

International Alliances and Regional Blocs: A Conceptual Analysis and their Impact on the Balance of Power in the Contemporary International System

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the theoretical concepts of “international alliances and blocs”, an academic and legal lens by using a critical analysis of the literature in international relations, such as Hans Morgenthau and Ken Booth. Reviewing historical models such as NATO and the BRICS bloc. This analytical framework provides an understanding of the dynamics of alliances and blocs amid the complexities of the contemporary international system. Findings reveal that alliances are often temporary and linked to specific security contexts, whereas blocs tend to exhibit greater continuity, driven by long-term development interests.

Keywords: International Alliances, Balance of Power, Contemporary International Order, International Law, Economic Cooperation.

International alliances and blocs represent core pillars of interaction among states within the contemporary international system. Also, international alliances are considered strategic instruments for achieving security and advancing mutual interests in a competitive and complex global environment. International alliances are crucial for achieving security and advancing mutual interests in a competitive and complex global environment. These alliances "help in establishing collaborative relationships among nations to ensure international safety and prevent conflicts" (Nolan, 2010). Strategic alliances "provide opportunities for partners to create greater value through cooperation rather than competition, emphasizing the importance of learning alliances for long-term success" (Larissa, 1997). Business alliances in various

industries, such as "automobile manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, airlines, and telecommunications, offer insights into the benefits and challenges of forming and managing strategic partnerships" (Culpan, 2002).

Furthermore, the world has witnessed major military alliances such as NATO and the Warsaw Pact—both shaped by the Cold War era—while more recent blocs like BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization reflect shifting power dynamics toward multipolarity. International relations and international law are closely intertwined fields that involve the study of global interactions between states and the legal frameworks that govern these interactions. International law "plays a crucial role in regulating the behavior of states in the international system" (O. Keohane, 2002).

It provides guidelines for diplomacy, trade agreements, and the resolution of conflicts between nations. The United Nations, established in 1945, serves as a key institution for upholding international law and promoting peace and security (Holm & Deese, 2022). Through its various bodies, such as the Security Council and General Assembly, the UN plays a central role in addressing global challenges and promoting cooperation among countries (Coelho, 2024). Additionally, regional organizations like the European Union and African Union also play important roles in shaping international relations and upholding legal norms within their respective regions. Overall, the study of international relations and international law is essential for understanding the complexities of the modern globalized world and the mechanisms by which states interact and cooperate.

Therefore, this study aims to achieve three primary objectives:

1. To analyze academic and legal definitions of alliances and blocs, highlighting their core differences in terms of objectives and organizational structures.
2. To classify types of international alliances (e.g., defensive, offensive, temporary, and permanent) and patterns of blocs (e.g., economic and political).
3. To explore the impact of these alliances and blocs on the global balance of power, and their implications for regional and international stability.

Through sheds light on a key issue: the effectiveness of alliances in achieving collective security amid the rise of non-traditional threats, such as (terrorism and climate change, in contrast to blocs that focus on economic cooperation), also, examines the role of ideological and geographic factors in shaping such formations and how they affect the sovereignty of smaller states under the dominance of major powers.

The Concept of International Alliances and Blocs

Numerous references, books, and academic studies have addressed the topic of international alliances and blocs in an effort to formulate a comprehensive definition of these terms. In this section, we aim to highlight the most significant of these definitions by dividing the discussion into two sub-sections: the first will focus on defining the concept of international alliances, while the second will address the definition of international blocs.

2.1 The Concept of International Alliances

Linguistically, the Arabic term for alliance (*ḥilf*) refers to a pact or covenant made between parties. The verb *ḥalafa* means "to make a pact," and *taḥālafa* means "to agree on mutual support or alliance." The plural form *aḥlāf* is commonly used to refer to agreements or alliances, and it also connotes mutual support or solidarity (Al-Jawhari, A. N. I. H. (2009). Another linguistic definition describes alliance as "taḥālafa," meaning "the parties have agreed upon mutual support," as in the case of "two armies forming an alliance against a common enemy" (Elias, J. 2003).

In political science, the term is defined as "a contractual relationship between two or more states, whereby the parties commit to mutual assistance in the event of war." Alliance policy stands in contrast to isolationism, which rejects any responsibility for the security of other states. It is also distinct from the policy of collective security, which aims, in principle, to universalize the concept of alliances in order to deter and respond to aggression globally (Shukri, M. A., 1978). An alliance is also defined as a formal agreement among a group of states to cooperate militarily against specific state(s), with signatory states committing to the use of force or consultation under certain conditions (Al-Ali, A. Z., 2017).

Alliances are considered a fundamental mechanism for maintaining the balance of power, operating within the framework of multipolar state systems. As such, they are as old as the fragmentation of the world into competing

political entities. Hans Morgenthau posits that two rival states (A and B) have three options to strengthen their positions: they can increase their own power, add the power of other states to their own, or deny the rival access to allied states. The latter two approaches are the basis of alliance formation (Al-Ali, A. Z., 2017).

An alliance is further defined as a formal agreement between two or more actors—usually states—for cooperation on perceived common security issues. The alliance seeks to enhance security by establishing a system of deterrence, applying collective defense in the event of war, and may include exclusivity clauses to prevent members from joining rival alliances (Evans, G., & Newnham, J., 2004).

From another angle, alliances are a type of international relation formed when states perceive their national security to be under significant threat—possibly requiring the use of military force. In this context, the alliance serves to multiply the capabilities of member states, enabling them to confront the threat more effectively (Saeed, A. M., 2015).

Another definition considers an alliance to be "a treaty concluded between two or more states that are parties to the agreement," and also as "a conditional commitment to undertake certain cooperative measures in response to a designated adversary, even if that adversary is not explicitly named" (Mansour, M., 1997). Others define it as "a contractual relationship between two or more states aimed at mutual support in the event of war" (Badawi, A. Z., 1989).

Henry Capitant defines an alliance as "a treaty between two states whereby each commits to assist the other, whether through military action or other forms of support, in the event one is threatened." Ken Booth refers to it as "a formal agreement between two or more states for cooperation in the field of national security." David Edwards describes it as "a conditional commitment, of a political or military nature, between a group of states to take joint actions against one or more other states." Edwin Fedder sees alliances as "the concentration of efforts by

a group of states over a defined period with the aim of enhancing the security of the member states" (Amidi, S. M., 2017). Julien Freund defines an alliance as "a relationship under which two sovereign political entities commit to providing each other with military assistance to enhance their individual or collective strength against a common enemy, particularly during wartime" (Murad, F. (1994).).

The Oxford Dictionary, as published online, defines an alliance as "a union or association between countries or organizations." The Cambridge Dictionary describes it as "a group of countries, political parties, or individuals who agree to work together for shared interests or goals." It is also defined as "an agreement to collaborate with another party to achieve a common objective." Duhaime's Online Legal Dictionary defines it as "a military treaty between two or more states, either to plan an offensive or for mutual defense in case of attack" (Murad, F., 1994).

From the standpoint of international law, an alliance is a contractual relationship between two or more states involving commitments to mutual support in the event of war. Historically, alliance policy has been linked to the balance of power strategy and, as some evidence suggests, may increase the likelihood and scope of armed conflict (Al-Kayyali, A. W. n.d.).

According to Edwards, an alliance represents a political or military contractual commitment among a number of states, often directed against a specific, even if unnamed, adversary. These alliances typically establish organizations to oversee the implementation of their objectives and are usually formalized through treaties or agreements (Edwards, D. V., 1964).

Duchacek argues that when states have shared interests, they may codify these interests legally and establish joint mechanisms for policy execution through alliances. However, such cooperation can also occur informally when states have complete alignment of interests, as exemplified by U.S.-U.K. relations from the

Monroe Doctrine (1823) until the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 (Duchacek, I. D. , n.d.).

A number of other definitions are cited by Al-Ghoneimi, including that in Capitant's Legal Dictionary, which defines an alliance as “a treaty under which two or more states agree to provide mutual assistance, either militarily or by other means, in the event of war.” Calvo, in his international law dictionary, defines it as “a union of two or more states to pursue a common political goal.” Siry sees it as “a status created by treaty involving political and military commitments, to be fulfilled individually or jointly, without necessarily establishing a higher decision-making body.” Oppenheim defines it as “a union treaty between two or more states for mutual defense in war, or for joint offensive action, or both” (Abu Al-Khair, A. M. A., 2010).

Dr. Mohamed Taha Badawi describes an alliance as “an agreement between two or more states on specific measures to protect their members from another power perceived as a threat.” Similarly, Dr. Khaled Al-Masri defines it as “an agreement among two or more states pledging to confront a known and defined enemy should it attack any member state.” More broadly, an alliance may be understood as an agreement between two or more parties for cooperation and solidarity to achieve shared objectives or to confront other parties—either on a permanent or time-bound basis (Badawi, A. Z. (1989).

The term alliance may also denote a political or military contractual commitment among states directed at a specific adversary, and such alliances typically establish organizations to monitor and implement their objectives. Duchacek also suggests that states may establish shared policy enforcement bodies through formal alliances, though informal cooperation may occur when their interests are perfectly aligned—again referencing U.S.-U.K. relations as a case in point (Abbas, S. D. (2017)).

Alliance policy is often a key feature in a balance-of-power international system, especially when there is a degree of parity in

political, economic, and military capabilities. It often reflects mutual suspicion and caution in international relations, contributing to tension and the militarization of states, frequently manifesting in arms races. This is in contrast to neutrality or isolationism, which rejects military entanglements (Sbila, M., & Al-Harmouzi, N., 2017). An alliance may also be defined as “a public agreement between two or more parties, whether military or non-aggression in nature, wherein the parties commit to defending each other militarily or pledging not to attack one another” (Al-Masha'ali, M. B., 2007).

From a legal standpoint, some view alliances as “treaties concluded between two or more states that are parties to the agreement” (Shabibi, L., 2010). Accordingly, such agreements are alliances, not just informal coalitions. In this sense, an alliance is a formal treaty-based commitment typically directed against a specified state or group of states, and it establishes institutional mechanisms for achieving its objectives (Shukri, M. A. (1978)).

2.2 The Concept of International Blocs

In the context of international relations, the term bloc is used to denote certain international groupings that focus on specific aspects of cooperation. Generally, blocs primarily aim to foster collaboration in political and economic affairs. Notable examples of international blocs include BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN. Furthermore, the rule of law underpins the legitimacy and effectiveness of international blocs by promoting legal accountability, fostering trust among member states, and providing a stable framework for collective decision-making and dispute resolution (Hasan et al., 2024).

Some scholars have referred to military alliances as military blocs. However, others have drawn a distinction between blocs and alliances. They define a bloc as a “permanent ideological-military league that operates in both peace and wartime, led by a pole-state (a dominant global power),” or as “a number of states following a common line in politics, defense, economics, and

trade—usually in opposition to another group of states, which in turn adopts a shared approach to counter the first group.” (Saeed, A. M., 2015)

Despite the increased academic interest in the topic of international blocs following the end of the Cold War—especially with a focus on economic integration as a prominent feature of such blocs—the concept remains somewhat ambiguous and interpreted differently by various scholars. Some adopt a broad view, treating any trade relationship between two states as a form of bloc, while others see it as a manifestation of deeper economic integration.

Furthermore, some scholars confuse the terms economic integration, economic union, and economic cooperation. Economic cooperation refers to the participation of two or more states in one or more joint economic activities, without necessarily aiming to achieve full integration. In contrast, economic integration is a more cohesive and advanced form of cooperation, while economic union represents the highest level of integration, where national economies effectively operate as a single economy (Abbas, S. D., 2017).

The term bloc continues to be used in international relations to refer to groupings concerned with certain aspects of cooperation, primarily in political and economic fields. Examples include BRICS, the Shanghai Organization, ASEAN, among others.

Numerous economists have provided definitions of economic integration. For instance, Gunnar Myrdal defined it as: “A social and economic process through which all barriers between different economic units are eliminated, to ensure equal opportunities for all factors of production—not only at the international level but domestically as well.” (Davanzati, G. F., 2013). Meanwhile, Peter Robson described it as “A group of states with interconnected or geographically proximate economic interests, working to eliminate barriers to the movement of goods, people, and capital among them, while coordinating their economic policies to eliminate distortions caused by policy discrepancies”

(Robson, P., 2002). Other scholars define a bloc as “international groupings formed within a continental or regional framework—geographic proximity is not the sole criterion but remains a key factor in such formations. (Shukri, M. A. 1978).”

Some define blocs as: “a group of poorer countries experiencing a quasi-permanent state of crisis, marked by dependency on a dominant state, which exerts pressure to maintain their membership within the bloc.” Another common definition sees the bloc as a “permanent ideological military league led by a pole-state that operates in both peacetime and wartime.”

Blocs vary based on their foundational objectives. They may be international or regional in scope and formed to pursue political, social, operational, or economic goals.

According to Abu Al-Khair, A. M. A. (2010), Given the foregoing, it is important to outline the key distinctions between blocs and alliances as follows :

- (a) A bloc is a military league characterized by ideological unity, often exhibiting doctrinal homogeneity among its members—unlike alliances, which do not necessarily require such ideological consistency.
- (b) Blocs are not confined to wartime; they function in peacetime as well. However, they may also emerge during conflict when states perceive existential threats.
- (c) In a bloc, member states typically operate under the leadership of a dominant pole-state sharing ideological alignment. This contrasts with alliances, which are often temporary arrangements driven by immediate mutual interests and dissolve once those interests cease to exist.
- (d) Both alliances and blocs are voluntary in nature. However, treaties forming alliances tend to be revocable and are often focused on organizing collective defense, with relative equality among members. Conversely, treaties forming blocs are generally irrevocable.

Recommendations

Policymakers and member states in international alliances and blocs should adopt flexible, adaptive strategies that respond effectively to rapid geopolitical transformations while safeguarding both national and regional interests. Sustained diplomatic dialogue among members is critical to maintaining cohesion, particularly as strategic priorities shift. In this context, international law must play a central role in regulating the accession to and withdrawal from alliances, thereby mitigating the risks of security vacuums or instability. Economic groupings such as BRICS are encouraged to strengthen cooperation in strategic sectors, especially technology and renewable energy, to confront global challenges like climate change and food insecurity. Furthermore, transparency in the stated objectives of military alliances is necessary to avoid their misinterpretation as threats by non-member states—an issue that could otherwise trigger arms races or unwanted escalation.

A careful balance between the national interests of individual states and the collective goals of the alliance is essential to ensure sustained commitment and compliance with agreements. Alliances should develop effective internal dispute-resolution mechanisms to prevent fragmentation due to secondary disagreements. Building regional alliances and blocs that reflect local cultural and economic

contexts is preferable to importing models that may not align with regional realities. The role of international organizations, particularly the United Nations, should be reinforced in monitoring alliance activities to ensure their compatibility with the principles of international and humanitarian law. Additionally, fostering synergy between military alliances and economic blocs can yield strategic integration that advances both security and development agendas in parallel.

Periodic reviews by member states of the performance and relevance of the alliances and blocs to which they belong are necessary to ensure alignment with evolving global dynamics. Strengthening internal cohesion requires investment in mutual trust-building initiatives across non-military fields such as cultural exchange and educational collaboration. Alliances should avoid becoming instruments for the dominance of a single great power, as such imbalances undermine both legitimacy and long-term efficacy. Counterterrorism efforts must maintain a firm commitment to human rights to prevent abuses under the pretext of security. Regional blocs, in turn, should pursue inclusive development policies aimed at narrowing economic disparities among members, thereby reinforcing stability. Engaging the private sector and civil society in the objectives of economic blocs is also vital, as their participation broadens the base for achieving sustainable development.

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