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The Concept of Military Alliance

1. Introduction

1.1. Alliances are a central phenomenon in world politics

Alliances are a central and constant phenomenon in international politics throughout history. Whether we look at ancient periods, at the Middle Ages or at the centuries of Bismarck or Napoleon, we find states forming alliances. As George Liska has put it, "It is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances; the two often merge in all but name."¹

1.2. Yet there exists no accepted definition of the concept of alliance

Reflecting this important role of alliances in world politics, the literature in international relations has produced quite an impressive list of interesting studies, articles and analyses in this area of research.² However, it seems striking that despite this scholarly assiduity not much thought has been given to the question "What is a military alliance?"³ Now one might argue that there exists such a broad consensus about the concept that no further analysis is needed. But exactly the opposite is the case. As Edwin Fedder stated in his conceptual analysis in 1968, "the concept of alliance in the literature of international relations is ambiguous and amorphous."⁴ Five years later, Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan came to the same conclusion by observing "the lack of an accepted definition of alliance."⁵ Although quite many outstanding studies have been published in the area of alliance research since then, we are still lacking a concise, theoretically useful and practical definition of the concept of military alliance.

1.3. This article wants to contribute to fill this gap

This article is an exercise in conceptual analysis and wants to contribute to fill this gap. First, it will present some considerations about concepts in general. Following this, the

1 George Liska (1968): *Nations in Alliance. The Limits of Interdependence*, paperback edition, Baltimore, p.3. A similar statement is made by Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973), who consider alliances to be „a universal component of relations between political units, irrespective of time or place“, Ole R. Holsti/Terrence P. Hopmann/John D. Sullivan (1973): *Unity and Disintegration in International Alliances*, Lanham/New York/London, p.2.

2 A compilation of the most important alliance literature is found in Stefan Bergsmann: *Warum entstehen Bündnisse? Konzepte und Theorien der Allianzbildung in Europa*, Sinzheim: ProUniversitate Verlag, and in Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973).

3 A careful query in the literature brought about 35 different definitions, only one conceptual analysis done by Edwin Fedder in 1968 and two lexical articles by Stephen Walt and Arnold Wolfers. Edwin H. Fedder (1968): "The Concept of Alliance", In: *International Studies Quarterly* V.12 N.1, pp.65-86; Arnold Wolfers (1968): "Alliances", In: *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. By David L. Sills, V.1, pp.268-271; Stephen M. Walt (1993): "Alliance", In: *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, ed. By Joel Krieger et al., New York/Oxford, p.20.

4 Liska (1968), p.70.

5 Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973), p.3.

common meaning of the term "alliance" and a few prominent definitions of the concept that are found in the alliance literature are discussed. On the basis of this analysis, a new definition of the concept of military alliance will be put forward, defining an alliance as an explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain.

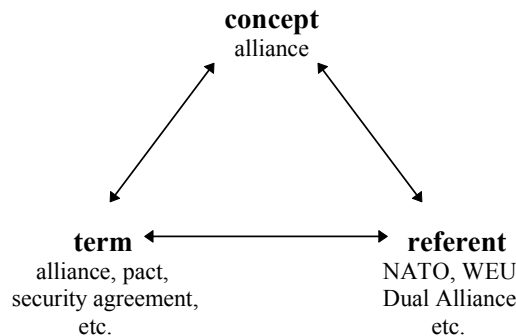
Thus, the definition leaves aside other forms of cooperation in the military and non-military field and allows the researcher to focus on the core element of military alliances: the assistance clause. While this might seem too narrow a focus for researchers who deal with alliances in a broader sense, it is argued that concepts have to be that narrowly defined in order to allow further theorizing and comparisons and to avoid confusion in the theoretical discussions. Thus, researchers that focus on other aspects of cooperation or alliances in a broader sense are encouraged to define their objects of research in a similar way with the vision to get to a more general but still concise concept by generalizing from the new definitions at a later point in time.

2. Theoretical Considerations about Concepts in General

2.1. *Concepts can be seen as parts of the triangle concept-term-referent*

Concepts are the bricks out of which theories are built. However, their definition is quite often difficult and contested. In the classical view, concepts are ideas of something that exists in the world. Therefore, they are related to a term which denotes the concept, on the one hand, and referents which correspond to it in reality, on the other hand.⁶

Figure 1: The Triangle Concept-Term-Referent



2.2. *Confusion arises from the different conception of this triangle among authors*

Problems mainly arise because this triangle varies a little bit from author to author. First, the concepts are defined differently among authors. Second, some terms are sometimes used synonymously or for different concepts. Thus, we find in the literature, for example, the terms alliance, coalition, pact and bloc sometimes used interchangeably, while other scholars

⁶ For a different view of concepts see for example the very inspiring study of George Lakoff: *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things. What Categories Reveal about the Mind*, Chicago/London 1987. However, for the task undertaken in this paper the classical approach to concepts was found to be more useful than other approaches such as those developed by Lakoff and others.

distinguish among them along various criteria. Besides these terms, the related concepts of entente, alignment, neutrality and non-aggression pact are also used widely but not uniformly. Finally, even the referents which are seen as the central elements or exemplars of the defined category differ from author to author: some see, for example, NATO as the prototype of an alliance, others the alliances against Napoleon or those of Bismarck. So, while this analysis concentrates on the definition of the concept of alliance, we always have to keep also the other two related elements of the triangle above in mind.

2.3. A concept has to cover the referents but also to be theoretically useful

It is obvious that it is necessary to define a concept in such a way that it covers the phenomena one wants to deal with. In other words, it has – to some extent – to correspond to reality. Less common sense, however, is the necessity of the definition of a concept to be at the same time theoretically useful. This means that it has to be as clear as possible and to contain only a few essential elements. This is important because only then clear conclusions can be drawn during later exercises in theorizing. Imagine, for example, a concept that is defined by a great number of qualities with different consequences following from each of them. Even if such a definition may cover the reality better than another, more sparse one, it is of only little theoretical use. To illustrate the point one just has to look, for example, at the "operational typology of international military alliances" developed by Bruce Russett in 1971.⁷ Russett did a good job in identifying all kinds of characteristics of different types of alliances, e.g. duration, nature of commitment, etc. Such a multitude of elements seems necessary to differentiate between different kinds of alliance arrangements in a typology. A definition of the concept that shall be promising for theoretical purposes, however, must concentrate on only a few characteristic elements on the basis of which theoretical conclusions can be developed. Therefore, Russett's typology, while being a useful tool for describing actual alliances, is not very promising for theoretical purposes. A definition must try to capture the most essential characteristics of a phenomenon that are important for further theorizing efforts. Only then conclusions can be drawn from the defined qualities that can be subjected to empirical testing. If such a theoretical finding – in case it would be confirmed – would then be valid for a specific referent in the real world, depends on how close this referent corresponds to the definition of the concept and, in particular, to the few isolated defining characteristics.

2.4. The theoretical usefulness ranks higher than the empirical accuracy

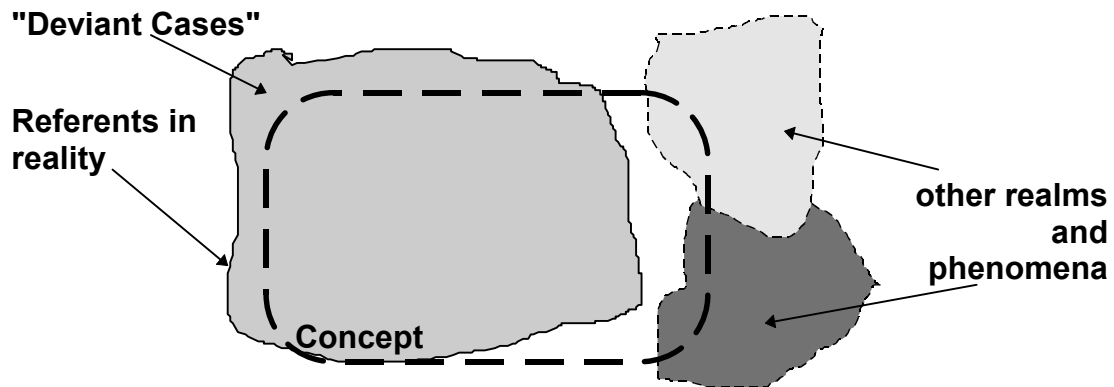
Thus, everybody trying to define a concept faces a dilemma: on the one hand, one has to try to cover the corresponding referents which common sense has designated by using the term that denotes our concept as good as possible; on the other hand, one has to leave aside the multitude of attributes and to concentrate on only a few essential characteristics in order to have a useful basis for further theorizing.⁸ Being in this dilemma, I would argue for the greater importance of the second point: the concentration on only a few essential qualities in order to have a concept that is theoretically useful ranks higher than its claim to cover all the referents that exist in the real world. The reason for this is quite simple: firstly, concentration on certain qualities makes it easier to identify causal relations: conclusions can be drawn from crucial qualities of the concept; secondly, by referring to these qualities instead of the real

7 Bruce Russett (1971): "An Empirical Typology of International Military Alliances", In: *Midwest Journal of Political Science* V.15, pp.262-289.

8 This problem can be observed with almost any concept. A very intensive conceptual debate was going on, e.g., over the definition of the concept of small states.

world category it might be possible to explain some apparently deviant cases: cases, that lack certain effects or outcomes just because they lack the crucial quality although belonging to the real world category according to common sense; thirdly, it becomes easier to transfer possible findings from one realm to another: other cases that belong to a very different category but are followed by the same effects might thus be explained by looking if the crucial quality is present.

Figure 2: A Theoretically Useful Concept



3. The Practical Usage of the Concept of Alliance

Apart from the theoretical usefulness and the accuracy two other important criteria have to be met:

- 1) the definition has to stick as closely as possible to the common meaning of a term in ordinary language so as to minimize the danger of confusion, and
- 2) the concept shall relate to existing definitions of the most celebrated writers in the area of research.⁹

This section will try to meet these two criteria: first, the common meaning of the term "alliance" and its roots will be identified; following this, some of the important definitions of the concept of alliance put forward by leading scholars will be discussed.

3.1. *The common meaning of the term "alliance": a connection between actors*

As for the first, the ordinary meaning of the term, a short look into Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary may suffice. There, an alliance is defined as¹⁰

- 1a) the state of being allied
 - b) a bond or connection between families, parties, or individuals
- 2a) an association (as by treaty) of two or more nations to further their common interests
 - b) a treaty of alliance

The essential point here seems to be the element of a connection between two or more actors.

9 Compare the rules of conceptual analysis as developed by Malthus, Oppenheim and Machlup. David A. Baldwin (1980): "Interdependence and Power: a conceptual analysis", In: *International Organization* V.34 N.4, pp.471-506.

10 *Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary*, revised edition, New York 1995, p.27.

This meaning also corresponds to the historical development of the term "alliance". The corresponding German term "Allianz" developed in the 17th century out of the French word "alliance", which meant "connection", "pact" or "association between states". This French term, in turn, goes back to the old French verb *aleier* (= to connect, to combine, to join), which is itself rooted in the Latin verb *alligare*. *Alligare*, finally, is a compositum of Latin "ligare" (= to bind) and could be translated as "to bind" and "to combine".¹¹

As shown, the common usage of alliance defines it as some kind of connection between actors to achieve some common goals. However, it is quite evident that this definition is much too broad for scientific purposes: according to this almost everything – e.g., such different associations as the International Postal Union, the G-7 or the Non-Proliferation-Treaty – would count as alliances, although all of them have very different consequences. Thus, the common meaning has to be restricted.

3.2. Its usage by famous political scientists: a specific kind of relation between states to achieve certain goals

In order to do this, we shall proceed by looking at the usage of the concept by some of the leading writers in the area of alliance research.

A short look at the different definitions found in the alliance literature shows that most authors use the concept in a sense that is very similar to the common usage identified above. All authors see alliances as a specific kind of relation between states to achieve certain goals. Concerning the concrete type and intensity of the relation and concerning the kind of goals an alliance serves to achieve, however, the authors differ widely. As for the intensity, the spectrum reaches from some kind of loose cooperation¹², to concerted action¹³ and a closer association¹⁴, and, finally, to very specific agreements in the form of a formal treaty¹⁵. The same is found concerning the goals of such an alliance: some authors just speak of some general policy as the common goal¹⁶, others restrict this policy to the realm of national security¹⁷ or – in some cases – name some very specific goal, such as the fighting of a war together¹⁸.

11 Duden. Etymologie. Herkunftswörterbuch der deutschen Sprache. Ed. By Günther Drosdowski, Paul Grebe et al., Mannheim/Wien/Zürich 1963, pp.19-20.

12 E.g. Jack S. Levy/ Michael M. Barnett (1991): "Domestic Sources of Alliances and Alignments: The Case of Egypt, 1962-1973", In: *International Organization* V.45 No.3, p.370; Stephen M. Walt (1987): *The Origin of Alliances*, Ithaca/New York, p.12; Stephen M. Walt (1993): "Alliance", In: Joel Krieger et al. (Eds.): *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, p.20.

13 E.g. Fedder (1968), p.68.

14 E.g. Wichard Woyke (1983): "Militärbündnisse", In: *Handlexikon zur Politikwissenschaft*, Ed. by Wolfgang M. Mickel, München, p.292; Jellinek and Despagnet, both cited in Rafael Erich (1907): *Über Allianzen und Allianzverhältnisse nach heutigem Völkerrecht*, Helsingfors, p.23 and p.24; Glenn H. Snyder (1990): "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut", In: *Journal of International Affairs* V.44 N.1, p.104.

15 E.g. Ken Booth (1987): "Alliances", In: John Baylis/Ken Booth/John Garnett/Phil Williams (Eds.): *Contemporary Strategy*, Vol.1, 2nd edition, London/Sidney, p.258; Erich (1907), p.15; Wilhelm G. Grewe (1970): *Spiel der Kräfte in der Weltpolitik. Theorie und Praxis der Internationalen Beziehungen*, Düsseldorf/Wien, p.105; Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973), p.5; Dan Reiter (1994): "Learning, Realism, and Alliances. The Weight of the Shadow of the Past", In: *World Politics* V.46 N.4, p.495; Russett (1971), pp.262-263; David J. Singer/Melvin Small (1966): "Formal Alliances, 1815-1939: a Quantitative Description", In: *Journal of Peace Research* V.3 N.1, p.4; Gerald L. Sorokin (1994): "Arms, Alliances, and Security Tradeoffs in Enduring Rivalries", In: *International Studies Quarterly* V.38 No.3, p.423; George A. Lopez/ Michael S. Stohl (1989): *International Relations. Contemporary Theory and Practice*, Washington, p.367.

16 E.g. Funk-Brentano/Sorel, Bonfils and Pradier-Fodère, all cited in Erich (1907), p.23; Stohl/Lopez (1989), p.367.

17 E.g. Levy/Barnett (1991), p.370; Booth (1987), p.258; Fedder (1968), p.68; Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973), p.5, Walt (1987), p.12; Woyke (1983), p.292.

18 Barry Posen (1984): *The Sources of Military Doctrine*, Ithaca/New York, p.62.

3.3. *The definition of George Liska: a formal association between two or more states against the threat of a third*

One of the most important early works on alliances, George Liska's study on Nations in Alliance, does not offer the reader an explicit definition of the concept at all. However, from the text it becomes apparent that Liska sees an alliance basically as a formal association between two or more states against the threat of a third, more powerful state. The association itself is what Liska calls an "alignment" and corresponds to the predictions of the balance of power theory. Alliances for him – although he uses the terms almost interchangeably – merely formalize these alignments.¹⁹ Conflicts are thus for him the primary determinant of alignments and alliances, with threat and power potential used as synonyms as usual in the balance of power literature: "Alliances are against, and only derivatively for, someone or something".²⁰

The problem here is that Liska already includes a possible reason for the formation of alliances in his (implicit) definition: threat. If an alliance is stipulated as an association against a threat from outside then balancing against threats is what one is going to find by analyzing the alliance policy of states. Because the definition already includes one of the hypotheses to be tested, it is not useful for theoretical purposes.

3.4. *The implicit definition of Melvin Small and David Singer: a data set*

A second definition that was very important in the alliance literature was put forward by Melvin Small and David Singer. Actually, they did not really formulate a definition of the concept but collected a data set on formal alliances which was widely used by other scholars. By using their data set these researchers also accepted the criteria according to which the two authors had collected and selected their data.²¹

Small/Singer differentiate three types of alliance in their collection of data: 1) defense pacts, 2) neutrality and non-aggression pacts, and 3) ententes.²² In addition, it was required that at least two of the signatories of an alliance treaty had to be independent nation-states with a population of more than half a million people and their sovereignty recognized by the two leading nations in the period analyzed: Britain and France. Second, they included only alliances that were in the form of a written, formal agreement. And finally they also excluded all alliances that were formed during a war or within three months before war broke out and also a rather large class of treaties "because they did not reflect, in any appreciable fashion, the coalitions and divisions in the system."²³

This data set is problematic in several respects. First, it mixes up treaties of a very different nature: defense pacts provide for mutual military assistance in the case of an attack against one of the partners; neutrality pacts bind the signatories not to intervene in a conflict between

19 Liska (1968), p.3.

20 Liska (1968), p.12.

21 E.g. George T. Duncan/Randolph M. Siverson (1982): "Flexibility in Alliance Partner Choice in Multipolar Systems", In: *International Studies Quarterly* V.26 No.4, pp.511-538, Randolph M. Siverson/Juliann Emmons (1991): "Birds of a Feather. Democratic Political Systems and Alliance Choices in the Twentieth Century", In: *Journal of Conflict Resolution* V.35 N.2, pp.285-306, David Lalman/David Newman (1991): "Alliance Formation and National Security", In: *International Interactions* V.16 N.4, pp.239-253.

22 Small/Singer (1966), p.5.

23 Small/Singer (1966), p.5. Excluded were a) collective security agreements, b) charters and constitutions of international organisations such as the ILO, c) treaties of guarantee to which all relevant powers had given their consent like the Locarno Pact of 1925, d) agreements limited to general rules of behavior such as the Briand-Kellogg Pact, and e) unilateral guarantees such as the US commitment to the protection of the Isthmus of Panama of 1903.

others; in non-aggression pacts, which are mostly formed between hostile nations, the partners promise not to attack each other; an entente, finally, provides just for consultations in the case of one of the partners being attacked by a third state. So all of these treaties provide for a certain behavior in the case of a conflict. However, the kind of behavior provided for is so different in these four cases that – for general theoretical purposes – it does not seem to be legitimate to put them all into one data set,²⁴ even more so, as each behavior is followed by very different consequences. But similar to other arrangements, alliances are formed because of their expected consequences. If, because of the definition of the concept, the consequences vary so widely, however, an analysis of the reasons for their formation, e.g., is no longer possible.

A second problem with the data set is the exclusion of all war time alliances. Although for the purpose of the authors this exclusion was important, for other research efforts it might cause serious problems. Because alliances are evidently connected to national security and conflict situations, part of the relevant data is thus excluded from the beginning.²⁵

In sum, the usage of the data set of Small/Singer has to be decided case by case. For the problem dealt with here – i.e. the definition of the concept of alliance –, however, it is not very useful.

3.5. The definition of Ole Holsti, Terrence Hopmann, and John Sullivan: a formal treaty between nation-states concerned with national security issues

Another important definition in the literature was developed by Ole Holsti, Terrence Hopmann and John Sullivan. For them three elements are essential for an association to qualify as an alliance:

- 1) a formal treaty – open or secret
- 2) it must be directly concerned with national security issues
- 3) the partners must be nation-states

On the basis of these three elements the authors define the concept as follows: "an alliance is a formal agreement between two or more nations to collaborate on national security issues."²⁶ Compared to the two definitions discussed before, the one here is clearly a step forward: it is explicit and confines itself to a few objective criteria.

Nevertheless, here also some criticism is in order. First of all, this definition is simply too broad: it covers for example the SALT treaties as well as Austria's neutrality or the Partnership for Peace Accord. Second, it requires a formal treaty, which is actually not really necessary. The point is rather that both partners know of their commitment, i.e., that it is made explicit among them. This usually is done by signing a treaty, however, one could also imagine other forms of explicit statements. Third, – but this may be an individual preference based on my German-speaking origin – it is not necessary that states are nation-states to form an alliance. Alliances have been formed long before the rise of the nation as the state-constituting element in the era of Napoleon; they will be formed long after the end of Nationalism.

24 For the purpose of the authors, which was to analyse the correlation between alliances and the outbreak of war, the data set may nevertheless be useful.

25 A list of the omitted war time alliances can be found in Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973) in appendix A.

26 Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan (1973), p.4.

3.6. Stephen Walt's definition of alliances: arrangements for security cooperation among states

The last important definition in the literature that shall be discussed here is the one developed by Stephen Walt, who is without doubt one of the main researchers in the area of alliances. He uses alignment and alliance as synonyms and defines the latter in his *Origins of Alliances* as "a formal or informal arrangement for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states".²⁷

Again we face the same problem as with Holsti/Hopmann/Sullivan: the definition is so broad that almost every security arrangement will qualify as an alliance thereby making theorizing impossible. In order to be theoretically useful the concept has to be defined in such a narrow way that it covers only phenomena that are sufficiently similar to allow conclusions that are valid for all of them. The origins of the open skies agreement in the framework of the conference on security and cooperation in Europe are probably not the same as those of the treaty of Dunkirk concluded between France and Great Britain in 1947. Yet both would qualify as an alliance according to Walt's definition.

In a later article Walt modified this definition a little bit and wrote "an alliance is a cooperative security relationship between two or more states, usually taking the form of a written military commitment."²⁸ However, the concrete content of this commitment is still not clear, nor when it should come into force.

3.7. Summary of the critique: existing definitions are too broad and vague

The analysis of some of the most important definitions of the concept of alliance in the alliance literature showed three important things:

- 1) there is no single definition that is accepted by all or most of the authors,
- 2) not much energy has been spent up to now to develop a theoretically useful and practical definition of the concept of alliance,
- 3) the existing definitions are only of limited use because most of them are too vague and too broad.

In the remainder of this article the attempt should therefore be made to develop a new definition of the concept on the basis of the discussion above.

4. A More Concise Definition of the Concept

As said above, a concept is an idea of something formed by mentally combining its attributes. The common meaning of the term alliance did this in a fashion that seemed too broad for analytical purposes. The various definitions of the scholars mentioned did narrow this somehow, but still not enough. None of them seems to be covering all the necessary qualities that make an alliance. Clearly, we need a new definition that – on the basis of these findings – tries to correct these shortcomings.

²⁷ Walt (1987), p.12. In footnote 1 at p.1 he uses the word "relationship" instead of "arrangement".

²⁸ Walt (1993), p.20.

But what are the essential elements of an alliance? After carefully analyzing some real alliances and comparing them with other forms of cooperation and association²⁹ I would suggest the following eight elements:

1. Alliances are arrangements between *states*: important here is, however, not if a state is formally recognized or accepted in the international community; it is only necessary that there exists an independent authority which has the power to rule over a certain population and territory. This is important because only then the possibility exists to mobilize and dispose of power capabilities – a necessary precondition in an alliance.
2. Alliances are *explicit agreements*: it does not matter if the agreement is made explicit by a hand-shake between statesmen or by a formal treaty. The important thing is only that the participating parties themselves know with certainty that an agreement exists. Thus, they can calculate on this basis and form their expectations accordingly. This criterion distinguishes alliances from alignments which are only informal groupings of states based upon interests that give rise to mere *implicit* expectations.
3. Alliances deal with *a certain behavior for a certain contingency in the future*. Although most alliances also comprise some activities that take place for the whole time the treaty is in force, such as coordination of doctrines or joint exercises, the main part of an alliance is focused on a specific behavior that shall be followed in the event of a certain situation, the so-called *casus foederis*. This element distinguishes alliances from mere security cooperations or from non-aggression pacts which promise a certain behavior for the full period of duration of the agreement.
4. In connection with the last element, it is essential that *the event for which the specified behavior is promised is uncertain*: the partners do not know, when this occasion will occur nor if it will occur at all. This separates alliances from actual coalitions, which are formed in anticipation of a decision that will take place for certain at a more or less known point of time – such as an election or a war, for example. This element of uncertainty is very important because the pros and cons of the promise for a specific behavior to be expected differ decisively compared to a situation of certainty: when a state joins a war coalition, entanglement into the conflict is certain, when a state joins an alliance, however, entanglement is only a possibility that does not necessarily have to occur.
5. An alliance is a *promise*. Therefore, it has to be distinguished from the actual behavior shown by the state once the *casus foederis* has occurred. From this element together with element 3 described above follows the inherent insecurity of alliances and, therefore, – from the perspective of the allying partners – the problem of credibility or the risk of abandonment, which both cover just different views of the same problem.
6. The promise comprises an *assistance* in the event specified in the treaty (usually an attack on one of the partners). This assistance comes up to the *use of one's own resources for the defense of the other*. How this is done in particular and exactly which kind of resources are covered by the alliance is not that important, the point is, however, that each of the partners can calculate with *a substantial external contribution* to its own resources in the case of an actual occurrence of the *casus foederis*. This element distinguishes alliances from neutrality pacts and from ententes: whereas neutrality pacts promise only not to augment the adversary's resources, the promise of an entente comprises only the vague commitment of consultations in case of a crisis.

29 The definition was developed during my studies on alliances for my master's thesis. See Stefan Bergmann: Warum entstehen Bündnisse? Sinzheim 1996.

7. The promise is a *mutual* one. This means that each of the partners has to calculate not only the advantages of external assistance in the case of a serious threat but also the disadvantages of the risk of getting entangled in conflicts of the partner and, thus, of suffering high costs should this risk become reality. Unilateral guarantees are in many respects very similar to alliances, however, they differ in this point because in a guarantee relation one partner worries only about the risk of abandonment whereas the other is only concerned about the risk of entanglement.
8. Last but not least, the agreement falls into *the realm of national security*. This element – although maybe seeming obvious – is also very essential because only in this realm the risk is so high as to cover the question of the further existence of a state as a sovereign entity. This gives alliances a quality of seriousness that clearly distinguishes them from agreements in other areas of foreign policy, such as finance or commerce. By covering the question of national security the risks that are inherently entailed in an alliance become not just matters of cost but matters of life and death.

Putting together these eight constituting elements an alliance shall be defined as an explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain.

5. Summary

This article tried to develop a theoretically useful definition of the concept of military alliance. Starting from older conceptual efforts by Edwin Fedder the paper analyzed the common sense meaning of the term as well as the definition and use of the concept by leading researchers in the field of alliance theory. However, it is argued here, all definitions developed so far are not clear, concise and narrow enough to be a useful basis for further theorizing. Therefore, it was attempted to identify the eight constituting elements of the concept and to put them together into a new definition in hopes that it may be of greater theoretical value than its predecessors. Thus, it is proposed here to define an alliance as an explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain.

Although this definition will for sure not be the last one to be developed it tries to put forward the idea of defining concepts more concisely by focusing on a small number of key features hoping that such definitions will contribute to avoid confusion in theoretical discussions and to get even more inspiring results out of theorizing and comparisons.

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30 A full list of all the literature used during the development of this paper is given in Bergsmann Stefan: *Warum entstehen Bündnisse?* Sinzheim.

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