

The Tragedy of Rising Power Polities: Imperial Japan's Ascent and Its Alliances

Mina E. Pollmann, MIT
minapoll@mit.edu

Abstract

When, how, and why do rising powers' grand strategies change over time? I argue that the analytical focus should be on individuals' changing causal beliefs about what *means* are most effective for achieving the state's ambitions, rather than on changes in the rising power's "interests." A rising power's ascent causes generational change in the leadership's worldviews, and change in the domestic institutional context that facilitates bargaining over grand strategy. The cases I use to test my theory of grand strategy formulation are alliances because unlike other foreign policy choices where logrolling or a stalemate is possible, e.g. arms build up, territorial expansion, every state only gets one alliance policy, so domestic actors are forced to bargain over the form of the alliance until an alliance is signed or alliance negotiations collapse. Plausibility probes of Imperial Japan's first and last alliances provide preliminary evidence in support of the theory.

The Argument

A rising power's ascent is defined as an absolute increase in military capabilities and the increasing scale and frequency of the use of force. As a rising power ascends, more individuals come to hold militarist causal beliefs as they observe the rising power's early successes. They will prefer a militarist grand strategy and its corollary, a deterrent alliance. Even though not all individuals hold militarist causal beliefs, because the process of ascent also creates other institutional interests, there is room to bargain over multiple issues. This increases the likelihood that the militarists who want a deterrent alliance can get their preferred alliance by making concessions to domestic opponents on other institutional interests. Therefore, a deterrent alliance is more likely later in a rising power's ascent than earlier.

Cases

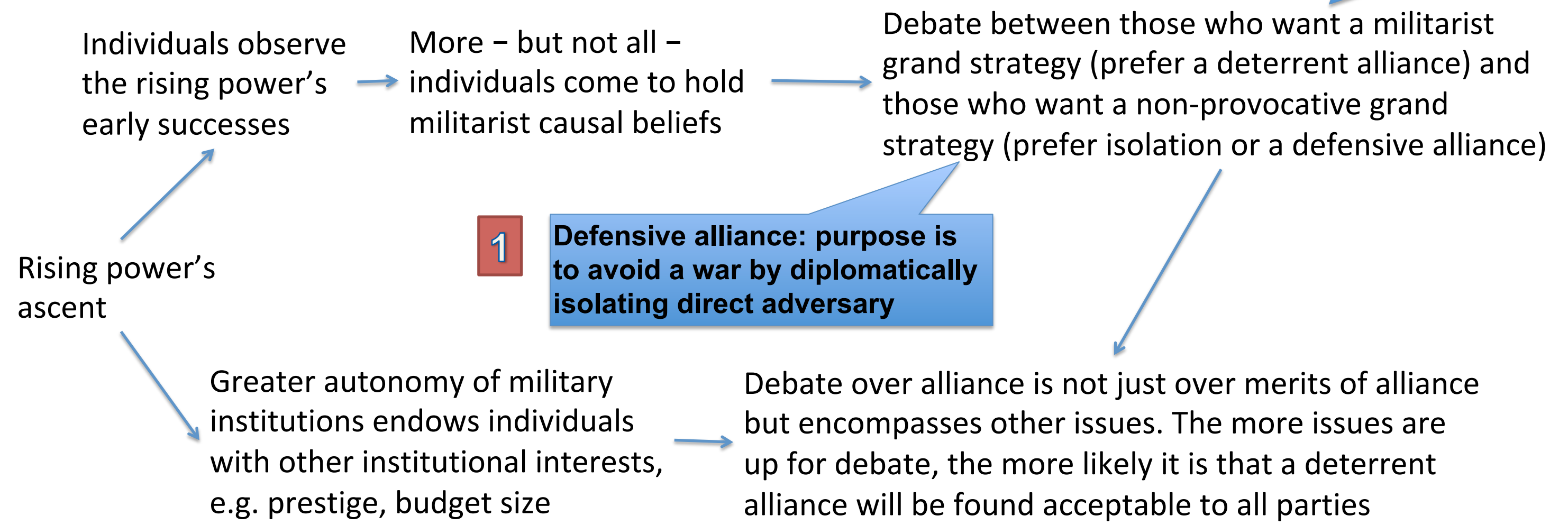
Anglo-Japanese Alliance (1902)

- Defensive alliance against Russia.
- Japan did *not* want to fight Russia, and would have been willing to make concessions to Russia in Manchuria for Russian concessions in Korea.

Tripartite Pact (1940)

- Deterrent alliance against the United States.
- Japan *wanted* to fight China, and Japan was unwilling to pull back from continental expansion.
- The Navy was opposed to the Tripartite Pact, but was bought off by the Army because of the Navy's need to protect its prestige and for a larger budget.

Deterrent alliance: purpose is to prevent third party intervention in a war against the direct adversary



1 Defensive alliance: purpose is to avoid a war by diplomatically isolating direct adversary

2 Individuals holding militarist beliefs fail to offer enough concessions to their opponents to sign a deterrent alliance

3 Individuals holding militarist beliefs offer enough concessions to their opponents on other interests to sign a deterrent alliance

