Thinking Outside the Alliance: Frontstage v. Backstage Signals of Support

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Signals of Support

- Major powers have an interest in signaling support for their protégés
- Most literature to date has focused on alliances as a means of signaling support
- But major powers also signal support in many other ways
  - Troops
  - Military aid
  - Arms sales
  - Leadership visits
Foreign Policy Substitutability

- To some extent, all of these signals of support are substitutes.
- Yet they also have some differences:
  - Hand-tying v. sunk costs
  - Requirements for veto player approval
  - Level of publicity
- How does a major power choose which type of signal to send?
The Puzzling Case of Saudi Arabia

- In the last 10 years in our dataset (1998-2007), the US:
  - Sold more arms to Saudi Arabia than to 98% of other countries
  - Deployed more troops in Saudi Arabia than in 95% of other countries
- And yet
  - The US president never visited Saudi Arabia
  - The Saudi king never visited the US
  - The US has no formal defense pact with Saudi Arabia

Riyadh: A destination rarely visited by US presidents
Frontstage v. Backstage Signals

- To explain how major powers select which signals of support to send, we divide signals into two categories:
  - Frontstage signals
    - Associated with high levels of publicity
    - Includes defense pacts and leader visits
  - Backstage signals
    - Not secret, but likely to receive less attention
    - Includes military aid and arms sales
The Signaling Decision

- Major powers will generally prefer to send frontstage signals, either alone or in conjunction with backstage signals
  - Publicity makes potential adversaries more aware that a signal has been sent
  - Publicity creates hand-tying costs that increase credibility
The Signaling Decision

- Yet democratic major powers, such as the US, may be reluctant to send frontstage signals to an autocratic protégé due to:

  1. Hypocrisy costs
     - Criticism for not practicing the democratic values preached
  2. Democratic credibility impediment
     - Frontstage signals of support for an autocratic regime may create public backlash that would actually undermine the credibility of the signal
The Signaling Decision

- Autocratic protégés may also be reluctant to accept frontstage signals from the US because of:
  1. Need for regime justification
     - Some autocrats justify their regimes based on opposition to the US-led world order
  2. Need to maintain perception of strength
     - Autocrats might not want to look weak by needing US support
  3. Fear of democratic values
     - Autocrats do not want their population to look on democratic values promoted by the US favorably
Hypotheses for the United States

- Based on this theory, we expect:
  - H1a: The United States is more likely to send frontstage signals of support to more democratic countries.
  - H1b: The United States is more likely to send solely backstage signals of support to less democratic countries.
Research Design

- Dataset of country-years between 1950 and 2007
  - The universe of potential US protégés
- Use multinomial logit model to predict type of signal sent
- Key independent variable: Polity score
- Control variables
  - MID s fought against US rivals, MID s fought on same side as US, other MID s, UN voting similarity, Soviet alliance indicator, imports from and exports to US, time trend
**Dependent Variable**

- The dependent variable has four categories

1. No signal of support (52% of sample)
2. Backstage signaling only (4% of sample)
   - Level of military aid or arms sales in top 10%, but no visits or defense pact
3. Frontstage signaling only (31% of sample)
   - Leader visit or defense pact, but no military aid or arms sales in top 10%
4. Both types of signaling (13% of sample)
   - Leader visit or defense pact **as well as** level of military aid or arms sales in top 10%

- Note: For now, we omit troop deployments
## Dependent Variable Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries Most Frequently in Cat. 2 (Backstage Only)</th>
<th>Countries Most Frequently in Cat. 3 (Frontstage Only)</th>
<th>Countries Most Frequently in Cat. 4 (Front and Backstage)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Taiwan</td>
<td>2. Iceland</td>
<td>2. Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tunisia</td>
<td>5. Panama</td>
<td>5. Italy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Indonesia</td>
<td>7. Dominican Republic</td>
<td>7. Canada</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Iran (before 1979)</td>
<td>8. Guatemala</td>
<td>8. Israel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Category 2: Backstage Only</th>
<th>Category 3: Frontstage Only</th>
<th>Category 4: Both Front and Backstage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Polity</td>
<td>-0.105***</td>
<td>0.061***</td>
<td>0.082***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.027)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td>(0.022)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Rival MIDs</td>
<td>0.633***</td>
<td>-0.195</td>
<td>0.809***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.215)</td>
<td>(0.191)</td>
<td>(0.203)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Side MIDs</td>
<td>0.767**</td>
<td>0.577**</td>
<td>1.035***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.342)</td>
<td>(0.283)</td>
<td>(0.293)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other MIDs</td>
<td>0.071</td>
<td>-0.133</td>
<td>0.116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.116)</td>
<td>(0.098)</td>
<td>(0.086)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Voting Similarity</td>
<td>2.731***</td>
<td>1.973***</td>
<td>2.519***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.747)</td>
<td>(0.278)</td>
<td>(0.385)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russian Ally</td>
<td>-1.619***</td>
<td>-1.019***</td>
<td>-1.171**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.468)</td>
<td>(0.247)</td>
<td>(0.499)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Exports</td>
<td>0.856***</td>
<td>0.842***</td>
<td>0.899***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.268)</td>
<td>(0.274)</td>
<td>(0.271)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US Imports</td>
<td>-0.121*</td>
<td>-0.134*</td>
<td>-0.145*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.071)</td>
<td>(0.077)</td>
<td>(0.075)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Substantive Effect of Democracy

![Graph showing the predicted probability against Polity for different categories: Backstage Only, Frontstage Only, and Both.]
Robustness Checks

1. Lagged indicators of support categories
2. Multinomial probit
3. Splitting sample into Cold War and post-Cold War
4. Dropping some countries that might be outliers
5. Including troops as frontstage, then backstage signal
6. Putting leader visits in the opposite category from defense pacts – Our result goes away, as predicted
7. Adjusting threshold for aid and arms to be considered a signal of support
8. Controlling for region, identity of US president, US domestic conditions, and more
9. Changing the measurement of democracy, defense pacts, and previous MIDs
Conclusion

- The US is more likely to send solely backstage signals of support to less democratic countries
  - Suggests that concerns over the public reaction in both the US and the supported country influence signaling decisions
- Not saying this is the only thing that matters in signaling decisions
  - Control variables are also significant
  - Yet controls cannot provide a strong explanation for why one type of support signal is chosen over another