

Review – Bandwagoning in International Relations

Written by Alexandre Haym

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2024/02/29/review-bandwagoning-in-international-relations/>

ALEXANDRE HAYM, FEB 29 2024

Bandwagoning in International Relations: China, Russia, and Their Neighbors

By Dylan Motin

Vernon Press, 2024

Neorealists tend to excessively focus on great powers, often relegating the analysis of minor power behavior to liberals, constructivists, and neoclassical realists. Consequently, the predominant focus in scholarly discussions on minor power politics revolves around domestic affairs, normative concerns, or economic interests. Proposing a neorealist theory of why and when minor powers accommodate great power threats is Dylan Motin's ambition in his first book, *Bandwagoning in International Relations: China, Russia, and Their Neighbors*.

A first noticeable point of Motin's work is to sidestep the traditional offensive-defensive realist divide that has polarized neorealists for over three decades. His argument works within both theoretical baselines and will thus appeal to a broader readership. In this sense, he walks in the steps of Montgomery (2016), Rosato (2011), and Shiffrin (2018) in proposing theories bypassing the stalemated offensive-defensive debate. But the flip side is that the book's consensual theory does little to advance this discussion, which remains nowhere near solved.

The influence of Mearsheimer's thinking is apparent, as Motin reuses many of his concepts (e.g., 'potential regional hegemon') and assumptions (e.g., the centrality of land military power and geography). Motin describes his work as a parsimonious alternative to Walt's (2013) classical balance-of-threat theory. Walt proposed four variables: three typically realist (aggregate power, geography, offensive capabilities) and a domestic-level one (threat perception). Motin explains bandwagoning with a potential hegemon with only three, and none rests on domestic politics: offensive capabilities, preexisting conflict with a third rival, and great power support.

He subdues Walt's geography variable within offensive capabilities. This move appears salutary since geography highly conditions offensive capabilities. Even a formidable state may have little means to harm a distant target, while a moderately powerful state can be an existential threat to a close neighbor. The two other variables are straightforward and compatible with a purely neorealist take, which is Motin's stated goal. He analytically divides bandwagoning intensity between complete alignment, survival accommodation, and profit accommodation. Minor powers choose among the three depending on their ability to resist China or Russia and the relative capability of Beijing and Moscow to subjugate them.

The book's empirical part relies mostly on secondary sources, news reports, and leadership declarations to defend his case. He traces the impact of threat severity, conflicts with third states, and the level of U.S. support in seven cases of countries that bandwagoned with either Beijing or Moscow (Armenia, Belarus, Cambodia, Myanmar, North Korea, Pakistan, and Serbia). Unlike the tendency of qualitative researchers to sometimes smuggle in ad hoc arguments to explain inconsistencies, Dylan Motin always stays on course and acknowledges instances that do not match his theoretical expectations, particularly the North Korean case. Furthermore, his engagement with seven cases of minor powers often overlooked by the IR mainstream is commendable.

However, several criticisms inherent in his choices should nonetheless be underlined. Although going in the opposite direction of Motin's attempt for parsimony, introducing additional levels of complexity, such as distinguishing middle

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powers and small states, and discussing the impact of nuclear deterrence more in-depth would have yielded interesting insights. The North Korean case is an exception within Motin's theory and thus requires more explanations. Another shortcoming directly conflicting with his quest for parsimony revolves around the decision to start his study in 2008. For example, the rise of China has been well documented since the 1990s, and even if China's then-material capabilities did not make it fit as a potential hegemon according to Motin's definition, analyzing North Korea's foreign policy from the mid-1990s would have provided better insights. The 1994 Agreed Framework has been a turning point in North Korea's diplomatic relations with the U.S. and, as a result, has directly impacted its relations with China. The subsequent peace processes on the Korean Peninsula revolving around denuclearization are also worth analyzing. For the Korean case, using a more detailed explanation could explain the empirical anomaly of Motin's theory (Haym 2020).

The author's theory provides many insights and could be expanded on other historical cases and strategies in later studies. The Cold War, albeit briefly mentioned, would be worth studying with that new theoretical framework, and the book's last pages assert that the theory should apply to early twentieth-century Asia and Europe. Furthermore, Motin only briefly mentions other possible strategies like hedging and buck-passing. That is understandable, given the book's focus on bandwagoning, but the reader is left wondering whether variations of the three causal variables can explain other strategies, too. The theoretical discussion in Chapter 2 implies they do, but the author never expands on it.

The book concludes with policy recommendations mainly destined for U.S. decision-makers. These recommendations flow naturally from the argument but will raise eyebrows from liberal scholars and neoconservative pundits. He partly blames many of the cases of bandwagoning with China and Russia on Washington's commitment to promote democracy and human rights aggressively. If the United States did not bully Asian and European states like Belarus or Myanmar to bring about regime change, Motin says, bandwagoners would become likely to distance themselves from Beijing and Moscow and engage in balancing instead.

Overall, the book presents the first full-fledged neorealist attempt to explain bandwagoning. The argument is logical, clearly stated, and consistent with prior neorealist scholarship. The demonstration is suitable, but the book will mostly preach to the realist choir. Nonetheless, non-realist readers will also find insightful information, as it will likely provide a yardstick to discuss bandwagoning for the coming years.

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