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Informal is the New Normal: Command and Control as the Choice for the Functional Source of Security Commitment

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Since the end of the Cold War, the decline in the formation of formal treaty-based alliances has coincided with a volatile security environment and the rise of network-enabled military capabilities. Developments such as the US push to prepare for network-centric warfare since the late 1990s, the growing interest in developing weapons systems through partnerships, such as the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) security pact, and Switzerland and Singapore's decisions to procure F-35s, which feature improved situational awareness through advanced sensor-to-shooter connectivity, highlight a shift toward informal alliances. This shift reflects states' significant interest in leveraging technological advancements and establishing arrangements that offer flexibility and adaptability in achieving greater security without the rigid and costly commitments of formal treaties. This study develops a theoretical framework to explain why states choose informal alliances in such conditions. Drawing on institutionalist and functionalist theories of international relations, security studies, and command and control (C2) literature, I argue that the volatile security environment drives states to choose informal alliances because C2 establishes an organizational framework for security commitment that reduces the alliance risks and costs (opportunism, uncertainty, and risks of abandonment or entrapment) while facilitating political-strategic interoperability and operational adaptability between states which enables them to achieve greater security. The C2 framework introduces dimensions that allocate decision rights, designate interaction patterns, specify information distribution, and enable states to exploit and leverage technological opportunities at both the political-strategic and operational levels of interoperability. These dimensions create a "relational-flexibility" framework that links actors' security commitment at the political-strategic level with the operational level, achieving functional security commitment without requiring binding formal treaties or institutionalized frameworks. This research aims to contribute to alliance studies by addressing gaps in the literature on informal security arrangements and the underexplored role of C2 in shaping alliance behavior, deterrence, and defense objectives.

What discipline or branch of humanities or social sciences do you identify yourself with?

International Relations, Security Studies

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No, I am submitting a Closed Panel abstract

Are you a PhD student or early-career researcher?

Yes

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