Sathyan Sundaram

South Africa s Alliance Choices in the Second World War

Introduction and Framework

Though there was a strong tendency toward isolationism throughout all of the white dominions, which had independent control over their respective foreign policies, in the years leading up to the Second World War, the declaration of war against Germany from the Union of South Africa was least assured. In South Africa, unlike Canada, Australia or New Zealand, only a minority of the *enfranchised* population was of English descent. Most (60%) were Boers (also called Afrikaaners) a people descended from 17th-century Dutch settlers in the Cape and refugee French Huguenots and German Protestants (Stultz 8). The UK waged the South African War (1899-1902) to bring the Boer States under its imperial control. One of the Boer generals of this war, James Barry Hertzog, would go on to be the Prime Minister (1924-39) of the Union and one of the strongest advocates for neutrality in the House of Assembly (equivalent to House of Commons).

Given such a recent history, anti-imperial sentiment was relatively strong. However, South Africa *did* join up with the Allies, in a move which brought about Hertzog s resignation. The obvious question is: What factors brought about this decision? Can existing theories of alliance formation account for this declaration of war? Below, I will test three theories (Waltz s Balance of Power, Walt s Balance of Threat, Schweller s Balance of Interest) as to whether they assist our understanding of this case.

Definitions of Basic Terms

Before proceeding several important terms need to be defined. The state is an organization that provides for protection and welfare [of its citizens] in return for revenue (Gilpin 15). The key roles of the state are to provide property rights and public goods (Gilpin 16); its policies are determined by interests of dominant domestic coalitions (Gilpin 19). To safeguard vital interests, the state is willing to wage war (Gilpin 25). An alliance is a bilateral, or multilateral, agreement by contracting states to

improve their power capabilities relative to a nonmember threat by joining together in defense of common interests. Power is the ability to make another state do (or not do) something which it would not do (or do) of its own accord.

Balancing is a strategy undertaken by states in light of a perceived threat in which the state joins the side of a conflict which appears to be weaker (Schweller I 19), so as to move toward a balance the capabilities between the contending sides. Conversely, bandwagoning is a strategy of joining the side of a conflict which appears to be stronger to maximize power or security (Schweller I 22). A Status Quo state is a state which is satisfied with the current international system and its place in it and which views attempts to change that system as threatening to its prestige, power and security. Many actors should be considered status quo even though they do not strictly adhere to those guidelines. A relatively strong (or not immediately threatened) state may accept some changes in borders as long as essential actors are not swallowed up. Such a state, while rebuffing mortal threats against LGPs, may accept compensatory changes in the periphery (often changes have been made in colonial holdings) and semi-periphery as a method of engaging (the euphemism for appeasing) to satiate a dissatisfied power which is a potential threat to the state s vital interests. A strong (in terms of capabilities) in-theater state (e.g., UK) or an out-of-theater state (dominions, USA, Brazil, etc) has a greater margin of security than a weak in-theater power (France) and need not react to revisionism against non-essential actors. Britain could accept Germany acquisition of Eastern Europe while France could not. Britain could not accept the absorption of essential-actor France. Both Britain and France were status quo actors whose decisions in specific situations were influenced by relative power and the threat to their respective vital interests. Following this logic, a limited-aims revisionist, accurately identified, whose ambitions do not threaten the *vital* interests of essential actors of the system, can always be engaged by a countervailing coalition of the system s status quo actors. A Revisionist is a dissatisfied state which seeks a change in the international system allowing for its increased prestige, power and/or security. The revisionist can seek limited or

unlimited aims.

Theoretical Background

Waltz s Balance of Power

In Waltzian neorealism, the structure of the international system is determined by counting the number of Great Powers (Schweller II 185). A systemic theory, Waltz identifies bipolar and multipolar as the types of systems which have appeared since 1648. In the history of the modern state system, it shifted from multipolar to bipolar after the Second World War (Schweller II 186). Waltz argues a system is composed of structure (bipolar or multipolar) and interacting units (Waltz 79). The interacting units are political actors such as states. The relative positioning of actors within a system is more important than how they interact (Waltz 80) and the structure defines this arrangement (Waltz 81). The systemic structure is guided by the principles by which subunits are ordered, the specification of functions and the distribution of capabilities (Waltz 82). The subunits are ordered within a system which has anarchy as its defining characteristic. Fundamentally, the sovereign states are functionally undifferentiated (Waltz 97) and seek to assure their survival (Waltz 91), i.e., states are *security-maximizers*.

Waltz believes that a bipolar system such as the one which prevailed during the Cold War is the most stable system. He would attribute the lack of war between poles and LGP s to the bipolar structure rather than solely to the existence of nuclear weapons. Waltz s conclusion regarding global management is that a bipolar system is more likely to take the collective action of managing the system than a multipolar structure (Waltz 198). In a large-N system, a state defines goals and ambitions in terms of itself (Waltz 133); while in a small-N system, a state allows for the reactions of other players in the system (Waltz 134). The key characteristics of the bipolar system are (1) it is zero-sum, (2) wish becomes reality and (3) poles feel the dangers themselves (Waltz 171). The other pole will oppose each threatening action. There can be no hope that a countervailing alliance will not form to oppose such aggression. In a bipolar world, the poles do not need allies for survival as the LGP France depended on

the polar UK in 1939-40 (Waltz 169). Such power permits a wider range of choices of actions (Waltz 194). A state which requires allies due to inadequate capabilities cannot be as certain that these allies will do their part in a conflict; a state with sufficient capabilities on its own does not have this uncertainty. Furthermore, by having a preponderance of capabilities among the poles, the bipolar poles are able to moderate the actions of others which allows them to manage the system (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff 133).

Waltz s theory is one of a balance of power in which powers seeking to maximize their *security* oppose others gaining a preponderance of capabilities. To do this, they forge alliances with other interested parties and increase their own capabilities. Both the tactics of balancing and bandwagoning can be used. The key feature of this approach is that it focuses on relative power among polar and LGP states.

Walt s Balance of Threat

Walt refines Waltz s theory in his consideration of alliance dynamics in the postwar Middle East (Arab-Israeli Wars). He refocuses from power to threat. For Walt, threat is composed of (1) aggregate power, (2) geographic proximity, (3) military doctrine and (4) aggressiveness of intentions (Walt 22-25). Population, industrial capability, military capability and technological prowess constitute aggregate power (Walt 22). Geographic proximity and military doctrine, which represents the perceived offensive/defensive relative advantage, combine to describe power projection capabilities (Walt 24). The key refinement which Walt provides is: threat inheres in power *and the intentions of the adversary*.

Likewise he redefines balancing and bandwagoning as allying with others against the prevailing and immediate threat and allying with the source of danger, respectively (Walt 17). Walt continues: If balancing is more common than bandwagoning, then states are more secure, because aggressors will face combined opposition. But if bandwagoning is the dominant tendency, then security is scarce, because successful aggressors will attract additional allies, enhancing their power while reducing that of their opponents. (Walt 17)

States have selected from each of these policies in the past for a variety of reasons. A state chooses to balance if its survival is at risk to curb a potential hegemon before it becomes too strong. To ally with the dominant power means placing one s trust in its continued benevolence. The safer strategy is to join with those who cannot readily dominate their allies, in order to avoid being dominated by those who can (Walt 18). On the other hand, a state can exert more influence by joining a weak alliance because the weak alliance has a greater need for its joining (Walt 19). The state could even be the king-maker. States also bandwagon defensively as they believe success begets success. In other words, there is a momentum behind a belligerent s battle record and states are attracted to strength (Walt 20) hoping to avoid turning their own territory into a battlefield and to share of spoils of victory (Walt 21).

Walt sees a perhaps a special motivation for small (capabilities, i.e., weak) states. He argues, Small states are more likely to bandwagon as they add little to a defensive coalition but will suffer the full wrath of the aggressor. Because weak states can do little to affect the outcome, they go with the winning side (Walt 29). Also, states look around to test the waters. States will bandwagon when allies [sufficient for a countervailing alliance] are simply unavailable; if they see no means of outside assistance, they will accommodate the most imminent threat (Walt 30). Arch-realist Carr provides a historical example: When France was militarily supreme in Europe in the nineteen-twenties, a number of smaller Powers grouped themselves under her aegis. When German military strength eclipsed that of France, most of these Powers made declarations of neutrality or veer toward the side of Germany (Carr 104-105). A major weakness in Walt s treatment is that it cannot explain alignments made in the absence of clear and credible threats, as in the case below.

Schweller s Balance of Interest

In his new book, Schweller develops an analysis of the interwar structure to explain great power behavior in the Second World War (Schweller II 183). Drawing upon the work of Waltz and Walt, Schweller formulates a balance of *interest* theory. He puts it very clearly: Interests, not power,

determine how states choose their friends and enemies (Schweller II 189). He then groups the state actors on a system interest continuum running from Unlimited-Aims Revisionist (Wolf) to Strong Status Quo Supporters (Owl/Hawk, Lion) with a total of five categories (Schweller II 90). Schweller finds eleven distinct state behaviors, including balancing, buck-passing, distancing, engagement (appeasement), bandwagoning and the jackal form (Schweller II 190).

One of Schweller's most significant contributions is his consideration of jackal behavior (Italy in his case). He argues, "... bandwagoning rather than balancing is the characteristic behavior among revisionist states because their primary goal is to transform, not maintain, the [current] system. System stability is a virtue only for those states that are content with the status quo" (Schweller II 191). Italy, hoping to rebuild the Roman empire and break out of its Mediterranean captivity and establish a peripheral empire, was clearly a limited-aims revisionist. Capabilities-wise Italy certainly was an LGP with ambitions in excess of its unaided forces. Anglo-French forces would have to be otherwise committed for Italy to take such a risk as confronting their Mediterranean interests. Yet, a revisionist is less cautious than a status quo supporter. Seeking to maximize their power, not their security, revisionist states tend to be risk-acceptant, rather than risk-averse, actors (Schweller II 191). Mussolini, seeing Italy's satisfaction of its ambitions with powerful revisionist Germany, insisted that "small nations had to place themselves under the wings of the great, or perish" (Knox 76). Germany, having no need of aid, asked for nothing" (Knox 96). In terms of blood and treasure, Italy saw a cheap route to hegemony over the Mediterranean. A contemporary report put it: "The doubters have fallen silent, and the anti-Fascists are ultracautious . . . the expectation of a swift, easy, bloodless against a France bled white and an England disorganized and with a decimated fleet, it rapidly maturing. The Italian public was ready to partake of the spoils" (Knox 112). As such, Italy stands as the exemplary jackal case. Most relevant to the case considered below, Schweller put forth the notion of distancing. For him, a weak state will engage (appease) an aggressor with limited revisions or distance itself from a potential ally which is

directly targeted by a credible source of threat (Schweller II 73).

Another point Schweller makes is in regards to alliance size. Revisionists, he argues, seek a minimum winning coalition (Schweller II 196) so that the spoils of victory need not be divided between as many actors and strategy not compromised by contradictory goals. Status quo alliances seek the largest alliance possible to deter the upsetting of the system by revisionist powers (Schweller II 197). This alliance can be large because its members share one goal: stopping the revisionists. This is not to say that intra-alliance dynamics do not have a role to play but that a large alliance is less strategically detrimental to military and political objectives being achieved.

The Case: The Second World War and South Africa

In light of these theories, how can South Africa s behavior in the years leading up to WWII be explained? These theories argue for structural determinism for alliance formation. In South Africa s case, I would argue, many of the most significant developments took place domestically and in the fragile coalition government itself. The Union eventually decided to join the Anglo-French alliance in its war against the Italo-German Axis, certainly the weaker side in all aspects (excluding the latent empire) except naval. South Africa did not bandwagon by joining the most **power**ful alliance. Nor could the addition of South Africa s capability enable the western democracies to defeat the Axis, thereby balancing their power.

There is a bit more credibility to Walt s **threat** approach. The 1938 Munich Crisis drove home the possibility that Germany would come asking for her former colony, South West Africa (now, Namibia), a development from which the Union could no longer remain aloof (Pienaar 149). The Labour Party expressed fears that South West Africa could be Hitler s new Sudetenland and the Union may suffer the same fate as the rump Czechoslovakia (Pienaar 152). How credible was this threat? For Germany to make good on this threat would require a significant sealift capability and at least the annihilation of the Royal Navy and Royal Canadian Navy (370 warships) and probably the United States

Navy; after all, if Germany could reach the Cape, America s Atlantic seaboard was in jeopardy. The Kriegsmarine even with Plan Z could not have achieved this. Then Germany would need the merchant ships which it did not have. Germany s direct threat to the Union could not be mortal but it could be harassing. Later, there were also threats to strategic Cape lanes (India to US/Canada/UK) and the world s richest gold fields: U-boats off Capetown and the IJN threat to Vichy Madagascar once Singapore fell (Elliott 450 n 33). U-boats and commerce raiders *did* operate off the Cape until the RN destroyed them; the IJN threat to Madagascar, which controlled the sea lane from Capetown to Bombay, only subsided when British forces preemptively invaded the island.

The Axis was clearly the greater threat but South Africa did not bandwagon. South Africa added little to the countervailing coalition other than a few more bases for the RN to use. This would not provide the difference in the war. Walt claims that small powers tend to bandwagon when sufficient allies are unavailable. While this may be true for a state like the Netherlands in 1939-40, it simply does not apply to South Africa which by all capabilities measures is a small state. This has to do with the credibility of the threat, i.e., power projection capability. If Walt would qualify his statement by arguing that *threatened* small powers bandwagon, he likely would have a case. In this case, the threat to the small power was not mortal.

Will the **interests** explanation Schweller offers fare any better? South Africa as far as the system was concerned was a status quo actor. In fact, South Africa was one of the League s greatest defenders: South Africa believed in reforming the League in light of the interwar crises even when the organization was thought dead by the British (Pienaar 35). When the League lifted sanctions on Italy in 1936 which were seen as having failed, South Africa was the only dominion which abstained from the vote (Pienaar 79). Only in 1938 did the Union begin to give up on the League (Pienaar 91). In the Italo-Abyssinian War, South Africa learned that the international system could not depend on strong action from Britain or France for its defense. The Union would remember this weakness when it decided whether these states

were credible allies for the maintenance of the status quo. Recall that Walt claims where credible allies exist a small state can balance against the prevailing threat. Lack of Anglo-French resolve in Abyssinia informed the Union that this was lacking and encourage it toward isolation and engagement of the threat. This isolationism found fertile ground in the interwar period. The dominions were generally isolationist as they felt themselves insulated from Europe and they felt the Great War had been wasteful and pointless. South Africa s position was complicated by a conflict of loyalties and a bitter hatred . . . of all things French as embodied in the Paris Peace Conference and Locarno, hoping to preserve an isolation from European affairs (Howard 76). In 1936, South Africa (and Canada) declared its opposition to Anglo-French enforcement of Locarno guarantees and refused to fight to prevent certain Germans [the Sudeten Germans] from rejoining their Fatherland or preserving the archaic and discredited Balance of Power (Howard 100) Indeed Afrikaaners argued, We desire to lay down an axiom, that is that the South African nation shall not enter or take part in any offensive war before the people have had the opportunity of expressing their desire to do so or not, and there has been a plebiscite or election (Pienaar 77)

Could the interest South Africa found to choose sides have been economic? Before the war, the UK accounted for 40% of South Africa s imports and 80% of exports (Elliott 444) while Germany was its second-best customer (Elliott 445). So the British were a much more significant trading partner than Germany and the Union would be unable to trade with the Axis regardless of alignment during the war due to the RN blockade. Economic interest would clearly lay on the British side and could account for pro-allies neutrality but active engagement?

A status quo state should be a security maximizer. If South Africa was led by the balance of interests, Allied belligerency should have maximized its security. Japanese and German naval forces would have to harass the Cape in any case as these were vital British supply lines. As a non-belligerent there was, however, some protection in neutral waters. It was strong British naval capabilities which

allowed the Union to sacrifice this safety. Belligerency brought the Royal Navy to South African bases from which it could more fully defend the lanes. So the British protected South Africa s commerce. In a very general sense, it was in the security interest of South Africa for Hitler to be defeated so contributing the Reich s defeat maximized the Union s security. However, as I have previously argued, it is unlikely Germany had the potential to mortally threaten the country. Furthermore the RN had an interest itself in protecting what it did in South Africa. As trivial as the Union s contributions to the alliance in total, even more so were its naval forces. Without the RN (or USN or even RCN), the Cape could not be adequately defended against Doenitz. South African security was enhanced by an ASW buildup on its territory as the KM would have to strike at the vital British trade routes.

For the most part, the Union s involvement was as a foreign war, attempting to limit revisionism. South Africa was able to end its pragmatic flirtation with the Nazis only when Britain became a credible ally as it re-armed. While the Dominions encouraged Chamberlain to find peace in Munich through their isolation, they also encouraged Perfidious Albion to seek increased military capabilities to restore its polar status after two decades of welfare state decadence. While not an interwar pole, the UK was the dominant naval power which was the field of protection needed by South Africa. The collapse of the UK, if it meant the destruction or seizure of the Royal Navy by the Axis, would leave the Union s trade routes and substantial coastline utterly unprotected. A threat to British naval supremacy by a hostile power was a threat to South African security. How could this security concern best be addressed? Appeasement was the preferred strategy if Britain was weak as the Nazi-South African relationship would be stabilized, i.e., the Axis navies would have no retaliatory reason to raid the Cape. The Union could support a strengthening UK as a credible bulwark against the Axis armada and abandon distancing. Fundamentally, South Africa was not concerned with affairs of the Continent but with the maintenance of British naval power. Deploying land forces abroad to deny resources and industry to the Reich and protect the Home Islands and their capabilities was in the Union s interest when such an operation could be credibly

executed.

However, I hesitate to say the structure Schweller describes *directly* predicted South Africa s declaration of war. The answer may lie inside the country and be limited in its transnational application. Structural changes in threat and interest shook a fragile governing coalition, leading to the war vote. The dominions were technically independent and equal to the UK but this was more a matter of custom than formal definition; the predominantly Boer government called for an unambiguous statement of the fact (Douglas 126). From 1924 to 1933, Hertzog s (Afrikaans) Nationalist Party was the government and Smuts (Afrikaans and English) South African Party the opposition (Elliott 426). In the decade before the war broke out there was a rising tide of Boer nationalism calling for a South African *republic* which would not recognize the British King as their head of state (Douglas 131). Afrikaaner nationalism grew in the depression era rallying against the twin evils of British imperialism and capitalism; as the economic situation improved its ranks slimmed (Stultz 45). When Hertzog and Smuts formed their 1933 Coalition, they agreed that South Africa was not bound automatically to enter into a war which involved the Commonwealth; rather, the Union could only enter if Parliament decided so on that occasion (Elliott 431). During the Czech crisis, which was resolved in Munich, Hertzog and Smuts told the Cabinet they favored neutrality if war broke out over the situation (Elliott 431). In 1938, the British representative was informed in no uncertain terms that South Africa would declare neutrality in an Anglo-German war (Pienaar 92). Yet on Friday, September 1, 1939, Adolf Hitler s Wehrmacht invaded Poland. Two days later, the UK and France declared war on the Reich. In the Union, these events necessitated a decision as to its neutrality in a war involving Britain. It was on this issue in 1934, the Smuts-Hertzog Coalition agreed to differ. Prime Minister Hertzog advocated strict neutrality in effect, to ignore that a war was occurring in diplomatic and economic relations while General Smuts offered an amendment committing the Union to a war against Hitlerite Germany (Stultz 60). After a day of debate, the House of Assembly voted 80 to 67 to sever relations with the Thousand-Year Reich and not remain neutral.

Hertzog resigned his Premiership the following day. The next day Smuts became Prime Minister and declared war on Germany (Stultz 61). South Africa s position in the international structure did not change between Czechoslovakia in 1938 and Poland the following year, unlike the UK which rearmed so it could end appeasement and confront the Axis in a status quo balancing coalition. Arguably the Union s interest did not change much. What did change was Germany had demanded Sudetenland and invaded Czechoslovakia; could Hitler s demands on South West Africa be limited? We simply do not know whether South Africa would have fought if war began in 1938. War, rather than speculation about it, forced the parliament to a very close vote. The results of Munich may have changed enough votes from Hertzog to Smuts for the declaration of war to be possible. It was an interaction of the international structure and the domestic political coalition wrangles that likely formed the basis for South Africa joining Britain in alliance.

Conclusion

As I have tried to demonstrate in this paper, South Africa provides an important case for analysis in a WWII which polarized and strained national allegiances. At first look, the threat which the Axis could bring against the Union appears non-credible. However, we are removed from the political context within which the government was operating. Their perceptions, certainly propaganda-influenced, may have been much different. Also, I cannot emphasize enough, as war votes go, it was extremely close: South Africa went to war by a mere 13 votes. The threat of Germany, which increased after rump Czechoslovakia was swallowed, in addition to the economic situation (trade could only occur with the Allies) could sway these votes. The war fully divided the Smuts and Hertzog forces. The state did not operate as a *unitary*, rational actor. If the Prime Minister, Hertzog, was not relying on a fragile coalition government which was divided on the relevant issue, i.e., if he had dependable support is the House, would South Africa have declared war? The Union s economic trading interests lay with the Allies and Germany via South West Africa was a real threat and become even more of one throughout the year.

Hertzog s mind was, however, unchanged by these interests and threat considerations on the neutrality issue. Hertzog s dedicated supporters *did not* vote for war. Systemic changes undercut Hertzog s support versus Smut s resulting in the Union s policy decision. After the war, in 1948, the Afrikaaners would be in their ascendancy, as the nation backlashed against being dragged into war by parliament which they felt under represented the Boers rather than plebiscite, and established Apartheid perhaps Hitler s final victory.

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