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978-1-107-02724-4 — Constructing International Security
Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard
Brett V. Benson
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Constructing International Security

Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard

Constructing International Security helps policy makers and students recognize effective third-party strategies for balancing deterrence and restraint in security relationships. Brett V. Benson shows that there are systematic differences among types of security commitments. Understanding these commitments is key, because commitments – such as formal military alliances and extended deterrence threats – form the basis of international security order. Benson argues that sometimes the optimal commitment conditions military assistance on specific hostile actions the adversary might take. At other times, he finds, it is best to be ambiguous by leaving an ally and adversary uncertain about whether the third party will intervene. Such uncertainty transfers risk to the ally, thereby reducing the ally's motivation to behave too aggressively. The choice of security commitment depends on how well defenders can observe hostilities leading to war and on their evaluations of dispute settlements, their ally's security, and the relative strength of the defender.

Brett V. Benson is Assistant Professor of Political Science and Asian Studies at Vanderbilt University. His research concentrates on alliances, deterrence, nuclear disarmament, and international arms sales. He also studies Chinese politics and East Asia relations.

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BRETT V. BENSON
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For Lacy

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Preface

The inspiration for this book is the policy of “strategic ambiguity,” which is the United States’ strategy for addressing the dispute between China and Taiwan. I first became aware of the politics of the Taiwan Strait when I lived in Taiwan 20 years ago. I have a vivid memory of visiting Taiwan’s west coast and looking out over the Taiwan Strait from the vantage point of an empty pillbox, which was constructed decades before in anticipation of an attack by Chinese Communist soldiers. Taiwan has many such reminders of its tense relationship with mainland China, a relationship I did not fully appreciate or understand when I was only 19 years old.

A friend from Taiwan, who did his military service on the island of Quemoy, left an indelible impression on me. He was a proud descendant of the Sun family – of Sun Yatsen – and spoke longingly about Taiwan being reunited with China; yet, he served as a soldier charged with the responsibility of defending a tiny island from mainland China. I was struck by the strength of his convictions and the peculiarity of the dispute separating him from his ancestral home. Equally remarkable to me was the symbolic value of the tiny and militarily useless island of Quemoy. For a period of time in the 1950s, the world, including millions of Americans who had no idea what or where Quemoy was, feared there might be a war, perhaps involving nuclear weapons, over a piece of land smaller than Staten Island that lay just a few kilometers off of China’s coast. In researching this book, I have had the opportunity to revisit and explore in greater depth these early impressions. More important, I have learned that embedded in the narrow politics of the Taiwan Strait are valuable general lessons for the study of international politics.

Acknowledgments

This book is the culmination of years of input, guidance, and support from many valued influences. I owe my deepest debt of gratitude to Emerson Niou, who was my primary advisor in graduate school. As an undergraduate student studying political philosophy, I wondered how I might wed my disparate interests in philosophy and Chinese politics. Emerson guided me to the study of rigorous political theory and international politics, exposing me to a new world of formal methods and positive political theory. The road was long and often bumpy, but Emerson was consistently supportive and masterfully matched my comparative advantages to my interests. He taught me how to think big but with discipline. I owe Emerson more than words can express.

I am also indebted to my other advisors in graduate school. Mike Munger helped walk me through my move from Nietzsche to John Nash. He patiently sat through hours of white board sessions watching me struggle with Greek (not the kind I might have used to study the words of the ancients!). Chris Gelpi, Bob Keohane, David Soskice, and John Aldrich taught me how to do scientific research. This book began as a dissertation on a narrow topic, and even though the final product does not resemble my dissertation, these mentors set the trajectory for the project.

My research was also shaped by many conversations with fellow graduate students at Duke. I would be remiss if I did not extend special thanks to Jorge Bravo and Giacomo Chiozza, who both continued to influence my thinking long after graduate school. Both have spent many hours engaging with me about my ideas. I have benefited immensely from their keen insight and candid advice. As my office neighbor at Duke and again as a colleague at Vanderbilt, Giacomo was in the unfortunate position of being the first in the line of fire when I struggled with a tough question or thought I had a big idea. Fortunately for me, he has a gift for quickly connecting to the main issues. I thank him for clarifying my thinking on many occasions.

I am grateful to several participants in a conference held at Vanderbilt. Bob Powell, Jim Morrow, Erik Gartzke, Karen Mingst, Peter Rosendorff, and Michael Tomz generously gave their time to travel to Nashville and comment on drafts of my book chapters. They provided valuable advice and criticism, and I have worked hard to implement their suggestions. I offer additional thanks to Bob, Jim, and Erik for providing especially detailed comments and offering follow-up guidance. Their additional feedback gave my research an important clarity of focus and boost of momentum.

I spent a year as a Fellow in the Quantitative and Analytical Political Science Program (QAPS) at Princeton, which provided me with the time and the ideal environment to think and write. Special thanks goes to Adam Meirowitz, who read and reread several drafts. Few people I have met think as clearly as he does. I bothered him incessantly with many of the thorny puzzles. He was patient beyond expected protocol and made an enormous impact on my thinking and the final product. A friend pointed out that the acronym of the book's subtitle, "Alliances, Deterrence, and Moral Hazard" (ADM), is named after him. It is a coincidence but not an inappropriate one. Kris Ramsay encouraged me to sharpen my arguments and took extra effort to offer ideas about how they could be improved. Kris has high standards, and his ideas, thoughtful advice, and steady commitment to quality scholarship have not only improved my work but also inspired me as a scholar.

I am also grateful to others at Princeton. Among those are Alex Hirsch, Matias Iaryczower, Kosuke Imai, Nolan McCarty, and John Londregan, who constitute the core of the QAPS program that supported my stay at Princeton; Joanne Gowa, who shaped my thinking more than she knows through numerous conversations; and my officemate, Marc Ratkovic, whom I tormented with chats about parts of my project and various aspects of the book process.

My research benefited from the support of the East-West Center (EWC) in Honolulu, HI, where I resided as a Fellow. My stay at the EWC provided a welcome uninterrupted stretch of writing. I also had access to two valuable resources in fellow resident scholars Victor Cha and Michael Green. Victor and Michael generously donated their time to listen to me present parts of my research and provide detailed comments about the East Asian military alliances that I discuss in the book. I have taken special effort to implement their suggestions. I would also like to thank Denny Roy, who has thousands of great ideas about Asia. My book is significantly improved as a result of the support of the EWC and input from Victor, Michael, and Denny.

I cannot say enough about the supportive environment I have enjoyed at Vanderbilt. My department sponsored a conference for my research and the college kindly granted me a yearlong sabbatical to work on my project. My research has benefited from the input of colleagues Jim Ray, Michaela Mattes, Carol Atkinson, Dave Lewis, and Bruce Oppenheimer. I am appreciative of John Geer's advice and generous support, which have guided me through the many challenges of developing and publishing a book. Josh Clinton, who read

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multiple drafts and contributed valuable feedback, deserves a special note of thanks for going above and beyond what colleagues and friends typically do for each other.

There are numerous other people who have provided input as discussants, panelists, and friends. While there are too many to list, a few were particularly influential at critical points in the process. Among these are Andy Kydd, Jack Levy, Doug Gibler, and Paul Poast. I am also indebted to John Vasquez, who has advised me on a number of occasions throughout the book process and has provided insightful comments on my work. I thank Ashley Leeds for her data, research, and valuable input.

My research assistants deserve a great deal of credit. Patrick Bentley, Laura Cantley, and Frank Wilson were tasked with a range of responsibilities, including coding data, digging through historical texts, and editing drafts. I want to thank Lisa Camner for reading and editing the manuscript as well. I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewers of the book manuscript. They generously provided pages and pages (and pages!) of constructive comments and criticism. I took great care to follow their recommendations. The final product bears the distinct mark of these reviewers' contributions.

I am especially grateful to my wife, Lacy, and our two children, Max and Joey. I had many moments of insight through the process of writing the book, but for every such high point there were many more dark hours of frustration and struggle. As many know, those that live with us take the brunt of the hardship while those that live away from us get to enjoy the flashes of brilliance. This project was conceived, developed, and completed on the strong shoulders of my family. Lacy is unlike any other person I have met – she is patient, consistent, and always alight when it is darkest. It is for this reason that I have dedicated the book to her.

Finally, I would like to say a few words in honor of my parents. They have sacrificed a lot for the benefit of their children. I owe them more than I will ever be able to say for taking the effort to provide life experiences for us. It would be an enormous oversight not to thank them for investing in 600 acres of hay fields when I was six, a tractor when I was seven, and a hundred head of cattle when I was eight.