"What Allies Want: Rethinking Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence"

Moderator: A/P Chong Ja Ian
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ABSTRACT
A common belief is that alliance promises are interdependent: what happens in one alliance will affect others. Specifically, decision-makers worry that disloyalty to one ally will cause crises of faith among other allies. In response, they might loosen their alliance bonds, align with an adversary, or even build their own nuclear weapons. I argue this theory is only half-right: alliance commitments are interdependent, but this is not governed by a moral quality of ‘loyalty’. An ally’s behavior does not reveal universal character traits like loyalty or disloyalty, but it does prove the degree to which certain interests are valued, and how these interests are prioritized relative to others.

This does not mean that discrete alliance commitments are completely independent. Rather, it suggests that we have been looking in the right place for the wrong thing: what allies want is not indiscriminate loyalty, but reliability. An ally is reliable when it poses neither a risk of entrapment nor of abandonment. So long as a state’s ally is reliable, that state will not care about the ally’s general loyalty to other allies. But if the ally is unreliable—if it poses risks of abandonment or entrapment—then the state will seek to manage these dangers.

Extensive archival research of the First Taiwan Straits Crisis (1954-1955) shows that Washington’s security commitment to the Republic of China (ROC) was interdependent with its other regional alliances: developments in this relationship strongly influenced the fears and actions of other U.S. allies. But contrary to the belief of decision-makers in Washington, most of these allies were not worried about U.S. loyalty to Taiwan. Instead, they were concerned that American unreliability could pose significant risks of entrapment. In response, these allies encouraged Washington’s disloyalty to Taipei. This finding has significant implications for the connection between territorial disputes and U.S. credibility in Asia, as well as the likely ramifications of Taiwan being ‘abandoned’ in any form of U.S.-China grand bargain.

BIO
Iain Henry is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) at the Australian National University’s Strategic and Defence Studies Centre. His research interests include alliance politics, Asian security, the Cold War in Asia, diplomatic history and Australian strategic policy. Iain completed his Ph.D. at the Australian National University in 2017, and in 2014 he was a visiting Fulbright Scholar at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs.