their interests by redistributing territory and prestige (Wolfers, 1962:18, 84–86; Seabury, 1965; Buzan, 1983:175–186). As satiated powers, status quo states seek primarily to keep, not increase, their resources. For these states, the costs of war exceed the gains.

By contrast, revisionist states—variously called imperialist (Morgenthau, 1948), expansive (Weber, 1946), revolutionary (Kissinger, 1957), have-not (Mattern, 1942), aggressors (Jervis, 1978), or unsatiated powers (Schuman, 1948:377–380)—are those states that seek to increase, not just keep, their resources. For these states, the gains from war exceed the costs. Revisionist states are often those states that have increased their power “after the existing international order was fully established and the benefits were already allocated” (Organski and Kugler, 1980:19). Thus, they often share a common desire to overturn the status quo order—the prestige, resources, and principles of the system.

Revisionist states are not always actively engaged in overturning the status quo; they may be temporarily passive because they lack the relative economic, military, and/or political capabilities needed to challenge the protector(s) of the status quo (*e. g.*, the Soviet Union, 1919–39; Germany, 1919–36; and Japan, 1919–31). Buzan points out, “even the most rabid revisionist state cannot pursue its larger objectives if it cannot secure its home base” (1983:177). It should also be noted that revisionist states need not be predatory powers; they may oppose the status quo for defensive reasons. As Schuman comments, revisionist states typically “feel humiliated, hampered, and oppressed by the *status quo*” and thus “demand changes, rectifications of frontiers, a revision of treaties, a redistribution of territory and power” to modify it (1948:378).

By elevating the concept of state interest to a position equally prominent as that of the distribution of capabilities, the model more accurately reflects the twin-pillared aspect of traditional realist theory—its equal focus on both the power and interests of states. Unlike Waltz’s theory, which is all structure and no units, the revised theory contains complex unit-structure interactions: predictions are co-

determined by the power and interests of the units and the structures within which they are embedded. Because neither level is “ontologically primitive,” the theory offers a partial solution to the agent-structure problem raised by Wendt (1987).

Other factors, such as geography and military technology, might be added to the theory (see Jervis, 1978; Hopf, 1991; Christensen and Snyder, 1990). I mention these elements when necessary, but space limitations prevent their full incorporation within the model. It is my contention, however, that these factors are generally less important than the power and interests of the units—without which geography and military technology provide only partial answers. Supporting this view, Posen tests hypotheses on geography and military technology against the military doctrines of interwar France, Britain, and Germany and finds that these factors alone are indeterminate (1984:236–239; also see Levy, 1984).

The next step is to link unit-structure interactions to expected outcomes, that is, system stability, alliance patterns, individual foreign-policy strategies. The theory’s two independent variables combine to produce many permutations, each of which must be analyzed according to its own systemic properties. For this reason, it is not possible to make quick deductions for all types of systems, let alone tests for all classes of cases. The discussion will therefore be limited to tripolarity and the Second World War, arguably the two most misunderstood cases.

Tripolar Systems

Given the definitional requirement that the weakest pole must have greater than half the resources of the strongest pole, there are four possible tripolar power configurations:

- (1) $A = B = C$
- (2) $A > B = C, A < B + C$
- (3) $A < B = C$
- (4) $A > B > C, A < B + C$

Definitions

- (1) Revisionist powers: states that seek to increase their resources.
- (2) Status quo powers: states that seek only to keep their resources.
- (3) To qualify as a pole, a state must have greater than half the resources of the most powerful state in the system; all other Great Powers are classed as middle powers.
- (4) Resources = military power potential.
- (5) System stability means that no actor in the system is eliminated.

Assumptions

- (1) Wars are costly; for revisionist states, the gains from war for nonsecurity expansion exceed the costs; for status quo states they do not.
- (2) The alternatives among which the members of the triad may choose are: (a) do nothing; (b) align with another member to block an attack; (c) align with another member to eliminate the third member; (d) wage a lone attack to eliminate one or both members of the triad.
- (3) A stronger member or coalition defeats a weaker member or coalition.
- (4) The strength of a coalition equals the combined total resources of its members: If $A = 3$ and $B = 2$, then $AB = 5$.

- (5) In a coalition attack, the resources of the victim are divided proportionately among the winning coalition members. In a lone attack, they are absorbed in total by the victor.
- (6) Resources are increased only by eliminating a member of the triad. States do not voluntarily cede resources.

Among other things, this last assumption and the inclusion of status quo states distinguish the present analysis from that of Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose (1989:93–97). Glenn Snyder notes in his critique of Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose that their assumption of infinitely divisible and freely transferable resources (1989:47) allows the authors to assert

that states will voluntarily cede resources to a stronger challenger or attacker if necessary to avoid elimination and that, in turn, the challenger will accept the resource transfers in preference to gaining the same amount by war. . . . Hence, the device of peaceful ceding of resources was introduced to permit the third party to save itself . . . by buying off a member of the threatening coalition at a price short of suicide. The logical fit between bargaining-set theory and a desired theoretical outcome—stability—was improved, but at considerable cost to empirical realism. (Snyder, 1991:134, 136)

Thus, Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose find, but I do not, that “the key feature of a three-country system is that no nation will be eliminated” (1989:95).

Conversely, Wagner’s analysis of three-actor systems (1986:554–559) assumes, as I do, that the power of states can only be increased by conquest. But in contrast to my assumption that the spoils are divided proportionately among the victors, Wagner assumes that states absorb the victim’s “resources at a maximum rate of r units per ‘day’” and “if two states are at war with a third, the rates at which they can each absorb the third’s resources are determined . . . by how the victim targets its resources at the two opposing states” (1986:549–550). Given the rules of Wagner’s game, it follows that the victim must target its resources unequally, thereby forcing the more-opposed attacker to defect before the less- (or un-) opposed attacker gains more than half the resources of the system. Thus, Wagner also concludes that no actor is ever eliminated in a three-actor system. The usefulness of Wagner’s assumption is an empirical question, but it is worth noting that Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, long rivals, eliminated Poland; neither attacker defected to the victim’s side.

Type 1. The Equilateral Tripolar System: $A = B = C$

This is the most unstable of all power configurations because it cannot be balanced by external means (alliances). Whereas this is true of any odd-numbered system composed of equal units, the imbalance is proportionally greatest in this triad, where A and B combined possess 66 percent of the total resources, as against C ’s 33 percent share. (See Burns, 1957:494–499; Caplow, 1968; Dittmer, 1981; Kaplan, 1957:34; Kaplan, Burns, and Quandt, 1960:244; Healy and Stein, 1973; and Waltz, 1979:163. Conversely, Garnham, 1985:20; Niou, Ordeshook, and Rose, 1989; Ostrom and Aldrich, 1978:766; and Wagner, 1986:575 find three-actor systems the most stable.) To ensure its survival, each pole must prevent the formation of a hostile two-against-one coalition. This, in turn, depends upon the specific mix of revisionist and status quo poles within the triad.

One Revisionist Pole. Given only one revisionist pole, a stable system should result. Potential aggression will likely take the form of the lone revisionist pole attacking the nearest status quo pole. But such an attack is improbable because individual

aggression in tripolarity tends to be self-defeating. On the one hand, if a stalemate results (and this is most likely among equally powerful poles), both combatants are weakened in relation to the neutral, or enjoying, third (*tertius gaudens*), who obviously has no incentive to join the fray. On the other, if the revisionist pole appears to be winning, the neutral third must join the status quo pole to ensure its own survival. Consequently, war is unlikely because the revisionist attacker can expect only a war of attrition or certain defeat.

A geographically distanced pole may assume one of four roles: (1) *tertius gaudens*, (2) the abettor, (3) the eyewitness, or (4) the mediator. The first two are likely to be played by a revisionist pole, the latter two by a status quo pole. As *tertius gaudens*, the remote pole turns the dissension of the two geographically proximate poles to its own advantage by asking an exploitative price for its support. As the abettor, it instigates conflict between the other members of the triad for its own purposes. In the role of eyewitness, it does nothing and seeks nothing from the conflict. In the mediator role, it declares neutrality toward the conflict and works to stabilize the triad.²

Two Revisionist Poles. A tripolar system composed of two revisionist poles is typically unstable because both power-maximizers are highly motivated to augment their resources at the expense of the lone status quo pole. As a result, the two revisionist poles can be expected to put aside their competition temporarily so as to make substantial gains. And because the winning coalition consists of two equally powerful partners, each member can expect to gain half the spoils, such that neither pole will be left vulnerable to the other after the war. Hence, there is little to prevent the partitioning of the isolated status quo state. Eliminating a member of the triad transforms the system into a relatively stable but competitive bipolar system, as the two remaining poles (both power-maximizers seeking gains at the other's expense) are expected to resume their rivalry.

A favorable geographic position may temporarily protect the lone status quo pole, but it will not appreciably stabilize this type of tripolar system. Suppose that the two revisionist poles are in close geographical proximity and the status quo pole is distanced from them. The triad contains, in effect, two subsystems: one bipolar, the other unipolar, wherein the rivalry between the two revisionist poles protects the remote status quo pole by preventing them from ganging up against it. The status quo power may assume the role of either "the enjoying third" or the "abettor." In either case, it remains on the sidelines, hoping that the two revisionist poles will bleed each other to death.

But this is a dangerous strategy for the status quo power. One of the revisionist poles may be able to defeat the other either by forming a winning alliance with one or more revisionist powers or by devouring weaker states until enough additional resources are acquired to defeat the nearest pole. Once accomplished, the victorious revisionist pole would be in control of at least twice as many resources as the lone status quo pole. (I will discuss Hitler's use of this strategy and why it failed.)

Three Revisionist Poles. In this case, in which all three members are of equal strength and are revisionist powers, any possible coalition—*AB*, *BC*, and *AC*—is equally likely, making it an extremely volatile situation. All three members seek coalition, since isolation means extinction. But the structure of this type of tripolar system prohibits external "balancing" behavior (alliances for the purpose of coun-

²I have borrowed the terms "abettor" and "eyewitness" from Liska (1962: 163–164); "*tertius gaudens*" and "the mediator" are taken from Caplow (1968:20); who, in turn, borrowed them from Simmel (1950:148–149).

terbalancing a stronger or more threatening power or alliance) because any coalition easily *defeats* the isolated third member. In addition, since all three members are revisionist powers, each pole must always be suspicious of the other two and none can enjoy true, long-term security. Consequently, this system should exhibit the tendency to evolve into a stable bipolar system, as two poles will be tempted to destroy the isolated third to gain lasting security. Eliminating one pole through partitioning should not present major difficulties because each member of the winning coalition is of equal strength and is therefore entitled to an equal share of the spoils.

Three Status Quo Poles. This, of course, is the most stable tripolar system because the interests of the actors are not strictly opposed to each other. In this system, in which no pole seeks the elimination of any other, the integrity of all three actors is virtually assured. Continued systemic stability simply requires the poles to make their intentions known, avoid provocative acts, and coordinate and consult with the others about their individual foreign policies. Their tacit agreement not to attack other poles in the system may be formalized by mutual non-aggression pacts between all dyads and/or a collective security agreement, wherein each pole promises to come to the aid of any attacked pole.

Type 2. The Paradox of Power: $A > B = C$ but $A < B + C$

In this type of tripolar system, *A* is slightly stronger than *B* and *C*, who are of equal strength. All three members strive for a coalition, as any combination defeats the isolated member. Paradoxically, when *A* is a revisionist pole, its strength proves to be a handicap, since both *B* and *C* find *A* less attractive as a coalition partner than each other. This is true because, in either an *AB* or *AC* alliance, *A* would be in control of its weaker partner. Consequently, *A*, in a coalition with either *B* or *C*, would be expected to gain at least an equal share of the rewards, and probably the lion's share—further disadvantaging the weaker ally, who must receive the bulk of the reward to gain security. Alternatively, a *BC* coalition (in which both *B* and *C* are of equal strength) secures an equal distribution of the reward and does not threaten either member.

Conversely, when *A* is a status quo pole, either *B* or *C* may align with it against the isolated third. Such an alignment is especially likely if either *B* or *C* is a status quo state, in which case an overpowering status quo coalition will form to oppose the lone revisionist member of the triad. Finally, when all three poles are status quo states, no coalition is predicted because there is no threat. (This “no-coalition” prediction holds for any system composed of all status quo units.)

Type 3. The Partitioned Third and the Balancer: $A < B = C$

The Partitioned Third. When both *B* and *C* are revisionist, *A* cannot align with either, because once the coalition has partitioned the isolated member of the triad, *A* will be destroyed by its stronger ally. The only remaining alliance, therefore, is *BC*, which can safely partition *A* because its members are of equal strength. Indeed, for security reasons alone, *B* and *C* should partition *A*: *B* must block *AC* and *C* must prevent *AB*. Therefore, the most likely scenario is the formation of a *BC* coalition for the purpose of partitioning *A* and achieving an equal balance between *B* and *C*.

The Balancer. However, if *B* and *C* are mutually hostile, then it is clearly in *A*'s interest to prolong their rivalry by acting as a balancer, gaining at the expense of the other two poles. The role of balancer, however, is a dangerous one for the weakest pole in the system to play because it must guarantee through skillful

diplomacy that the two warring poles do not temporarily set aside their differences to gang up against it. This is no easy task, for by playing the role of balancer and continually frustrating the desires of *B* and *C*, *A* cultivates—through the years—a certain amount of bitterness from both *B* and *C*. Thus, one would expect that typically the balancer role would be played by a state that was stronger than the other two combined, not by the weakest triadic member.

Type 4. The Unbalanced Tripolar System: $A > B > C$ but $A < B + C$

Although the logic is counterintuitive, a tripolar system is most likely to exhibit stability when at least some of the poles are of unequal weights. Consider, for instance, a tripolar system in which the power ratio among the three poles is $A = 5$, $B = 4$, $C = 3$. Let us further assume that all members of the triad are revisionist powers. At first glance, this system appears to be extremely unstable (*i. e.*, one of the actors will be eliminated) and war prone, since any contest between two actors is decisive and any coalition is a winning coalition. Yet it proves to be a very simple and stable form of a balance-of-power system.

First, consider an isolated attack within this triad. In such a situation, it is immediately obvious to the third power that it must block the efforts of the attacker by joining the weaker side, or else be dominated by the victor. The attacker knows not only that the third power must resist its efforts to destroy the initial victim, but also that it has no hope of prevailing against such a coalition. Thus, a stronger member of the triad will not be tempted to attack a weaker power; the dynamics of the system discourage offensive actions.

Now let us consider an attack by a coalition against an isolated third pole. Although every coalition is a winning coalition, all pairings in a 5-4-3 triad are unbalanced—they consist of a stronger and a weaker member. Thus, if any coalition formed, went to war, and won as expected, the system would be transformed into a dyad with the weaker pole at the mercy of its stronger partner. The weaker ally will be imperiled even if the spoils of victory are divided equally rather than according to each member's proportionate resources.³

In summary, given the dynamics of this system, any pairing will inevitably result in only one remaining actor; since this is obvious to all three poles, no coalition forms in the first place. Though all actors may be power-maximizers and every pairing forms a winning coalition, the workings of the system virtually assure the continued integrity of the actors and the absence of war among them. This is true for all mixes of revisionist and status quo states, except the following case.

Two Status Quo Poles. Ironically, when there are two status quo poles, the system is potentially unstable. In this situation, the status quo poles may be motivated, for defensive purposes, to wage a preventive war to destroy the revisionist pole, which poses a latent if not immediate threat to their individual security.

Hypotheses on Alliance Patterns

So far, the discussion has been limited to the behavior of only polar powers. This analysis leads to broad expectations about the overall stability of the four types of tripolar systems, but it does not explain the specific dynamics of a given historical

³Even supposing that the stronger member promises in advance to turn over the lion's share of the spoils to its weaker partner, the latter must still reject the offer. This is because, after the initially targeted pole has been vanquished, the stronger pole no longer has any incentive (and it cannot be coerced) to comply with the agreement.

case. For this we need to consider the behavior of middle and small powers as well as poles and develop a general theory of alliance dynamics, based on the two variables of the model—differences in unit size and interests. Unlike the prior analysis of tripolar systems, these hypotheses apply to all classes of balance-of-power systems, that is, bipolar, tripolar, and multipolar.

The Size Principle

William Riker's "size-principle" hypothesis posits that the coalition most likely to form is one that contains just enough strength to defeat the opposing players (1962:32–33). This so-called minimum winning coalition is attributed to the commonsense desire among the winners not to spread the spoils among superfluous partners. The greater the number of losers, the greater the sum of their losses and the greater the gains of the winners; and the fewer the winners, the greater the share of each winner. Thus, given three players of the following sizes, $A = 4$, $B = 3$, and $C = 2$, the size-principle hypothesis predicts a BC coalition.

The added complexity of more-than-three actor games, however, reduces the determinateness of Riker's theory. If A , B , C , D equal 4, 2, 2, 1, respectively, the minimum winning coalition or size principle predicts either an AD or BCD coalition.⁴ Experimental evidence has shown, however, that AD is more likely than BCD because AD is a one-step coalition whereas BCD requires two steps. Hence, bargaining costs are cheaper and less complex for AD than BCD (Shears, 1967; Russett, 1968:292).

In contrast to Riker, Theodore Caplow (1968) assumes that each player desires control over all others, including the members of its own coalition. Consequently, each actor prefers, *ceteris paribus*, to align with weaker coalition partners.

Returning to the example where A , B , C , D equal 4, 2, 2, and 1, respectively, Caplow's theory predicts a BCD coalition instead of AD because (given the large power disparity between A and D) D would be extremely vulnerable to A after the defeat of B and C . Instead, D feels more secure with B and C , which are only twice as strong as D , than with A , which is four times as powerful (see Rothstein, 1968:61). Broadly speaking, the anarchic international environment forces all states to consider seriously the possibility that today's ally will be tomorrow's enemy. Analysis of coalition formation must consider that "the weakest player, by joining a nearly predominant strong player, only creates a condition in which he will be the next victim" (Kaplan, 1979:70). Caplow's theory takes this into account; Riker's theory does not.

The Size Principle: Status Quo and Revisionist Coalitions

Riker's size-principle hypothesis clearly applies to revisionist powers. This is because the *raison d'être* of offensive alliances is to maximize one's share of the spoils of victory. Any additional member beyond what is needed for victory diminishes each member's share of the winnings. Hence, revisionist states desire a coalition, as Riker argues, just strong enough to defeat the target, and no stronger. Moreover, the demands of revisionist states are not always complementary; thus, a revisionist state will want to put together a coalition with as few members as possible and with states that do not hold conflicting territorial interests.

Conversely, status quo powers, whose primary interest is self-preservation and system stability, form alliances to deter or defeat revisionist states or coalitions. It is

⁴Moreover, under real-world conditions, even rational players may be uncertain of the distribution of power in the system. Riker's assumption of perfect information may therefore limit the empirical validity of coalition predictions based on the size principle (see Riker, 1962:48).

reasonable to assume, therefore, that they do not seek minimum winning coalitions but rather very large coalitions, which better serve defensive or deterrent purposes. Indeed, the larger the coalition, the less cost to each member of balancing against the threat. This is not to imply that free-rider problems do not exist in large coalitions (see Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966; Sandler and Cauley, 1975; Murdoch and Sandler, 1982; Thies, 1987; Oneal, 1990). It is precisely because alliance members can be expected to do less than their fair share that it makes sense to form a coalition that is clearly overpowering, not slightly more powerful than the aggressor(s). This is Woodrow Wilson's idea that states are only deterred by the threat of a community of power, not a balance of power.

Moreover, when the expansionist threat is large, there is less of a temptation to free-ride. This is because, as Jervis argues:

International coalitions are more readily held together by fear than hope of gain. . . . It is no accident that most of the major campaigns of expansion have been waged by one dominant nation (for example, Napoleon's France and Hitler's Germany), and that coalitions among relative equals are usually found defending the status quo. Most gains from conquest are too uncertain and raise too many questions of future squabbles among the victors to hold an alliance together for long. Although defensive coalitions are by no means easy to maintain . . . the common interest of seeing that no state dominates provides a strong incentive for solidarity. (1978:204–205)

For these reasons, the concept of the minimum winning coalition—which derives its logic from expectations of dividing the spoils of victory—is not operative for status quo alliances, whose *raison d'être* is defense and/or deterrence, not conquest. Note that this hypothesis—that status quo states are attracted to coalitions larger than necessary to defeat or deter the opposing state or alliance—contradicts a central tenet of balance-of-power theory, namely, that states react to power imbalances by joining the weaker side.

Indeed, all states were welcomed to pool their resources to fight Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler, and most recently Saddam Hussein. Thus, by war's end the resources of the status quo coalitions far exceeded those of the aggressors (Kennedy, 1987). Because Riker assumes that all actors are power-maximizers (none are status quo), he cannot explain why coalitions larger than necessary for victory have repeatedly formed throughout history. Critics of Riker's analysis point out that his assumption of only maximizing units also leads him to conclude (1962:160) wrongly that balance-of-power systems should be in continual disequilibrium (Zinnes, 1970:356–362; Wagner, 1986:569).

Status quo states are not afforded the luxury of the size principle; they must endure the annoyances of large alliances, that is, increased transaction costs, disagreements over rules and decisionmaking procedures that have distributional consequences regarding the burdens and benefits within the alliance (Stein, 1983; Snyder, 1984; Krasner, 1991).

Revisionist States Flock Together: Bandwagoning Alliances. Alliances are rarely a mix of revisionist and status quo states. This is because revisionist states will only join a defensive, status quo coalition if their survival absolutely demands it; otherwise they will flock together to overturn the status quo and thereby improve their power positions. Such bandwagoning behavior, however, creates tension for the revisionist leader, who, seeking a minimum winning coalition, must guard against “predatory” buckpassing, that is, allowing smaller revisionist states to gain unearned spoils. Thus, though revisionist states tend to flock together, they do so only in a limited sense: they will not balance against the dominant revisionist power but will support it in the hope of attaining their own irredentist aims. Such behavior is captured by the Italian Foreign Minister's remark of September 25, 1938, that “the

Duce and I, though we did not incite Germany to war, have done nothing to restrain her" (*Ciano's Diary, 1937–1938*, 1952:162).

For the same reason that revisionist states flock together, status quo states cannot readily embrace a revisionist state: to do so would be to risk unraveling the status quo to which they are committed. Further, status quo coalitions promise a smaller payoff to dissatisfied states than do revisionist coalitions, since the former cannot, in principle and for domestic political reasons, offer territorial incentives to wean the revisionist state away from a revisionist coalition.

Distancing. In addition to the formation of alliances through balancing and bandwagoning behavior, the proposed theory identifies a third type of response to threats: distancing, or no coalition. This hypothesis posits that threatened status quo states will not join the weaker side if the potential coalition cannot achieve enough deterrent or defensive strength to dissuade adversaries from attacking.

Suppose revisionist state *A* threatens status quo states *B* and *C*, and $A > B + C$: no coalition is predicted, since *A*'s strength exceeds *B* and *C* combined (which means that either *B* or *C* is not a pole, or both are not poles). In these types of situations, in which *A* is the dictator, a *BC* coalition will not form because not only does joining the weaker side fail to make the state safer, it is also dangerous: the state commits itself to being dragged into a war it cannot win. Associating with the weaker alliance also increases the likelihood that the state will be seen as a potential target; at the same time it depletes the state's already inadequate resources for the defense of its allies—resources that would be better spent on home defense. Consequently, it will seek to distance itself from other, more immediately threatened states, choosing to remain isolated even though potential allies are available.

Summary of Hypotheses on Alliance Patterns

- (1) If a status quo state or coalition has enough strength to deter or defend against the revisionist state(s), it will balance against it.
- (2) If the combined strength of two or more status quo states is less than the threatening revisionist power, no coalition will form. Instead, less directly threatened status quo states will distance themselves from available allies that are more directly threatened by the aggressor(s).
- (2a) Corollary: The stronger two or more status quo states become in relation to a more powerful revisionist state(s), the more they will draw together to oppose it; the weaker they get, the more they will draw apart.
- (3) Revisionist states not immediately threatened by a stronger revisionist state or coalition will seek to bandwagon with it and will not balance against it. Revisionist states flock together.
- (4) If an alliance forms for offensive purposes, it will operate according to Riker's size-principle hypothesis. Revisionist states seek minimum winning coalitions.
- (5) If an alliance forms for defensive or deterrence purposes, its members will seek additional partners beyond the minimum required to defeat the external threat. Status quo states seek large, not minimum winning, coalitions.

The Case Study: Tripolarity and the Second World War

World War II was chosen as the case study for the following reason: applying my definition of a pole to the Correlates-of-War computation of major-power capability shares yields *only* one instance of tripolarity in the post-1815 period: the 1936–39 system (only partial data exists for the years 1940 to 1945). Given the preceding

discussion of tripolarity, the case was essentially chosen for me. Luckily, the late-interwar period is intrinsically interesting and important because it engendered one of only two world wars this century. It should also be emphasized that the analysis examines the alliance strategies of all seven major powers (*i. e.*, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the U.S.). Hence, the case of World War II is actually seven separate cases.

Operationalizing the Variables

Capabilities. Data from the Correlates of War project is used to measure the relative capabilities of the major powers.⁵ Though the COW measures stress military forces-in-being, I believe that this is appropriate for the present analysis. It will be shown that statesmen, in choosing their course of action, responded to the current balance of power: for example, by 1937, Hitler saw Germany's military advantage as a wasting asset and so decided to wage a series of offensive wars before his window of opportunity closed; and though it is true that the U.S., before entering the war, could have extracted far more resources from its economy than it did, this provided little comfort to Britain and France in 1940 or to the Soviets in 1941.

COW capability scores reflect three distinct measures of national power: (1) military (forces-in-being), (2) industrial (war potential), and (3) demographic (staying power and war-augmenting capability). Each component is divided into two subcomponents. The military dimension consists of the number of military personnel and military expenditures; the industrial component is measured by production of pig iron (pre-1900) or ingot steel (post-1900) and fuel consumption; and the demographic component is divided into urban and total population. The composite power index is the sum of each state's mean score for the six measures as a percentage of all scores within the Great-Power subset.

As Table 1 indicates, by 1938 the international system was tripolar, with Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union comprising the three poles. Britain and France had fallen from the first tier, joining Japan and Italy as middle powers.

Interests. A state will be coded "revisionist" if (a) it expressed bitter dissatisfaction with the territorial changes, treaty revisions, or reparations that resulted from the last major-power war (whether it was on the winning or losing side), or (b) it grew to full power after the new order was established and complained that its increased power entitled it to greater benefits (territorial or prestige). All states that do not fall into at least one of these categories will be labeled "status quo."

TABLE 1. COW percentage share distribution of Great-Power capabilities, 1938.

USSR	U.S.	Germany	U.K.	Japan	France	Italy
25.0	22.7	20.2	10.4	9.4	6.9	4.9

Source: Compiled using the "Correlates of War" capability data-set printout (December 1987) made available through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.

⁵The COW capability index provides a reasonably accurate picture of the power bases held by the major actors with respect to their relative fighting capabilities. Originally a skeptic myself, I arrived at this view after having constructed my own "capability-index formula" (data available upon request) to test the validity and reliability of the COW numbers for the period 1938–40. My formula consists of ten separate power indices—eight of which are not used in the COW capability index—which attempt to measure the critical mass (population and territory), economic war potential, and military capabilities of the Great Powers. The result of this mini-experiment was that the Great-Power capability shares yielded by my index and the COW index were virtually identical.

Applying these criteria to the interwar period, Britain, France, and the U.S. won the last major-power war, established the new order, and thus were sated status quo powers. By contrast, Germany and Russia⁶ were both defeated in the First World War and saw the map of Europe redrawn largely at their expense. (Austria-Hungary was the biggest loser, of course.) Germany also suffered the loss of its colonies, huge reparation payments, and severe limitations on the size and equipment of its armed forces. Italy and Japan, though technically victors in the First World War, felt so betrayed by the Versailles peace settlement that they could not be relied upon to defend the new order. By the 1930s, both states had substantially increased their military power and sought to expand beyond their present territorial borders. As expected, Rome and Tokyo pursued naked revisionist aims: Mussolini tried to create a second Roman Empire, while Imperial Japan strove for hegemony over East Asia (the so-called Co-Prosperity Sphere, which it announced in 1938). In fact, these two middle powers unleashed the initial blows against the status quo order.

Table 2 converts the COW numbers into ratios and specifies the interests of the states:

TABLE 2. The capabilities and interests of the major powers, 1938.

<i>State</i>	<i>Type</i>	<i>Power</i>	<i>Interest</i>
USSR	pole	5.0	revisionist
U.S.	pole	4.5	status quo
Germany	pole	4.0	revisionist
Britain	middle	2.1	status quo
Japan	middle	1.9	revisionist
France	middle	1.4	status quo
Italy	middle	1.0	revisionist

A.W. DePorte's discussion of this period nicely summarizes the essence of what Table 2 shows:

. . . two things are sure: first, that both Germany and Russia were profoundly anti-status quo, and second, that the sum of their potential power was much greater than the sum of the power of those European countries that were pro-status quo (assuming the continued political abstention of the United States). . . . We may conclude, then, that in the long run the status quo was bound to be changed, but when, how, and to whose advantage were less certain. (1979:30–31)

Table 2 also suggests that whether a state is revisionist or status quo is not an endogenous function of the distribution of capabilities, as some realist, Marxist, and geopolitical theories posit: two of three poles were revisionist and half of the second-ranking Great Powers supported the status quo. Perhaps it is fair to conclude that for some reason the history of nations supports what the French characterized by the *bon mot* "l'appétit vient en mangeant," translated by Shakespeare as "the appetite grows by what it feeds on" (Mattern, 1942:59).

Alliance Dynamics of the Major Powers

This section attempts to explain the alliance behavior of all seven major actors through the use of the two elements in Table 2: the capabilities and interests of the Great Powers.

⁶For the Soviet Union as a "revisionist" power, see Mandelbaum (1988:104); Hochman (1984); Henderson (1940:258); Fischer (1969:349); DePorte (1979:31–32, 40); Carr (1951:123).

Britain

Historians and political scientists have wondered why Britain did so little to help France against Germany and allowed Hitler to pursue piecemeal aggression. Recent interpretations of the case maintain that Britain perceived defensive advantage in military technology and thus attempted to ride free on the balancing efforts of France. In short, Britain passed the balancing buck to France (Posen, 1984; Christensen and Snyder, 1990).

I argue instead that unlike 1914, when the status quo alliance of Britain, France, and Russia enjoyed a huge resource advantage over the revisionist coalition of Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1938 saw German power alone (4.0) exceed the combined strength of the European status quo states, Britain (2.1) and France (1.4).⁷ In this triadic—although not tripolar—situation (where $A > B + C$; A is a pole, B and C are middle powers), the theory predicts no coalition, since B and C cannot combine to defeat A and A does not require a coalition to defeat either B or C . I will attempt to show that, on both theoretical and empirical grounds, this interpretation is superior to the more widely accepted view.

The buckpassing argument is part of a larger theory that predicts the effect of perceived offensive/defensive advantage on multipolar alliance patterns (Christensen and Snyder, 1990). When offense is perceived to have the advantage, the theory posits, states balance aggressively and unconditionally: once one state goes to war, its allies immediately follow, as if on a chain gang. Conversely, when defense is perceived to have the advantage, states attempt to ride free on the balancing efforts of others: allies pass the buck. The perception of offensive advantage in 1914 and defensive advantage in 1939 is said to explain the difference between the alliance dynamics prior to the two world wars.

The logic is consistent and convincing, but does the theory successfully explain the British case? For several reasons, I think not.

First, how does the theory account for the reversal of British policy after Munich? According to Christensen and Snyder:

One of the reasons that Chamberlain appeased Hitler at Munich was his exaggerated estimate of German strategic bombing capabilities and his fear that Britain's own retaliatory capability would not deter attacks on British cities. After the Munich crisis, Chamberlain pushed for a reorientation of British air power expenditures from bombers to fighters. Believing these efforts to be successful, he concluded by mid-1939 that a German attack on Britain would probably fail. This allowed him to guarantee Poland with less fear of the immediate casualties that this might produce. (1990:165)

In Christensen and Snyder's own words, Britain's behavior directly contradicts their hypothesis. Perceived offensive advantage (a German knockout blow) causes Britain to buckpass, not chaingang, whereas defensive advantage (faith in their air defenses) causes it to balance more aggressively, that is, guarantee Poland and pledge to station troops on French soil.

My distancing hypothesis, by contrast, predicts Britain's partial policy reversal. After Munich, Anglo-French rearmament began closing the gap in Germany's military advantage, and Britain saw itself and not France as the more immediate target of German aggression (see Watt, 1989:ch. 6). As a result, Britain drew closer to France and actually pledged troops to a continental defense. In direct support of this argument, the Chiefs of Staff (COS) paper "The Strategic Position of France in a European War" (February 1, 1939) indicated that "British defenses were in the process of being strengthened," but stressed that "improvements would be shown during the next two years" (Wark, 1985:217). Taking pains to contrast the

⁷If Italy is added, the equation becomes even more lopsided in favor of the revisionist coalition.

“expected brighter future with the present,” the COS concluded: “We shall be in a position to defend ourselves at home and at the same time to afford considerably more assistance at sea, in the air and on land, than we could today” (Wark, 1985:217). When war came, however, the strength of Britain and France did not yet equal that of Germany. Thus, Britain, having accepted a limited commitment to the Continent, did not entirely reverse its distancing policy regarding France, though it might have in 1941.

Second, a central theme of the “buckpassing” argument is that British elites feared that higher military spending, particularly for a larger and better-equipped army, would tempt the French to reduce their own military expenditures. By passing the costs on to France, Britain could confidently believe that Germany would be balanced at minimal cost to itself.

The actual military expenditures of the Great Powers tell a different story, however. In the crucial period 1934–38, Germany increased military expenditures by 470 percent, Japan by 455 percent, the Russians by 370 percent, and Italy by 56 percent. By contrast, the British increased spending by 250 percent, and the French by a pitiful 41 percent (Milward, 1977:47). Hence, while one can argue that Britain should have spent more on the military to keep up with its potential enemies, it is implausible that Britain refused to do so because it worried that France would spend less. As Timothy McKeown points out, “increases in [French] military spending from 1934 to 1938 were so anemic that it is difficult to imagine them doing less, even had a stronger British effort offered them a greater opportunity to free ride” (1991:270).

Third, the buckpassing argument relies on the assumption that the defense of Britain and France comprised a collective good. None of the authors, however, explicitly makes this case, which is particularly troubling in light of the obvious differences between British and French security requirements. Britain was threatened by an air and sea assault; France by a land invasion. Thus, if one of the allies was able to secure its borders against a German attack, it does not follow that the other’s frontiers were thereby defended.

In fact, both British and French leaders believed that Germany could launch a successful amphibious assault against Britain’s home territory independent of a German occupation of France. Douglas Johnson observes:

[Beginning in 1939], the idea began to be put about that Germany was contemplating a move against Great Britain, perhaps preceded by a move against Holland and Belgium, rather than a move against France. If that was the case then France might well be able to stand by and allow that to happen. She could then do a deal with Hitler, or Mussolini, or both. (1983:58)

This view is supported, for instance, by Harold Nicolson’s diary entry on October 31, 1939, of a discussion he and other British politicians had with French political leaders, including Edouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud: “[The French] think that we shall suffer very much from the air and that this time *it will be we and not they who are invaded*” (Nicolson, 1967:45, emphasis added). Finally, on May 9, 1940, one day before the German attack on the Low Countries and France, the Chamberlain cabinet discussed a review of the strategic situation prepared by the Chiefs of Staff. The report predicted that Germany’s “most likely course . . . would be to launch a major offensive against Britain, and the main threat to the United Kingdom was an intensive air offensive which, if successful, might culminate in an attempt at actual invasion. An enemy occupation of the Low Countries would seriously aggravate this menace” (Butler, 1957:267).

The very fact that Britain survived after France’s defeat suggests that Anglo-French security lacked the property of jointness required of a collective good. Of course, this is not to imply that there was no relationship between British and

French security or that British leaders expected that the fall of France would not affect the risk of a successful German invasion of the British Isles. It is simply to say that Britain's frontiers would have been even less secure had Britain done more to bolster France's defenses and so less to strengthen its own.

The non-rivalry property of a collective good is also suspect in this case. Anglo-French forces assigned to defend one of the allies' frontiers could not simultaneously be used for the defense of the other's. As Wallace Thies observes:

Because defensive forces generally could not be transferred quickly and easily from one ally to another, alliance members did not view the forces of their allies as substitutes for their own. The French might take comfort in the knowledge that the British would almost certainly take their side in the event of war with Germany, but this did not relieve them of the requirement to build an army as large or nearly as large as Germany's; the British navy might rule the seas but it would be of little help in shielding France against a German attack. (1987:323)

And until the British had secured their own borders, they had no intention of shielding France against a German attack. To do so would be to make Britain a more inviting target than France. Thus, the British Chiefs of Staff, convinced precisely of this, predicted in their last prewar strategic appreciation (February 20, 1939) that a German attack would be concentrated against Britain rather than France because "the vulnerability of the islands to combined air and sea attack would make [Britain] a tempting target" (Wark, 1985:215). The COS gave four reasons for expecting the initial German assault to be directed against Britain:

France could not resist alone after the defeat of Great Britain; a full-scale attack on France would involve heavy losses which might have a serious effect on German morale; British support to France under attack was likely to prove more effective than French support to Great Britain; and lastly, by use of her air force alone against this country Germany would exploit her relatively strongest weapon with the least expenditure of life and economic resources. (Butler, 1957:172)

Believing that it would be attacked first, Britain made every effort during the final weeks of the twilight war to hasten the production of anti-aircraft equipment, especially Bofors guns, bomber and fighter aircraft, and fully trained crews (see Butler, 1957:172). The outcome of the Battle of Britain confirms the Chiefs of Staff's belief that, for Britain, the "crux of the matter is air superiority" (Barnett, 1972:583).

Even if the British had understood how quickly France would fall, it is far from clear that they would have, could have, or should have acted otherwise. According to J. L. Richardson, "even if more adequate resources had been available, the Army would probably not have adopted the kind of strategy and equipment likely to have made a crucial difference to the campaign in France in 1940" (1988:303). Indeed, many British elites expressed relief over France's defeat, as Eleanor Gates records:

Others quite openly viewed France as a heavy burden, which it was necessary to slough off, and gave full vent to their feelings after the French defeat. Chamberlain . . . spoke with relief of being "at any rate free of our obligations to the French, who have been nothing but a liability to us," even going so far as to claim: "It would have been far better if they [the French] had been neutral from the beginning. . . . Lord Hankey . . . also felt that France had been "a debit rather than an asset in the present war" and found it "almost a relief to be thrown back on the resources of the Empire and America." . . . Air Marshal Dowding, who had jealously guarded his fighter squadrons throughout the Battle of France, went farthest of all. At the end of this agony, he actually said to Halifax: "I don't mind telling you that when I heard of the French collapse I went down on my knees and thanked God." (Gates, 1981:566)

To many British elites, the rise of air power had made France and the Continent less important for British security—just as, years later, ICBMs and mutual assured

destruction made the balance of power in Europe largely irrelevant for U.S. security. Changes in the Air Ministry's programs that obviated offensive and defensive deployment of the RAF in the Low Countries bolstered this belief in the expendability of the Continent, as Michael Howard observes:

The Royal Air Force was [in autumn 1937] developing weapons-systems which were beginning to make a foothold on the continent of Europe, from their point of view, expendable. Consciously or unconsciously this may have affected the attitude of the Air Staff to the continental commitment. (1972:117)

Resources devoted to the RAF were "believed to increase British capability both autonomously to deter a German attack on Britain and to deal with that attack should deterrence fail" (Posen, 1984:171). Even Churchill called Britain's fighter squadrons "in effect our Maginot Line" (Butler, 1957:184)—a statement that sheds considerable doubt on Baldwin's claim in 1934 that Britain's frontiers lay on the Rhine.

Finally, according to the buckpassing interpretation, Britain attempted to ride free on the *strength* of France's balancing efforts. By contrast, the "distancing" hypothesis posits that alliances will not form among status quo states when their combined strength is *less* than the opposing revisionist state(s). According to this view, the main reason Hitler was able to pursue piecemeal aggression unopposed was the power asymmetry in his favor, not Britain's perception of France's defensive strength.

The empirical record supports the distancing hypothesis. Contrary to the buckpassing view, Chamberlain never considered relying on the efforts of other states to provide for Britain's security. Sidney Aster comments:

[Chamberlain] held France and its statesmen in near contempt. . . . Of particular concern were French economic and industrial troubles which hindered its rearmament programmes. His attitude to the United States . . . was that "it is always best and safest to count on *nothing* from the Americans except words." . . . [He] had no faith in Soviet military capabilities and considered the Russians untrustworthy as a potential ally. . . . Consequently, Britain could only look to its own resources for protection, having no reliable allies. (1989:242–243)

Upon succeeding Baldwin as Prime Minister on May 28, 1937, Chamberlain formulated a double policy of deterrence and appeasement, which was designed to provide for Britain's security without relying on allies:

His over-riding principle . . . was that Britain's best defence policy "would be the existence of a deterrent force so powerful as to render success in attack too doubtful to be worthwhile." As he wrote on 9 February 1936, in practical terms this meant "our resources will be more profitably employed in the air, and on the sea, than in building up great armies." Nothing, including the outbreak of war with Germany in 1939, ever changed his view on this subject. (Aster, 1989:247)

Seeing only weak and unreliable allies, Chamberlain reacted to the Czech crisis by "dismiss[ing] as impractical the Churchillian alternative of a 'grand alliance' against the dictators." Support for Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain declared, "would simply be a pretext for going to war with Germany . . . [and] that we could not think of unless we had a reasonable prospect of being able to beat her to her knees in a reasonable time, and of that I see no sign" (Aster, 1989:246). In other words, Britain could not join or put together a winning coalition, and so, as the theory predicts, no coalition formed. Rejecting the military option, Chamberlain redoubled his efforts to mediate possible areas of conflict with Germany—at least until the British rearmament effort had begun to pay off.

Even after German troops occupied Prague on March 15, 1939, Chamberlain persisted in his attempt to conciliate Hitler. On March 19 he wrote "I never accept the view that war is inevitable" (Aster, 1989:252–253). A week later he expanded on his view:

I see nothing for us to do unless we are prepared ourselves to hand Germany an ultimatum. We are not strong enough ourselves and we cannot command sufficient strength elsewhere to present Germany with an overwhelming force. Our ultimatum would therefore mean war and I would never be responsible for presenting it. (Aster, 1989:253)

As noted, the German move did provoke a limited British commitment to the Continent. Given the woeful state of the Territorial Army, however, Britain's pledge was merely a symbolic gesture designed to encourage France to fight and not to remain neutral or, worse, side with the enemy if Germany attacked Britain directly (Watt, 1989:94, 102). Barely equipped for survival, Britain was in no position to help its allies.

In sum, during the 1930s the combined strength of Britain and France was less than that of Germany, and so no coalition formed. Instead, Britain distanced itself from France and adopted a dual policy of deterrence and appeasement. As the rearmament programs of Britain and France began closing the gap in Germany's military lead, Britain drew closer to France and began to stand up to Hitler. That the gap was never entirely closed explains Britain's not doing more to aid France.

France

Before the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution, France was able to enlist Russia (then a status quo power) in an anti-German alliance that, given the size and strength of the alliance, allowed both countries to retain their offensive military doctrines. After 1919, France's inferior demographic and industrial potential relative to Germany, coupled with the loss of Russia (now a revisionist power) as an ally, resulted in French dependence on allied support and a strictly defensive military posture (Hughes, 1971; Challener, 1955:ch. 3).

Thus, throughout the interwar period, France tried to construct a massive defensive alliance system centering on the Little Entente, the League of Nations, and a troubled partnership with Britain. As the theory predicts, a status quo middle power directly confronted by a much stronger revisionist pole will seek a large alliance (not a minimum winning coalition) to deter or defend against the threatening state.

But one might ask why, given France's desire for a large coalition and Britain's reluctance to join, did Paris not push harder to secure a formal military alliance with Russia, its traditional ally against Germany? There are three principal reasons. First, French and British military experts agreed that the Red Army would be a formidable opponent to any invader but, decapitated by Stalin's purges, would not be capable of mounting an offensive campaign (Herndon, 1983). Said Neville Chamberlain of the Soviet Union in March 1939: "I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to" (Feiling, 1947:403). The West's assessment of Soviet capabilities proved remarkably accurate.

Second, Anglo-French elites deeply distrusted Stalin in particular, who they considered bloodthirsty and opportunistic, and the Soviet Union in general, which they regarded as a power-seeking, revisionist state. The French premier Edouard Daladier voiced these concerns—the defensive nature of the Red Army and distrust of the Soviet Union—in a March 9, 1939, conversation with the Polish Ambassador in France, Juliusz Lukasiewicz. The U.S. Ambassador in France, William C. Bullitt, noted:

Both Daladier and the Polish Ambassador were of the opinion that the Soviet Union was to be counted on for nothing. They both felt that it was certain that internal conditions in the Soviet Union would prevent the Red Army from taking any active part in any war anywhere and both agreed that no reliance could be based on any promises of Soviet support in the form of supplies to Poland or Rumania. Both agreed also that if Hitler should be willing it would not take a half hour to form an alliance between Germany and the Soviet Union. Stalin was panting for such an agreement. (*Foreign Relations of the United States 1939*, 1956:30)

In short, Daladier believed that the USSR would not honor its alliance commitments and, even if it did, the Red Army was in no condition to open a second front should war break out in the West.

Finally, Britain, upon whom France depended, pressured the French not to align with the Soviet Union because "it was far more likely that the Germans would move against the Soviet Union, and therefore much more probable that France and consequently Britain would be drawn into conflict to aid the Soviet Union than that she would have to call upon Soviet assistance against German aggression in the West" (Wolfers, 1940:308). Most French observers agreed, viewing an alliance with Russia as more of a liability than an asset, and adding that it would alienate Poland, Rumania, and other members of the Little Entente. For these reasons, Paris and London applied only weak pressure on Colonel Beck to get Poland to grant permission for the passage of Soviet troops—Moscow's precondition for continuing military conversations with France and Britain (August 1939).

Despite these reasons not to seek an alliance with Soviet Russia, however, Daladier believed war could not be averted without the threat of the Red Army entering on the side of the status quo powers. In a May 16, 1939, telegram to the U.S. Secretary of State, Bullitt wrote, "[Daladier] believed that it was essential to have Russia in the combination. Only thus could a sufficient combination of force be built up to deter Hitler from risking war" (*Foreign Relations of the United States 1939*, 1956:255). Daladier's thoughts are consistent with my hypothesis that status quo states seek very large alliances (not minimum winning coalitions) for the purposes of deterring aggression.

In sum, the French were torn between two contradictory impulses. On the one hand, they feared that aligning with revisionist Russia would jeopardize French security by risking the unraveling of the status quo order and alienating the Little Entente and Britain in the process. (Similar factors explain the weak French effort to gain an alliance with Italy; see Parker, 1974.) On the other hand, the French, wanting to construct as large a coalition as possible, feared that Hitler could not be deterred without Russian membership in the countervailing status quo alliance. Both French concerns, though pulling in different directions, are consistent with the predictions of the model. In the end, these conflicting impulses paralyzed French policy vis-à-vis the Soviet Union. This resulted in the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact and France's swift defeat by Germany in 1940.

Germany

Hitler's strategy and discussions of the balance of power suggest that he viewed the world as a tripolar system composed of Germany, the United States, and the Soviet Union. The tripolar image of Europe's vitality withering under the shadows cast by the growth in American and Russian power surfaces throughout Hitler's writings.

Of the United States, Hitler wrote: "With the American Union, a new power of such dimensions has come into being as threatens to upset the whole former power and orders of rank of the states" (1928:83). Continuing on the theme, Hitler remarked, "Since today Germany's economic fate vis-à-vis America is in fact also the fate of other nations in Europe, there is again a movement . . . to oppose a European union to the American Union in order thereby to prevent a threatening world hegemony of the North American continent" (Hitler, 1928:103).

Hitler's beliefs about the American threat were supported by his leading geopolitical strategist, Major General Dr. Karl Haushofer, who declared in 1938: "Potentially, the United States is the world's foremost political and economic power, predestined to dominate the world once it puts its heart into power politics" (Strausz-Hupé, 1942:67).

In fact, of all the Great Powers, Hitler most feared the potential military strength of the United States. As early as 1937, Hitler and Göring, the head of Germany's air force, had authorized the development of bombers to strike at New York and other East Coast cities; and, as Gerhard Weinberg puts it, "if nothing much eventually came of these projects, it was not for lack of trying" (1981:xiii). By January 1939, Hitler's statements indicate an obsession with America's shadow on the European scene. "From that time on," John Lukacs asserts, "he began to consider Roosevelt as his principal enemy—a conviction that Hitler held to the end" (1989:172). Of the American danger to Germany, Hitler commented, "confronted with America, the best we can do is to hold out against her to the end" (Trevor-Roper, 1953:199).

Prior to engaging in the inevitable battle against the United States, Germany would first have to defeat the Soviet Union and gain continental hegemony. This would not be an easy task, as Hitler's comments in 1941 illustrate:

The more we see of conditions in Russia, the more thankful we must be that we struck in time. In another ten years there would have sprung up in Russia a mass of industrial centres, inaccessible to attack, which would have produced armaments on an inexhaustible scale, while the rest of Europe would have degenerated into a defenceless plaything of Soviet policy. (Trevor-Roper, 1953:586–587)

Hitler's strategy for accomplishing German world domination was a Schlieffen in reverse. After the *Anschluss*, German forces would wage a lightning strike at Czechoslovakia to neutralize that power and acquire the additional strategic resources and manpower (35 Czech divisions) before switching the army westward. Germany would then pacify its western flank by conquering Belgium, Holland, and France. In the process, Germany would keep its war economy afloat by gaining direct control over the raw materials, food supplies, and labor reserves of Western Europe (Carr, 1978:87). Seeing no hope for victory, Britain would then sue for peace and join in the titanic war against the Soviet Union, the success of which would determine the fate of Hitler's ultimate goal of *Lebensraum*—living space in the East, particularly the Soviet Ukraine. Under Hitler's grand design, "What India was for England, the territories of Russia will be for us" (Trevor-Roper, 1953:24).

With the resources of the entire Eurasian landmass, Germany would be able to defeat the United States (the third pole). Weinberg explains:

[T]he Americans were the real threat to German predominance in the world. Hitler's deduction from this analysis was simple: only a Eurasian empire under German domination could successfully cope with this menace. A third war was now added to the original two. After the first two wars had enabled it to construct a continental empire from the Atlantic to the Urals, Germany would take on the United States. One of the major tasks to be performed by the National Socialist movement, therefore, must be the preparation of Germany for this conflict. (1964:1009)

Emphasizing demographics, Hitler viewed German continental hegemony as a prerequisite for the ultimate war with the U.S.:

It is ridiculous to think of a world policy as long as one does not control the Continent. . . . A hundred and thirty million people in the Reich, ninety in the Ukraine. Add to these the other States of the New Europe, and we'll be four hundred millions, compared with the hundred and thirty million Americans. (Trevor-Roper, 1953:93)

According to the Führer, the British Empire was also endangered by America's inexorable economic, military, and naval growth: "[Roosevelt] wants to run the world and rob us all of a place in the sun. He says he wants to save England but he means he wants to be ruler and heir of the British Empire" (Toland, 1976:693).

Given his misguided notion of an underlying Anglo-American rivalry, the Reich Chancellor confidently expected Britain to join a German-led European coalition against the North American continent.

But just in case the “thick-headed” British failed to see where their true interests lay, Hitler went to great lengths to convince Britain that Germany sought only freedom of action on the Continent and had no intention of threatening Britain’s naval supremacy or Empire. In the Anglo-German Naval Treaty (1935), whereby Hitler conceded a proportional naval strength of 35:100, “Germany took the initiative in the negotiations in the spirit of making a gesture in Great Britain’s interest; the German proposals themselves were clearly aimed at reassuring [Britain] on the question of German naval rivalry” (Hinsley, 1951:6–7).

Having made several generous offers to gain an Anglo-German alliance without success, the Führer grew disillusioned with the British. He could not understand why the British refused to see that Germany, unlike France and the United States, sought only European hegemony and would gladly allow Britain to maintain her world ambitions. How could the British resist German friendship, he wondered, in the face of the obvious common threats posed by America and the Bolshevik menace? Was it not obvious that Germany’s security had been severely compromised by the Franco-Russian alliance and that Russia was, in Hitler’s words, “now the greatest power in the whole of Europe”? (Robertson, 1963:54). Surely, this made an Anglo-German combination the most natural of alliances (Hitler, 1925:181–185, 892–965; Toland, 1976:536–537, 614–616, 692–694; Calleo, 1978:95–115).

Unable to gain an Anglo-German alliance, Hitler turned to the Soviet Union. In accordance with the prior discussion of tripolarity with two revisionist poles, to overturn the tripolar system Hitler needed to augment German resources by waging a series of offensive wars against small and middle powers. This depended on cooperation with the revisionist pole, the USSR. At the very least, Hitler had to prevent the formation of a hostile Anglo-Franco-Russian coalition, as had occurred in 1914. Without the Nazi-Soviet pact, Germany could not have attacked Poland and France.

After taking care of France and Britain, Germany would turn around and attack its penultimate target, the Soviet Union. That Hitler planned this strategy prior to signing the Nazi-Soviet pact is made clear in his statement to the High Commissioner of the United Nations, Burckhardt, on August 11, 1939, in which the Führer decried what he believed was the West’s stupidity in not coming to terms with Germany: “Everything that I undertake is directed against Russia; if the West is too stupid and too blind to understand this, then I will be forced to reach an understanding with the Russians, smash the West, and then turn all my concentrated strength against the Soviet Union” (Hillgruber, 1981:69). The prophesy about Russia shows that the Soviet pact did not signal a change in Hitler’s ultimate goal to destroy the Soviet Union; rather, it was nothing more than an expedient to avoid a two-front war—a necessary short-term act of pure power politics.

After the defeat of France, Hitler again felt optimistic about his chances of negotiating an end to the war with Britain. Together, Britain and Germany would first eliminate the Soviet Union and then turn their energies against the American continent. Of the latter task, Hitler said: “I rejoice on behalf of the German people at the idea that one day we will see England and Germany marching together against America” (Trevor-Roper, 1953:26).

Backed by U.S. material assistance, however, Britain chose to fight rather than jump on the Nazi bandwagon. London’s decision for war was eased by progress in its civil and air defense systems which greatly moderated the public’s fear of a German “knockout blow.”

Hitler’s earlier naval concessions proved costly in the Battle of Britain; as late as September 1939, the German Navy was woefully unprepared for war with Britain

(Hinsley, 1951:6–7). Then, in early 1940, the German fleet suffered heavy losses in the Norwegian campaign, which seriously impaired its ability to support an invasion of Britain four months later. Confronted by the prospect of a war of attrition with Britain that risked prematurely bringing the U.S. into the conflict, Hitler decided that the better gamble was to turn Germany's attention to the defeat of his primary target, the Soviet Union. If Russia could be knocked out of the war, Britain would lose its last potential continental ally and would, Hitler believed, sue for peace. More important, in control of the European continent, Germany could then wage the final hegemonic war against North America.

But unlike in the Battle of France, Germany's blitzkrieg strategy was foiled by the vast expanse of the Soviet Union, which allowed the Red Army to trade space for time. He might have won his gamble and defeated Russia in 1941, Hitler thought, if not for Mussolini's "idiotic intervention" in Greece (Calleo, 1978:108). Rescuing Italy cost Germany precious time and resources needed for the Russian campaign.

The failure of the *Wehrmacht's* great offensive in 1941 gave the U.S. time to mobilize its enormous war machine and join the Soviet Union in an overwhelmingly powerful two-against-one winning coalition. "As Hitler's observations imply, once the United States and Russia gathered and combined their vast resources, Germany's fate would be sealed" (Calleo, 1978:108). Had Hitler's victory come in a hurry, the tripolar system would have been transformed into a bipolar one, pitting the Eurasian continent against the weaker American continent (Hitler believed that the U.S. would annex Canada). The final war would then have converted the international system from bipolarity to hegemony under German rule.

Luckily, the *Wehrmacht* stalled in 1941 and the U.S. and the Soviet Union went on to defeat and partition Germany. This transformed the volatile tripolar system into a stable bipolar one and finally eliminated the "German Problem" that had caused two world wars in twenty-five years.

Italy

Dissatisfied with its power position and tempted by the prospect of gains in North Africa and Central Europe, Italy readily jumped on the German bandwagon, as the theory predicts. Britain and France, who wished to defend, not destroy, the status quo, were reluctant to align themselves with a revisionist state. For this reason, the Western powers could not match Germany's concessions to Italy. Says Arnold Wolfers of Franco-Italian relations between the two wars:

. . . the decisive obstacle to co-operation between France and Italy lay in the fact that Italy, unlike Poland or the Little Entente, was a dissatisfied country and could not be attracted to France by mere guarantees of the established order. She was out for change, not enforcement of the *status quo*, and many of the changes which she desired could be effected only by far-reaching French concessions. . . . [But] more was involved for France than this or that concession, this or that naval agreement, this or that cession of colonial rights or territory. The whole conception of the preservation of the *status quo* could not be harmonized with Italian or Fascist "dynamism" driving for greater power. . . . (1940:143–144)

The Spanish Civil War and the Anglo-French-inspired League sanctions against Italy in response to the Ethiopian War drove Mussolini firmly into Germany's embrace. The Duce believed that, although bandwagoning with Germany meant satellite status for Italy, aligning with France and Britain offered still less room for Italian maneuvering. On this point, Denis Mack Smith writes, "As one of his Ambassadors said, better be number two with Germany than a bad third after France and Britain; only with Germany could he challenge the dominant powers in the Mediterranean and break out of what he called Italy's 'imprisonment' in the

inland sea" (1983:260). Moreover, Hitler recognized that Germany (weight = 4.0) could not defeat a combination of Britain (2.1), France (1.4), and Italy (1.0). Italy thus enjoyed a strong bargaining position, afforded by its kingmaker role.

Seeking to maximize Germany's share of the spoils, however, Hitler did not desire active Italian participation against Britain or France (Germany could defeat them without help). Germany signed the Pact of Steel mainly to prevent an Anglo-Franco-Italian alliance. Hitler also reckoned that the threat alone of Italian intervention would tie down Western forces in southern France. Perhaps unwittingly, Hitler made it easy for Italy to assume its traditional role as the jackal, trailing the lion (Germany, in this case) to scavenge the scraps it leaves behind.

Japan

The hypotheses that revisionist states flock together and seek minimum winning coalitions are consistent with Japan's alliance policy. By 1940, Japan had established ties to all the revisionist major powers (Italy, Germany, and the USSR). But, as predicted by our hypothesis that revisionist states form minimum winning coalitions, Tokyo did not seek active support from any of them until war with the Anglo-American coalition appeared inevitable. The Japanese then enlisted only German participation, believing they were forming a minimum winning coalition. In so doing, however, they overestimated German-Japanese strength (according to my figures, 4.0 + 1.9) relative to that of the Anglo-American coalition (2.1 + 4.5). But the principal failure of Japan's strategy was its false presumption that Germany would soon sign a negotiated peace with the Soviet Union, freeing Nazi forces for the war against America and Britain.

The Soviet Union

In his speech at the plenary session of the Central Committee in January 1925, Stalin revealed the *tertius gaudens* strategy that would guide Soviet foreign policy in the next world war:

... if war begins, we shall hardly have to sit with folded arms. We shall have to come out, but we ought to be the last to come out. And we should come out in order to throw the decisive weight on the scales, the weight that should tilt the scales. (Deutscher, 1949:411)

In order for the Soviet Union to gain the enviable position of the enjoying third, Stalin had first to prevent the formation of two potential hostile coalitions: an Anglo-Franco-German combination and a German-Japanese alliance. Since Germany was the only common member of the two feared coalitions, the solution to the Soviet security problem was a rapprochement with Berlin. And because Stalin did not believe that Britain and France would come to Russia's aid in the event of a German attack in the East, an alliance with the dreaded Nazis in effect offered Moscow its only and therefore minimum winning coalition.

The "power" side of the model therefore predicts a Nazi-Soviet alliance, but only one in which the Soviets actively participate in the fighting and are assured of receiving along with Germany an equal share of the spoils. (See discussion above of equilateral tripolar system with two revisionist poles.) By joining Germany to divide Poland, Stalin behaved according to the "Partitioned Third" version of tripolarity. True, Poland was not a pole; but the power configuration of Poland, Germany, and the Soviet Union was $A < B = C$, and so the logic of what I call a "Type 3" tripolar system still applies. Conversely, by encouraging Germany to attack westward by itself, Stalin acted contrary to the logic of the "power" side of the model, and Russia paid the price for his mistake.

The “interests” side of the model also predicts a Nazi-Soviet alliance. Specifically, the pact supports the hypothesis that revisionist states flock together. For Russia, a rapprochement with Germany offered more than security: Soviet expansion was possible only in collusion with Hitler. In the end, the two dictators’ shared interest in revisionism bridged their ideological divide. As Louis Fischer comments, ideology “proved no barrier when Hitler wanted war and Stalin coveted territory” (1969:322).

Stalin’s own explanation for the Nazi-Soviet pact (given in 1940 to the British Ambassador, Sir Stafford Cripps) testifies to the strength of shared interests, whether revisionist or status quo, in deciding who aligns with whom: “[The] U.S.S.R. had wanted to change the old equilibrium . . . England and France had wanted to preserve it. Germany had also wanted to make a change in the equilibrium, and this common desire to get rid of the old equilibrium had created the basis for the rapprochement with Germany” (Weinberg, 1981:7). Similarly, Sir Nevile Henderson viewed the Nazi-Soviet pact as the inevitable outcome of a concession-making competition between status quo and revisionist suitors of an unsatiated power:

[By August 11, 1939] Moscow . . . was asking for a free hand in the Baltic States. Russia’s real objective was thus becoming apparent; and, with Germany secretly in the market, the scales were being heavily weighted against the Western Powers. They could not barter away the honor and freedom of small but independent countries, but Germany could. (Henderson, 1940:259)

In a limited sense, Stalin, like Hitler, conceived of the system in tripolar terms. But unlike Hitler, who saw the European system as bipolar with the U.S. out of the picture, Stalin believed that Britain and France together constituted a third European pole—one that could effectively balance Germany. Stalin’s “major blunder”—as Isaac Deutscher correctly points out—was that “he expected Britain and France to hold their ground against Germany for a long time; . . . he overrated France’s military strength; and he underrated Germany’s striking power” (1949:441; also see Ulam, 1974:227–229). Consistent with these observations, in 1939 Stalin stated that “peaceful, democratic states . . . are without doubt stronger than the fascist ones both militarily and economically” (Ulam, 1974:264).

But given his misperception of the power distribution, it is easy to see why Stalin made a deal with Hitler. A non-aggression pact with Germany would destroy the status quo, afford easy spoils in Eastern Europe and Finland, and instigate a war of attrition among the capitalist powers. Better still, the Soviet Union enjoyed the role of kingmaker, as both Germany and the democratic powers needed it to form a winning coalition. Thus, Germany would be made to pay heavily for Soviet assistance in a war from which Russia could safely abstain. Stalin used his bargaining power to prolong the Anglo-Franco-Soviet negotiations just long enough to extract additional concessions from Hitler, in exchange for which the Soviet leader put his signature to the pact with Germany that he desperately wanted anyway. It appeared that Stalin had succeeded in the role of abettor: Germany was deflected to the west, while the Soviets comfortably looked on from the sidelines, gaining at the others’ expense.

But contrary to appearances, Hitler duped Stalin. With the September 1 deadline for the Polish attack only a week away, Hitler was willing to give the Soviet dictator whatever he wanted to secure Soviet neutrality and thereby deter Britain from honoring its pledge to Poland. Indeed, the Führer seemed to be in an especially giving mood, confident that he would attack and crush Russia in the near future, taking back all he had given and more (see Rich, 1973:chs. 14–18; Leach, 1973).

In retrospect, we know that it would have been far better for the Soviets to have balanced against, rather than bandwagoned with, Germany. In that case, Stalin

would have presented Hitler with the prospect of a two-front war, seriously undermining the Führer's strategy and perhaps causing its abandonment. But because he mistakenly believed that Europe was structurally a tripolar, not a bipolar, system with France and Britain as the third pole, Stalin expected a war of attrition in the West. The fall of France abruptly ended Stalin's dream of easy conquests in a postwar period when the rest of Europe would be exhausted. But when the long war failed to occur, why did not Stalin immediately join Britain against Germany? The answer to this question reveals why the model of equilateral tripolarity with two revisionist poles could not have predicted the Soviet case. As the historian James McSherry points out, the intensity of Bolshevik ideology overrode tripolar systemic logic:

With three or more approximately equal states, a balance of power operates almost automatically. Should state *A* appear to be growing too powerful and dangerous, states *B* and *C* combine against it. If state *B* becomes too powerful, *A* and *C* form an alliance. Tsars and foreign ministers in St. Petersburg reacted in this classical pattern almost instinctively. . . . But the Bolsheviks saw themselves winning everything or nothing. They perceived only two powers: the Soviet Union and an implacably hostile capitalist world. As long as the capitalists didn't unite in a crusade against the U.S.S.R., what matter if one capitalist state became more powerful than the others or even brought some of the others under its sway? Once Hitler had conquered France, the Soviet Union was in mortal peril. But Stalin realized the full extent of the danger only on June 22, 1941. (1970:254)

The United States

As the lone status quo pole in an equilateral tripolar system, the United States had to guard against the formation of a hostile two-against-one coalition. Distanced from the European fray, the United States had time to watch events unfold and to change roles—the eyewitness, the mediator, *tertius gaudens*, and the abettor—to suit the situation. At a high level of abstraction, the theory accurately predicts American foreign policy. The U.S. entered the war when one of the two revisionist poles appeared to be triumphing over the other. Prior to that time, America stayed on the sidelines and provided arms and economic assistance to Britain and later the Soviet Union.

Though America's entry into the war is usually attributed to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the Atlantic Charter—arranged prior to the Japanese attack on the U.S. but after the German attack on the USSR—and the “Europe-first” strategy indicate that the Roosevelt administration was preparing for war and was principally concerned with defeating Germany. Essentially, Roosevelt's “shoot-on-sight” speech on September 11, 1941, which put into practice the policy of convoying British ships halfway across the ocean, committed the U.S. to the Battle of the Atlantic against Germany. Roosevelt's mid-October decision to revise the Neutrality Act, enabling American merchantmen to carry supplies across the Atlantic to British ports, would have resulted in war with Germany in a matter of months. True, Hitler desperately wanted to avoid war with the United States while the *Wehrmacht* was slugging it out against the Red Army, but the Reich Chancellor could not stand by idly as American ships carried a major portion of lend-lease supplies to Britain. This would have been tantamount to Germany's giving up the Battle of the Atlantic—a concession beyond the limit of Hitler's forbearance toward the United States. “And once Germany began sinking American ships regularly,” Robert Divine opines, “Roosevelt would have had to ask Congress for a declaration of war” (1969:46).

The overwhelmingly powerful U.S.-Soviet coalition ultimately defeated and divided Germany, transforming the unstable tripolar system into a stable bipolar one. Moreover, the United Nations coalition was a defensive alliance, and so, as the

theory predicts, no effort was made to limit participation to a minimum winning coalition.

Implications for the Post-Cold War World

Over the course of the last two years the unprecedented rate of global change has made the task of political forecasting as difficult as trying to paint a moving train. Yet there are clear signs that the emerging post-Cold War world is again becoming tripolar, with the United States, Germany, and Japan as the poles—each in control of a sizable regional bloc.

Supporting this view, Walter Mead envisions a world made up of three rival blocs—Europe, East Asia, and the Americas—with the U.S. heading the “weakest and most troubled” of the three (1992:335). Similarly, Leonard Silk posits that the post-Cold War world

has become “tripolar” economically, with the United States, Japan and Germany (or, in regional terms, North America, the Pacific Rim and the European Community) bound together in a complex relationship, both rivalrous and interdependent like a tempestuous marriage.

Depending on the way the ménage à trois behaves, the relationship may split apart or strengthen and mature. Threesomes are inherently unstable, however; the immediate danger, the Japanese believe, is that the Americans and Europeans will gang up on them. (Silk, 1991:2)

The significance of economic tripolarity has heightened “now that geoeconomics is turning geopolitics and all warfare into a provincial phenomenon” (Luttwak, 1992:13). Today more than ever, scholars, statesmen, and citizens alike appreciate the links between security and economic issues and assess states’ relative power according to their economic, not military, resources. Typifying the new awareness of economic-security links, Leslie Gelb reasons that “in the absence of the Soviet military threat, the Americans, West Europeans and Japanese have lost incentives to set aside economic differences. As a result, economic conflicts have become the most pronounced source of tension between nations, and disputes are becoming more difficult to resolve” (1991:54).

The political balance is also becoming tripolar. Witness Germany’s recent decision to recognize Slovenia and Croatia against the objections of the U.S., the E.C., and the U.N., demonstrating that it is no longer an economic giant and a political dwarf (Tagliabue, 1991; *The Economist*, 1991–92). Some even argue that the “new Germany, like its predecessors, has proved that it is a revisionist power, intent on reshaping Europe” (Lind, 1991:A33). Anthony Lewis agrees, and warns: “At a time when angry nationalism is flaring up in so many places, it is in everyone’s urgent interest to knit Germany into a larger Europe” (1991:A19).

Like Germany, Japan is beginning to assert political power more in accordance with its status as an economic superpower. In the first U.S.-Japanese bilateral negotiations since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the two countries pledged to share responsibility for maintaining peace and prosperity in the region. Yet, the competitive atmosphere at the Tokyo summit prompted *The Economist* to view it as a turning point in U.S.-Japanese relations: “From valued ally, Japan is being cast increasingly as a dangerous competitor, more of a threat than an opportunity” (1992:52). Fifty years after Pearl Harbor, some see Japan realizing its dream of a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” (Sanger, 1991:D1, D22).

Focusing solely on the tripolar structure of the emerging post-Cold War system, one is tempted to predict increasing systemic instability, possibly culminating in general major-power war. As I have written elsewhere, however, the huge increase

in the number of democratic states, and the fact that, unlike the interwar system, all three poles of the post-Cold War system will be democracies, should greatly mitigate the destabilizing effects associated with its volatile tripolar structure (Schweller, 1992:268).

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