Alliance Complements or Substitutes? Explaining Bilateral Intergovernmental Strategic Partnership Ties

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ABSTRACT	Since the end of the Cold War, informal security cooperation has been on the rise. Besides formal alliances, states are increasingly establishing so-called "strategic partnerships". This new form of security cooperation is currently under-researched, although governments consider it an important foreign policy tool. We do not yet know whether security interests are the basis of these arrangements or whether strategic partnerships function as substitutes for or complements to formal alliances. This article addresses both issues by analyzing a new dataset on strategic partnerships with the involvement of G20 countries. I find that two or more states are most likely to be tied by partnerships when the presence of a common threat coincides with the absence of their joint membership in a formal alliance. However, states parties to a formal alliance with a lower commitment, such as a consultation, neutrality, or non-aggression pact, are also likely to be tied to each other by partnerships when they face a common threat.

KEYWORDS	strategic partnership, alliance, alignment, informal institution, soft balancing, reassurance
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INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War, scholars have observed the changing nature of international security cooperation (SEE CHIDLEY 2014; LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021; TERTRAIS 2004; WILKINS 2012). According to many, there has been a shift in the emerging multipolar world from formal alliances as the preferred instrument for strengthening national security to new forms of "alignment," with so-called "strategic partnerships" at the forefront (SEE BLANCO 2016; DENG 2007; ENVALL – HALL 2016; FERGUSSON 2012; KAY 2000; NADKARNI 2010; PARAMESWARAN 2014; STRÜVER 2017; WILKINS 2008). These arrangements provide a flexible framework *"to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges"* (WILKINS 2008: 363). The nature of strategic partnerships differs from that of other forms of security cooperation, such as formal alliances, in that strategic partnerships are informal and have a general (security) purpose. Precisely this informality, which entails inherently low commitment costs, constitutes one of their most distinctive features. In this regard, the proliferation of such partnerships[1] reflects a broader trend of proliferation of informal institutions (SEE ROGER – ROWAN 2022; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2021) and the emergence of "hybrid institutional complexes" (ABBOTT – FAUDE 2022).

Whether strategic partnerships are an authentic category of alignment remains a subject of scholarly debate. Similarly perplexing is the ambiguous role of these arrangements vis-à-vis other forms of security cooperation, including formal alliances. The existing literature does not provide a clear answer as to whether security concerns are, indeed, one of the main drivers behind their rapid proliferation and, if so, whether their primary function is to complement or substitute for formal military alliances. The answers to these questions have potentially significant implications because our knowledge of how formal and informal institutions interact is currently limited (CF. ABBOTT – FAUDE 2022). As informal institutions, strategic partnerships could potentially serve as building blocks or stumbling blocks for a more formalized cooperation (VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013: 212–213). Addressing the issue of complementarity/substitution is therefore pertinent with respect to improving our understanding of the changing nature of the international institutional order.

To fill these gaps, this article presents the first large-*N* cross-country analysis of the factors affecting the incidence of strategic partnership ties,

drawing on a new "Bilateral Intergovernmental Strategic Partnerships" dataset of strategic partnerships with the involvement of G20 states as one of the members for the period of 1993–2020. The article contributes to three strands of scholarly literature. First, it contributes to the small but growing literature on strategic partnerships (SEE BLANCO 2016; ENVALL – HALL 2016; STRÜVER 2017; WILKINS 2008) by providing the most comprehensive empirical account to date of the extent to which such partnerships have proliferated over time and across states. Second, it contributes to the literature on informal institutions (SEE ABBOT – FAUDE 2020; ROGER 2020; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013) by testing an argument about the complementary/substitutive role of these *informal* partnerships vis-à-vis *formal* alliances. Lastly, it contributes to the alignment literature (SEE LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021; SNYDER 1997; WILKINS 2012) by improving our understanding of the drivers of lesser-known forms of alignments.

The results of the analysis provide mixed evidence in support of the proposition that security concerns – or more specifically, the presence of common threats – constitute(s) one of the primary factors behind the incidence of strategic partnership ties. Other factors, such as inequality of power, economic interests or a history of military conflict, clearly play a role as well. Perhaps most importantly, the results suggest that states are much more likely to be tied by strategic partnerships when their security interests coalesce with an absence of their joint membership in a formal alliance, which supports the idea that the primary role of these arrangements tends to be substitutive, rather than complementary, vis-à-vis the more traditional forms of alignment. One important caveat to this finding concerns the *level* of alliance commitment. Parties to the same alliance involving a relatively lower level of commitment – such as a consultation or neutrality/non-aggression pact – are also likely to be tied by a strategic partnership if they face a common threat. This finding suggests that partnerships can play both a complementary and a substitutive role, but this is contingent on the *level* of alliance commitment.

Given that strategic partnerships have received only limited attention in the International Relations literature so far, it is perhaps important to establish why they matter in the first place. First, strategic partnerships have become a staple of the "21st-century alignment" (WILKINS 2012: 68), and their proliferation reflects the international system as it is in transition (KUCHINS 2001: 2). Major and rising powers must navigate the unfolding

international environment under unprecedented levels of uncertainty about others' intentions and the future distribution of capabilities. The flexible nature of informal institutions, such as partnerships, provides one way for states to manage the related power shifts (VABULAS – SNIDAL 2020). It is no coincidence that states such as China and Russia, which have seen major changes in their status since the end of the Cold War, are among the most prolific originators of these arrangements. Both countries now favor strategic partnerships over formal alliances (SEE LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021; STRÜVER 2017; WILKINS 2008).

Second, strategic partnerships are durable. For example, China and Russia have maintained and continuously updated their strategic partnership from its establishment in 1996 to the present. Under it, the two parties meet regularly to address security, trade and other challenges. The meetings are held at the highest executive level, often with the presidents in attendance (STRÜVER 2017: 36; WILKINS 2008: 360). The recent elevation of the partnership to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for a New Era," demonstrates that Beijing and Moscow continue to benefit from their bilateral cooperation (MAULL 2022), which is ultimately driven by a common interest in promoting multipolarity and an anti-hegemonic (anti-United States) world order (LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021: 19). The enduring nature of this partnership is further evident from the fact that it has so far remained unaffected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Some analysts go so far as to describe the Sino-Russian partnership as "alliance-like" (YE 2022), although it does not entail any binding commitments to provide military support.

Lastly, governments attach a special importance to strategic partnerships. For example, in an op-ed for the Chinese news agency Xinhua, Russian President Putin praised the current Sino-Russian relations as a *"comprehensive strategic partnership"* and stated that they had reached *"an unprecedented level"* (PUTIN 2022). Chinese President Xi Jinping later said that the partnership with Russia is *"superior to any Cold War-era alliance"* (MUNROE ET AL. 2022). The two sides also signed a joint statement emphasizing that the partnership has *"no limits"* and that there are *"no forbidden areas of cooperation"* in it (KAPETAS 2022). In summary, since the end of the Cold War, strategic partnerships have become an increasingly common form of international cooperation that has proved enduring and is seen by governments as an important foreign policy tool. Therefore, it is pertinent to

explore what could explain the proliferation of strategic partnerships and what their role is vis-à-vis other forms of security cooperation, including formal military alliances.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, I provide a brief overview of the distinction between strategic partnerships and other forms of alignment, including alliances, coalitions, and security communities. Second, I formulate several hypotheses related to security concerns – namely, interstate threats – and the function of strategic partnerships vis-à-vis formal alliances – whether it is complementary or substitutive. Next, I describe the data and methods of analysis. In the following section, I present the results of the analysis and follow up with a discussion of my findings. Finally, I conclude with a summary of the findings and point to some avenues for future research.

VARIETIES OF ALIGNMENT

According to many scholars, the collapse of the bipolar system has led to a significant change in the nature of international security cooperation. This change has sparked an academic debate about one of the key concepts in our field – military alliances (CHIDLEY 2014; LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021; TERTRAIS 2004; WILKINS 2012). The problem at the outset was that the existing literature on this topic focused almost exclusively on *formal* military alliances as a tool for enhancing national security through which states could prevent and manage wars (RYNNING – SCHMITT 2018: 1). The leading contributions to this literature were largely written and developed during the Cold War (SEE WALTZ 1979; WALT 1987), and the sorts of arrangements that the authors observed and theorized, including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Warsaw Pact, were products of that time. Yet, this predominant focus on *formal* military alliances has effectively limited the field of research to a very specific form of security cooperation (CHIDLEY 2014; WILKINS 2012), and this entailed moving away from the broader concept of alignment, which Snyder (1997: 6) defined as *"[…] expectations of states about whether they will be supported or opposed by other states in future interactions."*

However, traditional conceptualizations of military alliances no longer necessarily reflect the new security environment and the full range of security cooperation in the nascent multipolar world. Increasingly,

countries are resorting to more *informal* arrangements (CHIDLEY 2014; LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021). Wilkins (2012) thus argued for a return to the concept of alignment as an umbrella term for different forms of security cooperation, including military alliances, coalitions, security communities, and strategic partnerships, which can be defined as *"[...] structured collaboration[s] between states (or other actors) to take joint advantage of economic opportunities, or to respond to security challenges [...]"* (WILKINS 2008: 383). Whereas alliances are based on *formal* agreements that bind their members to cooperate militarily in the face of a common threat (LEEDS 2020: 6), strategic partnerships are based on *informal* agreements organized around a general (security) purpose, or a "system principle," such as championship of a multipolar world (WILKINS 2008: 360–361). In addition, unlike security communities, partnerships are based on shared interests rather than values, and unlike coalitions, they are *"open-ended and evolving"* rather than *ad hoc* solutions to specific problems (ENVALL – HALL 2016: 91). Strategic partnerships thus arguably represent a distinct category of alignment.

The most characteristic feature of strategic partnerships, in comparison to military alliances in particular, is precisely their general (security) purpose and informality. Security is not the only, and sometimes not even the most prominent, area of cooperation under strategic partnerships. Rather, these partnerships tend to be multidimensional, often spanning a wide range of functional areas, including diplomacy, defense, trade, and culture (SEE KAY 2000: 15–16; MICHALSKI 2019: 4–5; ŠIMEČKA – TALLIS 2016: 3–5; WILKINS 2008: 360–361). The *general* security purpose of partnerships lies in their ability to combat uncertainty about the international environment by creating stable expectations about future interactions between states, regardless of the specific issue area (WILKINS 2008: 363–364). Military alliances limited to defense cooperation, on the other hand, are considered by many to be ineffective in addressing today's security challenges (LOCOMAN – PAPA 2021: 275) as they often require a more complex and multidimensional approach.

While during the Cold War formal security cooperation allowed states to formulate clear and long-term commitments, security cooperations today tend to be rather short-term and are often laden with uncertainty about future developments (VABULAS – SNIDAL 2021: 854). The informal nature of strategic partnerships brings some advantages, including the flexibility to modify the agreement as circumstances change, faster decision-making

and confidentiality, which can help states overcome the uncertainty. Most importantly, as informal institutions, they entail *low* commitment costs (ABBOTT – FAUDE 2020; ROGER 2020; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013). Partnerships thus stand in contrast to traditional military alliances, which are based on formal agreements, and entail *high* commitment costs due to legally binding obligations (SEE LEEDS 2020: 6). However, precisely because of their low costs, strategic partnerships are poorly-suited for addressing cooperation problems that require credible commitments (SEE ABBOTT – FAUDE 2020: 10), as is the case with coordinated military action.

The recent proliferation of strategic partnerships is part of a broader trend of proliferation of informal institutions, including informal intergovernmental organizations (IIGOs), with which they share some common features (SEE ROGER – ROWAN 2022; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2021). These include: (1) explicitly shared expectations, but no formal treaty, (2) explicitly associated members, but no formal membership, and (3) regular meetings, but no independent secretariat (VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013: 201). Partnerships are established on the basis of joint declarations or memoranda of understanding that specify shared expectations but do not constitute a legally binding commitment (HOLSLAG 2011: 295–296; PARAMESWARAN 2014: 264). The countries in the partnership are explicitly associated by its recognition, and they often develop mechanisms for regular interaction, such as so-called "strategic dialogues" (STRÜVER 2017: 37–38; PARAMESWARAN 2014: 264–265). What sets partnerships apart from IIGOs is their general purpose, which is normally associated with delegation to an independent authority (HAWKINS ET AL. 2006; HOOGHE – MARKS 2014) and the fact that they are typically bilateral.

ALLIANCE COMPLEMENTS OR SUBSTITUTES?

The conventional wisdom of realism in International Relations says that states form military alliances to balance against the most powerful or threatening state (SEE SNYDER 1997; WALT 1987; WALTZ 1979). While most authors agree that one of the main reasons why states establish strategic partnerships is to strengthen national and regional security (ENVALL – HALL 2016: 87; PARAMESWARAN 2014: 264; WILKINS 2008: 360), there is some disagreement as to whether their formation is motivated by the presence of external threats, as is the case with military alliances. Strategic partnerships tend to be "goal-driven" rather than "threat-driven." They are useful for policy coordination because

they allow states to share information, resources, and risks (WILKINS 2008: 361), but not for the aggregation of power to counter threats militarily since they lack mechanisms to make commitments credible. Even still, this property does not detract from their utility in addressing threats indirectly, such as through "soft balancing" (FERGUSSON 2012; KAY 2000; PAUL 2018). States resort to such strategies to achieve more modest goals by frustrating or undermining an adversary's foreign policy ambitions with non-military means, such as diplomacy, international institutions, and economic statecraft, while avoiding the risk of military confrontation (PAPE 2005: 7; PAUL 2018: 20).

Strategic partnerships are arguably an ideal tool for soft balancing, not least because of their informality. The absence of legally-binding obligations in them avoids some of the problems inherent to military alliances, such as entrapment or abandonment (PAUL 2018: 187). To be sure, countries may resort to soft balancing through other means, such as formal intergovernmental organizations (FIGOs), to achieve the same goals (WIVEL – PAUL 2020). Yet, formal rules and diverse memberships in FIGOs complicate reaching an agreement, while partnerships do not have to suffer from these limitations. The multidimensional nature of strategic partnerships can also aid in soft balancing as it seeks to reduce the influence of a hostile outside power not only in the military, but also in the economic, cultural and normative sphere (FERGUSSON 2012: 200). These benefits are likely to make partnerships an attractive option for states in terms of their addressing common security challenges. Therefore, states facing a common threat should be more likely to be tied by strategic partnerships.

Hypothesis 1: Two states that face a common threat are more likely to be tied by a strategic partnership.

Insofar as strategic partnerships serve a similar purpose as military alliances – i.e. to enhance national and regional security – the question arises whether they function as complements to or substitutes for each other. This conundrum goes even beyond the alignment debate since the recent proliferation of informal institutions has led to increasing complexity in global governance, with overlapping memberships in formal and informal arrangements that often focus on solving similar substantive issues (SEE ABBOTT – FAUDE 2022). These patterns are all the more difficult to decipher given that some countries, such as China, have established tens

of partnerships while maintaining only a limited portfolio of military alliances, whereas other countries, such as the United States, have pursued the establishment of both simultaneously (SEE STRÜVER 2017; PARAMESWARAN 2014). By the mid-2000s, virtually all the major powers had established strategic partnerships with their counterparts at the regional and global levels (SEE TALLIS – ŠIMEČKA 2017: 4; ENVALL – HALL 2016: 90), but the number of military alliances appears to be stagnating. In principle, both the logic of complementarity and that of substitution could apply here.

However, the literature on informal institutions addresses this question only marginally. For example, Abbott and Faude (2020: 26) argue that "low-cost institutions" can complement FIGOs in addressing specific aspects of cooperation, such as accelerated policy coordination, for which they are well-suited. But the same institutions can also exist in place of FIGOs in areas where it would otherwise be difficult to reach a formal agreement. As such, informal institutions can potentially act as "building blocks" for or "stumbling blocks" to a more formal cooperation (VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013: 195, 212)[2] These assumptions apply equally to strategic partnerships. When they serve as substitutes, they can be created as *"[...] new (less-demanding) types of alliance [...] with the specific purpose of bolstering a particular world view or the international positions of like-minded powers"* (MICHALSKI 2019: 7). The primary purpose of these arrangements would likely be soft balancing. The low commitment costs should also make it relatively easy for states to achieve some level of cooperation while avoiding the pitfalls of abandonment and entrapment associated with military alliances.

Strategic partnerships as complements can be created *"[...] to broaden the social interaction of the alliance partners, to widen the scope of cooperation to non-military areas/sectors or to broaden the alliance to a wider set of participants/stakeholders"* (MICHALSKI 2019: 7). The main purpose of these arrangements would likely be reassurance – that is, to increase the allies' feeling of security or discourage them from seeking outside options (SEE BLANKENSHIP 2020; BLANKENSHIP – LIN-GREENBERG 2022). While authors such as T. V. Paul (2018: 26) recognize the value of strategic partnerships in signaling reassurance, it is likely that such a complementary function would depend on the *level* of (pre-)existing alliance commitment. Some military alliances only oblige their members to take part in consultations or uphold principles of neutrality and non-aggression, whereas others include a more

serious commitment to active military assistance (SEE LEEDS 2020). The low commitment costs of partnerships would prove detrimental to reassurance in cases where the countries involved already share membership in *high* commitment alliances because the establishment of such arrangements could be seen as scaling back the alignment (SEE LIM – COOPER 2015). This leads us to two competing hypotheses.

Hypothesis 2a: A pair of states without joint membership in a formal alliance are more likely to be tied by a strategic partnership.

Hypothesis 2b: A pair of states with joint membership in a formal alliance are more likely to be tied by a strategic partnership.

Ultimately, the results of a test of these two hypotheses may lead to a misinterpretation of the function of strategic partnerships in relation to military alliances – whether complementary or substitutive – if we fail to account for the underlying rationale of enhancing national and regional security. The conceptualization of partnerships as alliance complements or substitutes arguably makes sense to the extent that they allow states to achieve similar – albeit more modest – goals as alliances. Therefore, the mere presence or absence of existing alliance commitments may prove to be a poor indicator of the hypothesized complementary/substitutive role. If the function is complementary, we should see partnership ties especially between countries that share membership in the same alliance and face a common threat. Alternatively, if the function is substitutive, we should see partnership ties especially between countries that do *not* share membership in the same alliance but face a common threat. The relationship between partnership ties and existing alliance commitments (or lack thereof) could thus be conditional on the presence of a common threat. I therefore amend the previous two hypotheses.

Hypothesis 3a: Two states without joint membership in a formal alliance are more likely to be tied by a strategic partnership when they face a common threat.

Hypothesis 3b: Two states with joint membership in a formal alliance are more likely to be tied by a strategic partnership when they face a common threat.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND DATA

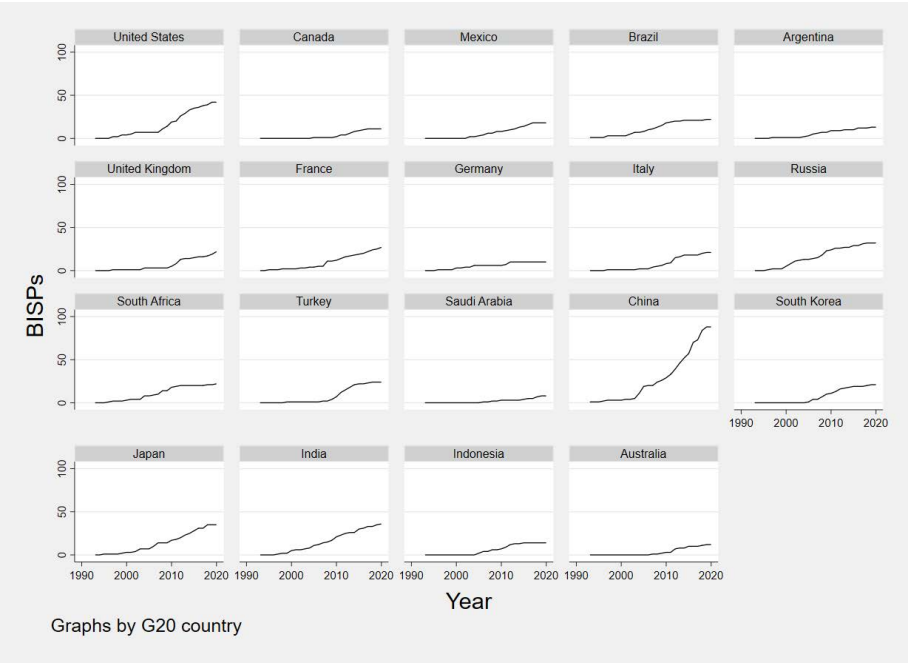
The BISP dataset and the dependent variable

To find out whether strategic partnerships function primarily as alliance complements or substitutes, I have created a new "Bilateral Intergovernmental Strategic Partnerships (BISP) Dataset" covering the universe of cases of *bilateral* partnerships – hereinafter BISPs – with the involvement of G20 members established between 1993 and 2020. Although limited in coverage, the new dataset provides the first cross-country account of BISPs to date. One notable previous attempt to document the proliferation of strategic partnerships is an article by Strüver (2017), which surveys Chinese partnerships formed between 1993 and 2016. Several other articles and policy papers provide partial coverage of countries such as the United States, Brazil, and India in this regard (SEE COSTA VAZ 2014; HALL 2016; HAMILTON 2014). Our understanding of the extent to which BISPs have proliferated across countries and over time is still limited. The new dataset at least partially fills this empirical gap. Given their influence on the international system, the G20 members are a good starting point for the data collection.

First, to collect the data, I surveyed the official websites of all the relevant political bodies – the chief of state, the head of government, the cabinet or government, the ministry of foreign affairs or its equivalent, and the parliament, as appropriate – in all the G20 countries. At this initial stage, I obtained the root domains of the official websites. Second, I looked up the term strategic partnership for each G20 member along with the name of one of the remaining 194 countries using the relevant root domains. Third, after obtaining the first ten results for all 3,686 search combinations, I conducted a full-text search for evidence of a BISP tie. I coded the dependent variable, *BISP tie*, as "1" if it met one of the following criteria: (1) the webpage explicitly mentions the year of the establishment of the partnership; (2) the webpage explicitly mentions the founding document;[3] (3) multiple webpages mention the existence of a BISP. If the year of the establishment of the partnership was missing, I recorded the year of the earliest mention of it that was found. If none of the above criteria were met, I coded the variable as "0."[4] Figure 1 shows the cumulative count of BISPs for all the G20 countries for the period between 1993 and 2020.

The data show that China and the United States had by far the highest number of BISPs by 2020, and it accounts for about a third of all the cases in the dataset. On balance, rising powers – the BRICS in particular – had more BISPs than the G7, which reflects the disproportionate attention the literature has paid to actors like China (SEE DENG 2007; STRÜVER 2017), Russia (SEE FERGUSON 2012; WILKINS 2008), or India (SEE HALL 2016). The mid-2000s have seen a rapid increase in the number of BISPs, which eventually reached 381 by the end of the year 2020 in the universe of cases of G20 partnerships. For the purposes of this analysis, I transformed the dataset into a cross-sectional format with undirected dyads as the unit of observation, where one dyad member is always a G20 country and the other is any other country. This transformation yielded a total of 3,515 observations. Since the data for some variables are available only up to 2014, the year of observation is also 2014. There were 275 BISPs in existence in that year.

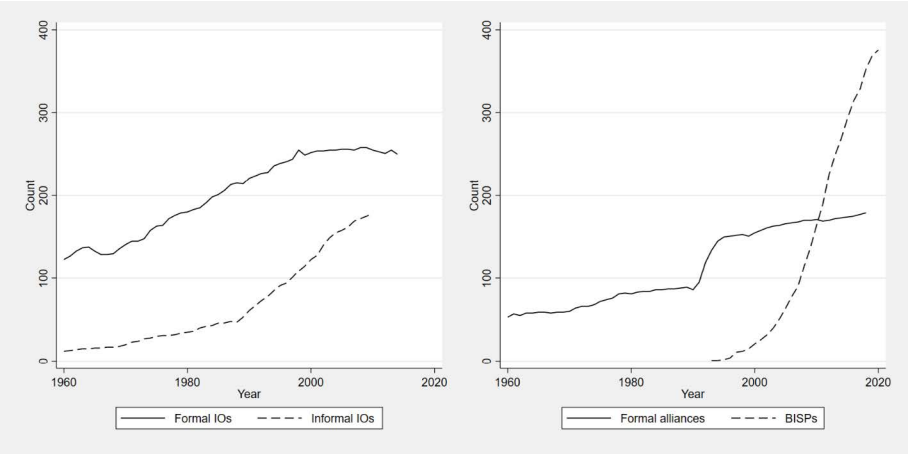
FIGURE 1: THE BISP COUNT OVER TIME FOR EACH G20 MEMBER, 1993–2020



Note: The data on BISPs were collected by the author of this article. Unit of observation: G20 member-year.

One of the challenges in constructing the dataset concerns the uncertainty about the status of individual BISPs – whether in force or defunct. Official sources do not provide information on BISP terminations, which means that some BISPs in the dataset may already be defunct. This issue is partly due to the informal nature of BISPs, which makes partnership-related activities inherently less transparent. To identify those BISPs that were most likely defunct by the end of 2014, I took a fairly conservative approach based on the following criteria: (1) the collapse of the state authority on the part of one member; and (2) the use of military force by one member against another. I recoded cases meeting one of these criteria as "0" unless official sources reaffirmed the existence of the partnership by the end of 2014. This final adjustment yielded a total of 269 BISPs as of 2014.

FIGURE 2: THE COUNT OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL FORMS OF COOPERATION AT THE G20 LEVEL, 1960–2020



Note: The data on FIGOs comes from the "Intergovernmental Organizations (v3)" dataset (Pevehouse et al. 2020). The data on IIGOs comes from Roger and Rowan (2022). The data on formal alliances comes from the "Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (v5)" dataset (Leeds et al. 2002). Unit of observation: G20-year.

In order to understand the significance of this number, let us now compare the proliferation of BISPs to that of other forms of institutionalized cooperation. The two line plots in Figure 2 above depict the increases in the numbers of FIGOs and IIGOs, on the one hand, and formal military alliances and BISPs, on the other hand, at the G20 level over the period from 1960 to 2020. As argued elsewhere (SEE ROGER – ROWAN 2022; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2020), especially since the end of the Cold War, states have increasingly preferred to establish informal forms of cooperation. This is evident from the plot on the left, which indicates that the increase in the number of IIGOs was more rapid than that of FIGOs. As shown in the plot on the right, this trend is likely even more pronounced in the area of agreements on security cooperation. By the end of 2020, there were roughly twice as many BISPs as there were formal alliances in the subset of G20 countries. Though the number of BISPs has risen exponentially since the mid-1990s, the number of formal alliances has remained fairly constant.[5]

Independent variables

To test H1, I use the *common threat* variable. This binary measure captures the presence or absence of the same third-party adversary in each dyad between 2005 and 2014. The data for this variable comes from

the dyadic "Militarized Interstate Disputes (v4)" dataset (MAOZ ET AL. 2018). I follow Lai and Reiter (2000: 214) and code the *common threat* variable as "1" if both dyad members participated in a militarized interstate dispute against the same third party sometime in the previous ten years, and "0" otherwise. Previous studies on military alliances have found that the presence of a common threat is a significant predictor of both alliance formation and duration (SEE GIBLER – RIDER 2004; GIBLER – WOLFORD 2006; LAI – REITER 2000; LEEDS ET AL. 2002). While recognizing that BISPs are not necessarily threat-driven arrangements (WILKINS 2008: 361), their general security purpose and utility for policy coordination make them a viable tool for addressing threats indirectly, such as through soft balancing (SEE PAPE 2005; PAUL 2018). If **H1** holds, there will be a positive association between the *common threat* variable and the dependent variable.

To test **H2a** and **H2b**, I use the *alliance* and *alliance commitment* variables. First, *alliance* is a binary measure that captures the presence or absence of a joint membership in a formal alliance as of 2014. The data for this variable come from the "Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (v5)" (ATOP) dataset (LEEDS ET AL. 2002). I code the *alliance* variable as "1" if the two states were parties to the same alliance, regardless of the types of obligations or provisions, and "0" otherwise. An alliance is *"[...] a formal agreement among independent states to cooperate militarily in the face of [a] potential or realized military conflict"* (LEEDS 2020: 6). Thus, for an alliance to qualify as such according to the ATOP coding scheme, it has to be based on a formal agreement. This is one of the main differences between alliances and BISPs, which are informal. If **H2a** holds, states with a shared alliance membership should be less likely to be tied by a BISP. Alternatively, if **H2b** holds, they should be more likely to have a BISP.

Scholars have long recognized that different types of alliances – whether defense, consultation, or neutrality/non-aggression pacts – entail different levels of commitment. Alliances that oblige their members to take part in consultations, or uphold principles of neutrality or non-aggression, represent lower commitment than alliances with provisions for active military support in the event of an attack (SEE LEEDS ET AL. 2002: 240–242; SMALL – SINGER 1969: 280). To capture different levels of commitment, I created an alternative variable which disaggregates alliance membership into two categories. I code the *alliance commitment* variable as "0" for "no alliance

commitment," which corresponds to the absence of a formal alliance, "1" for "low alliance commitment," which corresponds to alliances that do not oblige their members to maintain an active military support, and "2" for "high alliance commitment," which corresponds to the "defense pact" category.[6] If **H2a** holds, states with "no alliance commitment" should be more likely to be tied by a BISP. If **H2b** holds, the presence of a "low" or "high alliance commitment" should increase the likelihood of a BISP tie.

Other than the above independent variables, I use several controls to minimize the omitted-variable bias. These include *trade value (log)*, *polity difference*, *foreign policy difference*, *power differential*, and *conflict relations*. First, *trade value (log)* is a continuous measure of the total value of the merchandise trade between two dyad members in 2014. The data for this variable comes from the "Trade IV" dataset (BARBIERI ET AL. 2009). To account for the skewed distribution of values, I use a logarithmic transformation. Since many authors point to economic cooperation as one of the prominent features of BISPs (SEE NADKARNI 2010; STRÜVER 2017; WILKINS 2008), we would expect a positive association between *trade value (log10)* and *BISP tie*. As with formal military alliances, states may also form BISPs to reduce trade volatility by developing stable political expectations (SEE FORDHAM 2010; BAGOZZI – LANDIS 2015).

Second, *polity difference* is a continuous measure of the difference between the domestic-political institutions of the two states in a dyad as of 2014. The data for this variable comes from the "Polity V" dataset (MARSHALL – GURR 2020). This dataset includes the item "polity2," a spectrum ranging from -10 to 10, where higher values indicate the presence of more democratic institutions. To obtain the scores for *polity difference*, I follow Lai and Reiter (2000: 213–214) and calculate the absolute difference in the two countries' "polity2" scores. Previous research has shown that pairs of states with similar political regimes are more likely to engage in and maintain a cooperation, including within formal alliances (SEE LEEDS 1999; CRESCENZI ET AL. 2012; LAI – REITER 2000; LEEDS 2003). Cooperation is least likely among mixed-regime dyads because autocracies are less likely to have incentives to abide by the agreement, and democracies are less likely to allow the possibility of defection (LEEDS 1999). Thus, we would expect higher values of *polity difference* to be negatively associated with the *BISP tie* variable.

Third, the *foreign policy difference* variable is a continuous measure of the difference of the foreign policy preferences of the two states in a dyad as of 2014. The data for it comes from an updated version of the "United Nations General Assembly Voting Data" dataset compiled by Voeten, Strezhnev, and Bailey (2009). This dataset includes the item "ideal point," a single-dimension spectrum that captures states' positions toward the US-led liberal order based on their voting in the United Nations General Assembly. To obtain the values, I calculate the absolute difference in the two countries' "ideal point" scores. Previous research has shown that states with similar foreign policies are more likely to form alliances (CRESCENZI ET AL. 2012; GIBLER – RIDER 2004; FORDHAM 2010). If BISPs serve a similar role, we would expect a positive association between *foreign policy difference* and the *BISP tie* variable. In addition, when state preferences are in harmony, countries arguably only need a limited, or less formal, institutional framework to facilitate their cooperation (SEE EILSTRUP-SANGIOVANNI 2009; WHYTOCK 2005).[7]

Fourth, *power differential* is a continuous measure of the difference in material power between the two states in a dyad as of 2014. The data for it comes from the "National Material Capabilities (v6.0)" dataset (SINGER ET AL. 1972). I use the "Composite Indicator of National Capability" (CINC) item, which indicates a country's share of material capabilities in the international system, and calculate the absolute difference between the two states' CINC scores. The literature on informal institutions theorizes that informal institutions are more likely to emerge under conditions of power inequality since powerful states favor safeguarding their autonomy and have the ability to coerce weaker states to comply with specific policies without the help of formal procedures (SEE REINSBERG – WESTERWINTER 2021; ROGER 2020; VABULAS – SNIDAL 2013). Similarly to a(n) (asymmetric) formal alliance, the decision to establish a BISP could also be driven by the security-autonomy trade-off, where the weaker state offers concessions that bolster the more powerful state's freedom of action in return for security benefits (SEE MORROW 1991). We would, therefore, expect a positive association between the *power differential* and *BISP tie* variables.

Fifth, *conflict relations* is a dichotomous measure that captures the occurrence/non-occurrence of militarized interstate disputes between the two states in a dyad between 2005 and 2014. The data for it comes from the dyadic "Militarized Interstate Disputes (v4)" dataset (MAOZ ET AL.

2018). I follow Lai and Reiter (2000: 214) and code *conflict relations* as "1" if the two members of a dyad were on the opposite sides of a militarized interstate dispute during the previous ten years, and "0" otherwise. Enemies, by definition, are less cooperative and rarely maintain alliances with each other (SEE LAI – REITER 2000; GIBLER – RIDER 2004). In a similar vein, we would expect pairs of states with a history of conflict to be less likely to be tied by a BISP.

Estimation strategy

To investigate the plausibility of the previously described hypotheses, I use two statistical techniques: the chi-squared test and the logistic regression method. The former is suitable for bivariate analysis, and the latter for multivariable analysis. The more straightforward bivariate analysis is beneficial because it can reveal patterns in the data that can provide initial empirical support for **H1** through **H3b**. The latter analysis will further allow us to test the hypotheses while controlling for the influence of other confounding variables, and to model the interaction between the *common threat* and *alliance* or *alliance commitment* variables. For these purposes, I use multiplicative interaction models (SEE BRAMBOR ET AL. 2006) accompanied by plots of predictive margins (SEE BERRY ET AL. 2012). The analysis draws on the original dataset in a cross-sectional format with observations for all the variables as of 2014. The unit of observation is an undirected state-to-state dyad, where one of the members is always a G20 country. In line with the convention in quantitative political science, I use dyad clustered standard errors (SEE ARONOW ET AL. 2015: 565). In the online supplemental materials, I show that the results are robust to the use of alternative estimation techniques that account for the possibility of "dyadic clustering."

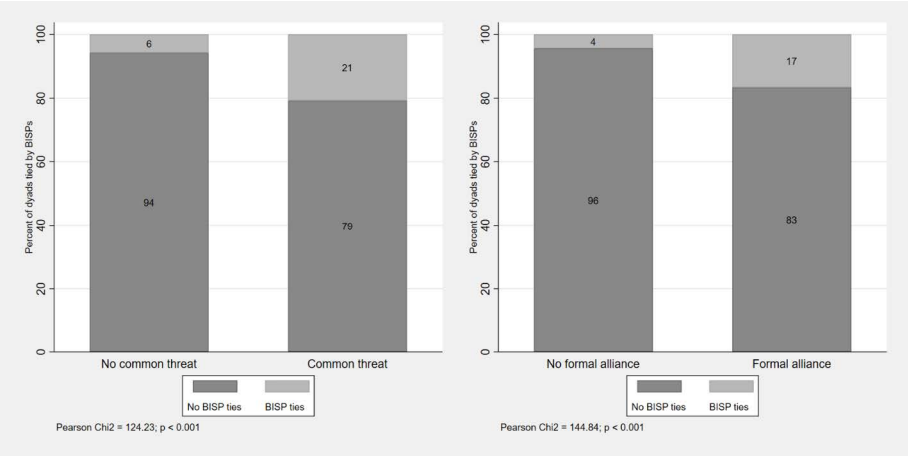
EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

A Straightforward Test

What patterns can we observe from the data? To explore the plausibility of **H1** through **H3b**, I first created contingency tables and performed chi-squared tests. For convenience, I provide only a visual representation in this section (SEE FIGURE 3 AND 4). The bar chart on the left of Figure 3 shows that the share of dyads tied by a BISP was more than three times higher in the "common threat" group (21%) than in the "no common threat" group

(6%). Moreover, the results of a Pearson's chi-squared test indicate that the likelihood of *common threat* and *BISP tie* being independent of each other is close to zero ($p< 0.001$). Thus, we obtain some initial evidence in support of **H1**. Crucially, the presence of a common threat also reflects the substance of the cooperation within specific BISPs. For instance, the 2021 "U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership" explicitly identifies the Russian Federation as a threat and lays out specific steps to counter it. Among other things, the Charter says that the United States *"[…] intends to support Ukraine's efforts to counter armed aggression, economic and energy disruptions, and malicious cyber activity by Russia, including by maintaining sanctions against or related to Russia and applying other relevant measures […]"* (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021).

FIGURE 3: BISP TIES ACROSS THE COMMON THREAT AND ALLIANCE MEMBERSHIP VARIABLES

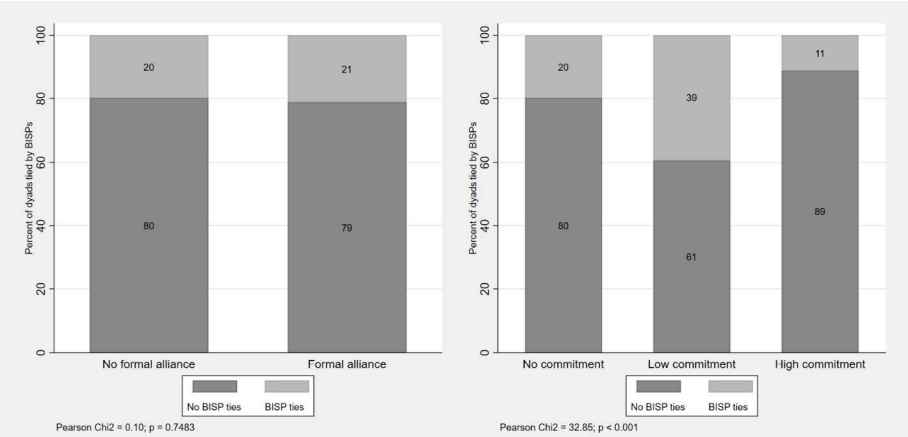


Note: The numbers in the bars correspond to the percent share of dyads tied by a BISP. N = 3,515. Unit of observation: State-to-state dyad as of 2014. For a table with the results of cross-tabulations, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 1.

Next, the bar chart on the right of Figure 3 shows that the share of dyads tied by a BISP was approximately four times higher in the "formal alliance" group (17%) than in the "no formal alliance" group (4%). The results of a Pearson's chi-squared test show that the likelihood of *alliance* and *BISP tie* being independent of each other is close to zero ($p<0.001$). Thus, we obtain some initial evidence for **H2b**. Indeed, a number of G20 countries have BISP ties with their formal allies. For example, China and India maintain a strategic partnership (MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS OF INDIA 2005), and they are also members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which

qualifies as a formal alliance due to its provisions for consultations and non-aggression. Similarly, the United States maintains strategic partnerships with countries such as North Macedonia (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2008) and Georgia (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2009), with whom it shares membership in the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which qualifies as a non-aggression pact according to ATOP. Notably, the founding documents of all of the mentioned BISPs focus on cooperation in security and defense areas.

FIGURE 4: BISP TIES ACROSS ALLIANCE MEMBERSHIP AND COMMITMENTS, COMMON THREAT SUBSET



Note: The numbers in the bars correspond to the percent share of dyads tied by a BISP. N = 449. Unit of observation: State-to-state dyad as of 2014. For a table with the results of cross-tabulations, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 1.

As a preliminary test of **H3a** and **H3b**, I repeated the analysis with the *alliance* variable with a subset of dyads faced with a common threat. If the main purpose of BISPs is to complement formal alliances, as previous results suggest, we should see the highest share of BISPs among pairs of states with joint membership in a formal alliance that also face a common threat. Yet, the bar chart on the left of Figure 4 shows that the proportions of dyads tied by a BISP are roughly equal for both the "no formal alliance" and the "formal alliance" group (20% and 21%, respectively). The results of a Pearson's chi-squared test additionally show that there is no statistically distinguishable difference between the two groups (p=0.7483). These findings would suggest that there is no conditional relationship between the variables. Thus, I repeated the analysis using the *alliance commitment*

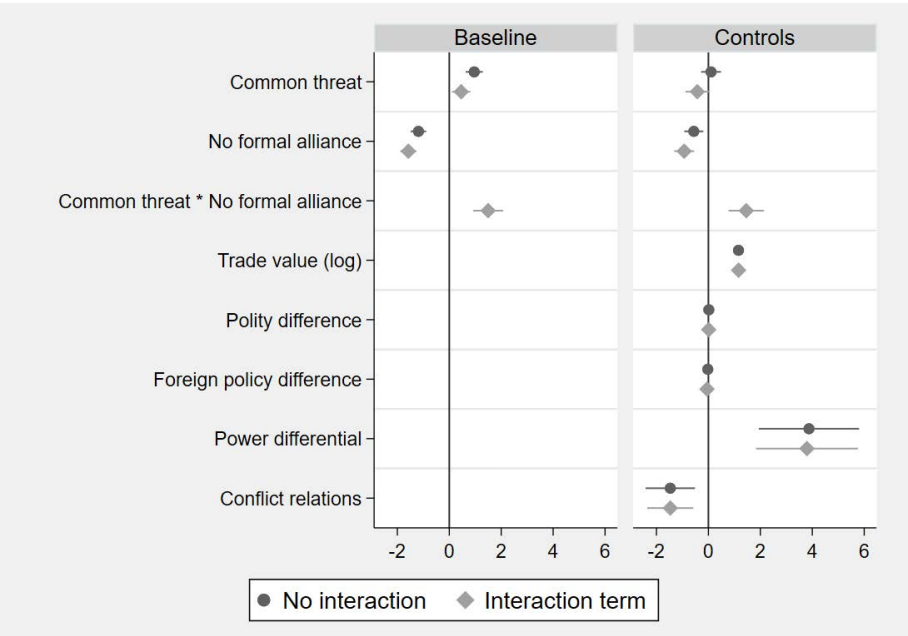
variable to see how the results would differ when disaggregating formal alliance membership by the type of commitment. The bar chart on the right of Figure 4 shows that the highest proportion of dyads tied by a BISP was in the "low commitment" group (39%), followed by the "no commitment" (20%) and "high commitment" group (11%). The difference between the three groups is statistically significant ($p<0.001$).

This latter finding is significant because it suggests that the complementary/substitutive role of BISPs likely depends on the *level* of alliance commitment. It appears that countries are most likely to be tied by a BISP when they are members to a "low commitment" alliance, such as a consultation or non-aggression pact, while also facing a common threat, supporting **H3b**. Ultimately, however, to get a better sense of these findings, we need to account for other potential confounding factors, and model the interaction between *common threat* and *alliance/alliance commitment* directly. I therefore turn to the results of the logistic regression in the following section.

Logistic regression with alliance

Figure 5 below shows regression coefficient plots with the main findings. To test **H1** to **H3b**, I use four models with *BISP tie* as the dependent variable. For a better interpretation, I change the reference level of the *alliance* variable from "1" to "0," from "formal alliance" to "no formal alliance." Model 1 includes *common threat* and *no formal alliance* as independent variables. Model 2 additionally includes the interaction term between the two variables. These models constitute the baseline for the analysis. To ensure the robustness of the results, I create Model 3 and 4 with the control variables *trade value (log)*, *polity difference*, *foreign policy difference*, *power differential*, and *conflict relations*. Model 4 again includes the interaction term. Before turning to the results, I evaluate how the models perform by comparing the values of the Area Under the Curve (AUC) statistic of the Receiver Operating Characteristic. In general, models with controls perform significantly better in distinguishing between classes – whether a BISP tie is present or not. The AUC for baseline models ranges from 0.71 to 0.72, while the AUC for models with controls is 0.86. The models with interaction perform slightly better.

FIGURE 5: LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BISP TIES

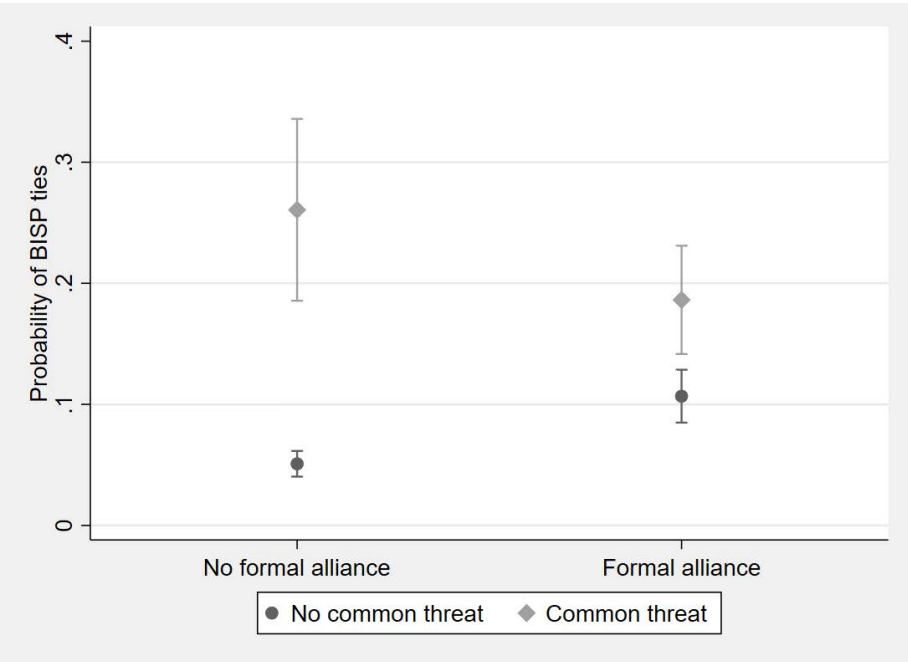


Note: Models 1–4. Logistic regression estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Dyad clustered standard errors. Variables whose intervals overlap with the vertical line are statistically indistinguishable from 0. For a table with the results of the logistic regression, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 2.

First, I evaluate the plausibility of **H1** through **H2b** by looking at the results of models without interaction. As shown in Figure 5 above, when only the *common threat* and *no formal alliance* variables are present in the model, the former attains a statistically significant (p<0.001) and positive association with the dependent variable, while the latter achieves a statistically significant (p<0.001) and negative association with the dependent variable. These results provide empirical support for **H1** and **H2b**, as opposed to **H2a**, because the presence of a common threat increases the likelihood of a *BISP tie*, while the absence of joint membership in a formal alliance decreases this likelihood. When controlling for other factors, the *no formal alliance* variable retains statistical significance (p<0.01), but the effect of the *common threat* variable becomes statistically indistinguishable from zero. Therefore, overall, we obtain evidence in support of **H2a** and mixed evidence in support of **H1**. However, as noted in the earlier section, the sole fact that two countries are more likely to be tied by a BISP when they are – or are not – members of the same alliance should not necessarily be interpreted as evidence that BISPs play either a complementary or substitutive role, unless the same underlying purpose is taken into account. To assess the plausibility of **H3a** and **H3b**, I turn next to models with interaction.

The interaction between *common threat* and *no formal alliance* is statistically significant ($p<0.001$) and positive in models with and without controls. To correctly interpret the interaction, I follow the recommendation of Berry, Golder, and Milton (2012) and construct a plot of predictive margins for Model 4 (SEE FIGURE 6). As evident from the figure below, the predicted probability of being tied by a BISP is at its highest for pairs of states without joint membership in a formal alliance that also face a common threat. This finding indicates that the primary purpose of BISPs vis-à-vis formal alliances is substitutive rather than complementary, providing empirical evidence in support of **H3a**. Examples of such BISPs include the partnerships between the United States and Israel, Italy and Tunisia, Russia and Venezuela, Saudi Arabia and India, and Japan and Poland. On balance, however, there were only 31 partnerships of a substitutive nature compared to 62 partnerships of a complementary nature. The fact that the predicted probability of being tied by a BISP was second highest for pairs of states with joint membership in a formal alliance that also face a common threat indicates that BISPs could equally play a complementary role. I investigate this possibility further in the next section.

FIGURE 6: PREDICTIVE MARGINS OF *COMMON THREAT* BY *ALLIANCE*



Note: The graph depicts the interaction between the variables *common threat* and *alliance*. 95% confidence intervals. For a table with predictive margins, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 2.

Besides the main independent variables and the interaction, the models with controls also reveal other significant predictors of BISP ties (SEE FIGURE 5). *Trade value (log)* attains a statistically significant and positive association with the dependent variable ($p<0.001$ in Model 3 and 4). This result reflects the observation in the empirical literature that economic cooperation constitutes an important issue area under strategic partnerships (SEE NADKARNI 2010; STRÜVER 2017; WILKINS 2008). The founding documents of many BISPs, including the Australia-France (DEPARTMENT OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND TRADE OF AUSTRALIA 2017), Japan-U.A.E. (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF JAPAN 2014), and South Korea-India (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF SOUTH KOREA 2010) declarations, include provisions to boost trade and economic relations. These provisions may also have a general security purpose, as they allow states to protect their material interests – similarly to military alliances (SEE LAI – REITER 2000: 210).

The other two statistically significant control variables are *power differential* and *conflict relations* ($p<0.001$ and $p<0.01$, respectively, in both Model 3 and 4). The former attains a positive association with *BISP tie,* suggesting that pairs of states with more unequal material capabilities are more likely to be tied by a BISP. This finding is consistent with the claim that conditions of power inequality lead to the emergence of informal institutions since powerful states disproportionately favor informality as a way of retaining their autonomy (SEE REISENBERG – WESTERWINTER 2021: 65–67). Many BISPs also reflect the rationale of the security-autonomy trade-off, similarly to asymmetric formal alliances (SEE MORROW 1991). For example, the 2021 "U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership" commits the Ukrainian side to trade liberalization and democratization in return for U.S. security assistance (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021). The latter variable, *conflict relations*, attains a negative association with the dependent variable. On balance, there were only a few cases of BISPs between former enemies in the dataset. The prominent examples of this include the Russo-Chinese and Sino-Indian partnerships. This finding highlights that while (formerly) mutually antagonistic states may also be tied by a BISP, the occurrence of such partnerships is generally unlikely (CF. MICHALSKI 2019: 10–11).

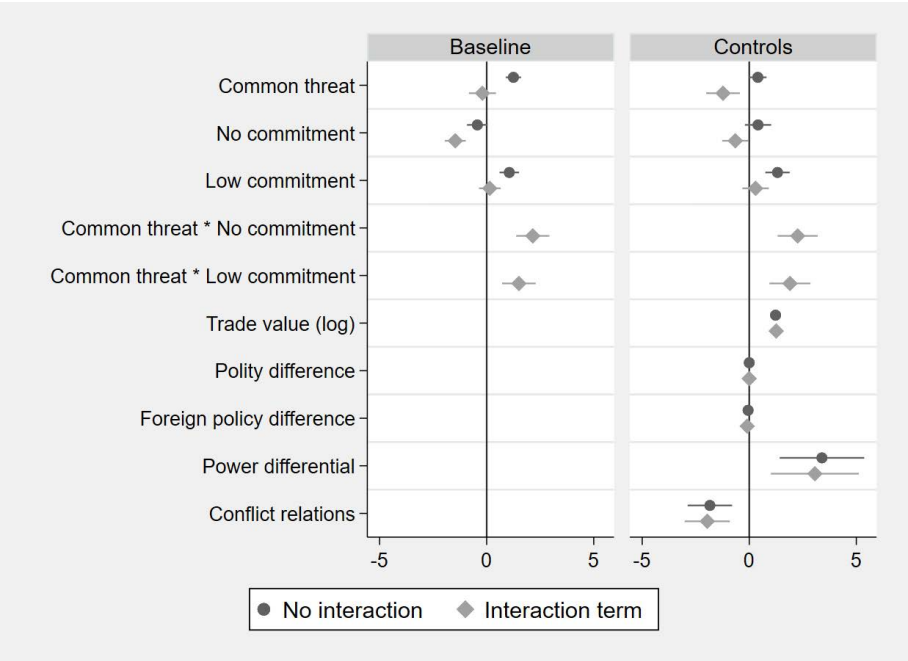
Finally, the control variables *polity difference* and *foreign policy difference* fail to attain a statistically significant association with *BISP tie*. One possible explanation is that the "low-cost" nature of BISPs makes

democracies less concerned about the possibility of defection, allowing for cooperation with even strongly autocratic states. For example, China maintains partnerships with both similar regimes, such as Belarus, Turkmenistan, or the United Arab Emirates, and dissimilar regimes, including Australia, Denmark, and New Zealand. In addition, as argued elsewhere, informal institutions could potentially emerge under the conditions of both preference heterogeneity (SEE ROGER 2020; REINSBERG – WESTERWINTER 2021) and homogeneity (SEE EILSTRUP-SANGIOVANNI 2009; WHYTOCK 2005). States may forge BISPs with partners with similar foreign policies because they do not need formal institutions to facilitate cooperation, and use BISPs as a means to achieve at least some level of cooperation with states with dissimilar foreign policies that would not normally be willing to cooperate with them formally.

Logistic regression with alliance commitment

While the results so far provide some insight into how BISPs relate to formal alliances in general, the fact that there is a substantial number of BISPs between both allied and non-allied pairs of states facing a common threat suggests that BISPs may play a substitutive as well as a complementary role. In order to investigate this possibility further, I repeat the analysis and use the *alliance commitment* variable as an alternative to *alliance*, with "high commitment" as a reference level for the estimation of the effects of the remaining two categories, "no commitment" and "low commitment." Figure 7 below shows regression coefficient plots for models 5–8. The logic behind the construction of each of these models reflects that behind models 1–4. Models 5 and 6 provide the baseline for the hypothesis-testing, whereas models 7 and 8 control for the influence of other potentially confounding factors. In addition, models 6 and 8 include the interaction term. The AUC for baseline models ranges between 0.72 and 0.73, while the AUC for models with controls ranges between 0.86 and 0.87. The inclusion of the interaction term produces slightly better results with regard to the models' capability of distinguishing between classes.

FIGURE 7: LOGISTIC REGRESSION OF BISP TIES

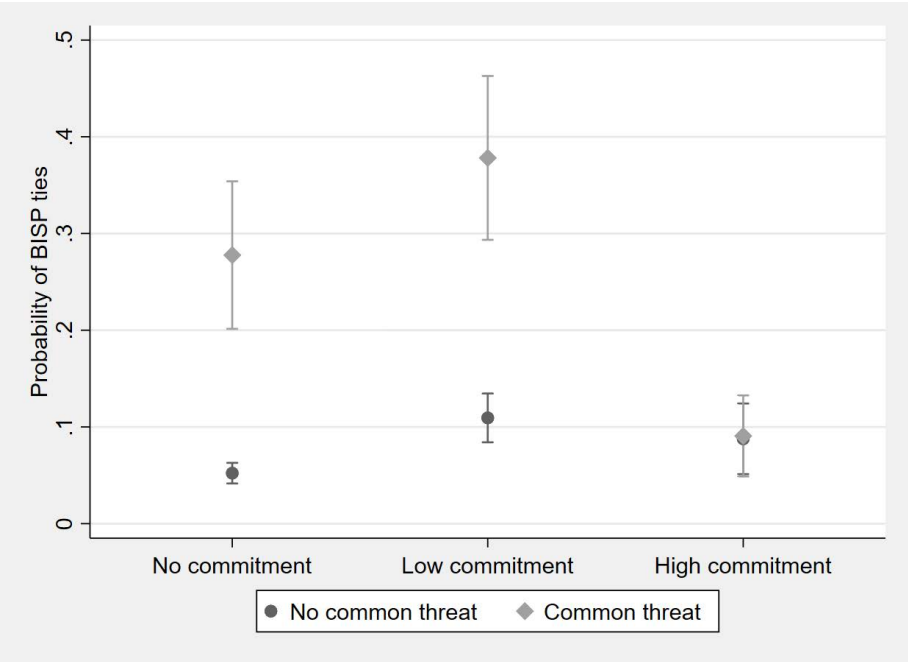


Note: Models 5–8. Logistic regression estimates with 95% confidence intervals. Dyad clustered standard errors. Variables whose intervals overlap with the vertical line are statistically indistinguishable from 0. For a table with the results of the logistic regression, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 2.

I again evaluate the plausibility of **H1** to **H2b** by looking at the results of models without the interaction. As shown in Figure 7 above, the *common threat* variable is statistically significant (p<0.001) and positive in Model 5, but not in Model 7 with controls, providing mixed evidence in support of **H1**. In addition, the *low commitment* variable is also statistically significant (p<0.001 in Model 5 and 7) and positive, providing further empirical support for **H2b**. More importantly, both interactions between *common threat* and *no commitment*, and *common threat* and *low commitment* attain a statistically significant (p<0.001 in Model 6 and 8) and positive association with *BISP tie*. To gain a better sense of how the variables interact and to assess the plausibility of **H3a** and **H3b**, I again construct a plot of predictive margins (SEE FIGURE 8). The figure below shows that the predicted probability of being tied by a BISP is at its highest for pairs of states with joint membership in a "low commitment" alliance – such as a consultation or neutrality/non-aggression pact – facing a common threat, and second highest for pairs of states without joint membership in a formal alliance

facing a common threat. These results suggest that the complementary/substitutive role of BISPs depends on the *level* of alliance commitment.

FIGURE 8: PREDICTIVE MARGINS OF *COMMON THREAT* BY *ALLIANCE COMMITMENT*



Note: The graph depicts the interaction between the variables *common threat* and *alliance commitment*. 95% confidence intervals. For a table with predictive margins, see the online supplemental materials in Appendix 2.

Although the results of the previous analysis indicate that states are more likely to be tied by a BISP if they do not have mutual alliance commitments while facing a common enemy, supporting **H3a** and the idea of a substitutive purpose vis-à-vis formal alliances, the results of the analysis using the *alliance commitment* variable suggest that this finding comes with an important caveat – BISPs can serve as complements to formal alliances that do not entail high commitment. A possible explanation is that forming and maintaining strategic partnership ties with a country with whom another shares a defense obligation – the highest level of commitment – could signal scaling back the alignment (SEE LIM – COOPER 2015). This arguably presents less of an issue when alliance commitment is relatively low, such as in the case of consultation or neutrality/non-aggression pacts, where the act of forming a BISP could reasonably serve as a tool of reassurance.

As of 2014, there were 41 BISPs between countries that faced a common threat while being members of a formal alliance without active military support provision. For example, the United States is a member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe – a non-aggression pact within the ATOP classification – together with several countries with whom it maintains BISPs, such as Georgia, Kazakhstan, North Macedonia, and Ukraine. In the case of Georgia and Ukraine, the rationale of reassurance is perhaps the most convincing. The "United States-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership" concluded in 2009 contains an entire section dedicated to defense and security cooperation (U.S. Department of State 2009). The updated version of the Charter includes a pledge by the United States to assist the junior partner in combating Russian propaganda (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2019). The 2021 "U.S.-Ukraine Charter on Strategic Partnership" contains similar promises. For example, it states that the two sides have a shared interest in *"[...] bolstering Ukraine's ability to defend itself against threats to its territorial integrity and deepening Ukraine's integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions [...]"* (U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE 2021) and expands on measures against Russian aggression. In both of these cases, the partnership signaled a commitment, albeit limited, on the part of the United States to upholding the security of its junior partners.

The results for the remaining control variables do not differ substantially from the previous analysis (SEE FIGURE 7). The variables *trade value (log)* and *power differential* attain a statistically significant ($p<0.001$ for both variables in Model 7, and $p<0.001$ and $p<0.01$, respectively, in Model 8) and positive association with *BISP tie*, while the *conflict relations* variable attains a statistically significant ($p<0.001$ in Model 7 and 8) and negative association with it. These results suggest that in addition to common threats or alliance commitments, other factors, such as economic interests, power inequality, and rivalries, play an important role in the incidence of BISP ties.

CONCLUSIONS

This article examined the proliferation of strategic partnerships as a new form of international alignment emerging after the Cold War. The two aims were to determine whether security concerns constitute one of the main drivers behind their proliferation, and to determine whether partnerships function as complements to or substitutes for traditional military alliances.

The results of the analysis provide mixed evidence in support of the proposition that security interests – specifically, common threats – are the basis of these arrangements. Other factors, such as trade, power inequality, and a history of conflict, clearly play a role. Most importantly, I find that two countries are most likely to be tied by a strategic partnership when their security interests coalesce with the absence of joint membership in a formal alliance. However, this finding comes with an important caveat – states parties to formal alliances with a relatively low commitment, such as consultation, neutrality, and non-aggression pacts, are also likely to be tied by partnerships when they face a common threat. The complementary/substitutive role of these arrangements vis-à-vis formal alliances is thus contingent on the level of existing alliance commitment.

These findings challenge our thinking about modern-day "alliances." The increasing trend of proliferation of informal forms of security cooperation points to the need to study the full spectrum of possible institutional arrangements to arrive at a better understanding of security dynamics in the emerging multipolar world. The original BISP dataset reveals that the extent of the proliferation of these arrangements is much greater than previously estimated, similarly to other informal institutions, such as IIGOs. The finding about the complementary/substitutive nature of strategic partnerships vis-à-vis formal alliances could arguably extend to the interplay between formal and informal institutions more broadly. It would seem that informal institutions are a poor fit for cooperation in areas where states are already highly committed by formal institutions. Though the analysis presented here offers some initial insights into these dynamics, there are also some important limitations. Future studies on this topic could address them by expanding the scope of the case selection, examining the *onset* rather than *incidence* of partnership ties, and using different operationalizations of security interests.

ENDNOTES

1 Please be aware that throughout this manuscript, the term "partnership" specifically refers to "strategic partnership."

2 I address this theoretical possibility in the online supplemental materials, namely in Appendix 9.

3 The founding documents are typically joint declarations, statements, or memoranda of understanding. As a rule, the founding documents do not entail a legally binding commitment. One exception to this concerns so-called "friendship treaties." See the original dataset for more detailed information.

4 For a detailed overview of the coding procedure, see the original dataset.

5 Note that FIGOs and formal alliances are two distinct, but not mutually exclusive, concepts. Both are based on formal agreements, but the latter do not require a permanent secretariat (see Pevehouse et al. 2019; Leeds 2020).

6 Note that the "low alliance commitment" category encompasses all consultation and neutrality/non-aggression pacts. Neutrality and non-aggression pacts involve promises to refrain from a military conflict with an ally. Consultation pacts commit the members to a policy coordination short of active military support (Leeds 2020: 11–12).

7 There is some disagreement in the informal institution literature on whether heterogeneous interests lead to formality or informality. Some evidence suggests that the latter is the case (see Roger 2020; Reinsberg – Westerwinter 2021).

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