
Persuasion in International Politics: A Rationalist Account

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Governments offer us the promise of rewards or the threats of punishment to secure favorable international bargains, but they also draw on reasoned arguments to convince their bargaining partners to accept mutually beneficial agreements. Works that have studied such attempts at persuasion hold that it is most likely to succeed when the states involved share important normative values or are uncertain about what is the “right” action to take. Drawing on rational choice theory of strategic communication, this study seeks to expand understanding the conditions under which attempts at persuasion in international politics succeed or fail. Persuasion can occur for reasons other than shared values; under some conditions, one state can persuade another by altering the latter’s beliefs about the rewards associated with available foreign policy options.

Contemporary thinking about international politics is structured around the debate between theories based on rational choice, or *rationalist*, and constructivist frameworks. For my purposes the key distinction between these approaches is how they conceptualize communication between states. Constructivist theories hold that communication can alter actors’ preferences by influencing their conception of what is right and wrong. Rationalist theories maintain that states’ preferences remain constant but that communication may lead them to revise their instrumental beliefs about the cause-effect relationships between policies and outcomes. The few existing studies of persuasion in international negotiations have used constructivist insights to argue that persuasion is most likely to succeed when the parties share important normative values, face significant uncertainty, and have an institutionalized relationship. Drawing off rational choice theory of the role of communication in bargaining, the next section develops a complimentary model of persuasion that depends on two elements: *information* and *credibility*. Attempts at persuasion are most likely to succeed when the party that is the target of persuasion believes the persuader has superior information about the issue under discussion and has incentives to convey this information honestly.

The goal in developing this account of persuasion is pragmatic; it seeks to add to our understanding of how persuasion operates and when it succeeds

and fails in international politics. The study does not seek to “prove” that rationalism is somehow superior to constructivism. Instead, the contrast drawn between rationalist and constructivist accounts of persuasion is motivated by the belief that “the most interesting research . . . directly engages questions that cut cross the rationalist/constructivist boundary as it is commonly understood” (Fearon and Wendt 2002, 52). Rationalism and constructivism both shed light on persuasion in international politics but identify different causal mechanisms through which it occurs. Elucidating what rationalism has to say about persuasion allows a richer appreciation of the concept and allows us to explain more cases in which one state persuades another to change its foreign policy. If the arguments presented are valid, persuasion occurs more often and for additional reasons than one relying on constructivist theory alone would expect. The evidence presented here demonstrates that variables identified by constructivist theories of persuasion cannot explain the outcome of this specific case, but those identified by rationalist theory can do so.

The subsequent section evaluates the plausibility of this understanding of persuasion through an analysis of the negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty in the late 1940s. The North Atlantic Treaty involved a fundamental change in American foreign policy, committing the United States to the defense of continental Europe, but it was instigated by British rather than American political leaders. The success of this episode of persuasion is consistent with the theory advanced here. British attempts to persuade the United States to ally with Western Europe only succeeded when American decision makers were uncertain about which course of action open to them would best serve their interests in the early cold war and were assured that Britain and other European countries were themselves committed to providing for their defense in important ways. In the conclusion I explore in greater detail a division of theoretical labor in which constructivist theories best explain persuasion that operates by altering its target’s conception of normatively appropriate behavior and in which the rationalist theory advanced here explains persuasion that changes the target’s beliefs about the efficacy of the available foreign policy options.

The focus here is on developing this alternative understanding of persuasion and testing its applicability in a carefully structured case study. The theoretical conclusions from this have important implications for how foreign policy decision makers approach international negotiations. The constructivist approach to persuasion concludes that only states sharing some important values can use persuasion to settle their disputes in a peaceful and mutually satisfactory manner. This article supports the conclusion that persuasion also can operate effectively to resolve disputes in situations where the states involved may not share important values but clearly understand each others’

interests. I conclude with a short discussion of the implications of this line of reasoning for contemporary American foreign policy.

Persuasion in International Politics

What is persuasion? Under what conditions are attempts to persuade successful? Social psychologists define persuasion as “an activity or process in which a communicator attempts to induce a change in the belief, attitude, or behavior of another. . . through the transmission of a message in a context in which the persuadee has some degree of free choice” (Perloff 1993, 15; see also Brody, Mutz, and Sniderman 1996). Persuasion is thus a form of power in that it is a means by which one actor makes another do something it otherwise would not do, but it does not rely on promises of material rewards or threats of punishment. Persuasion operates by influencing an actor’s cognitions, not by directly manipulating the utility it will accrue by taking a particular action. Persuasion differs from other strategies of influence, such as rhetorical action or heresthetics, which involve one actor manipulating the social setting or decision making rules in order to achieve an objective.¹ Constructivist and rationalist theories of persuasion differ in terms of the types of cognitions that persuasion alters and the steps one actor must take to successfully persuade another.

Constructivist Accounts of Persuasion

Constructivism and rationalism are wide-ranging frameworks that can be used as the starting point for the development of more specific interpretations or theories. One of constructivism’s central tenets is that social interaction and communication may alter the basic properties of actors; in other words, actors’ identities are constituted in important ways by their environment (Finnemore 1996; Katzenstein 1996; Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner 1999; Wendt 1999). Here I focus on what is typically termed the “conventional” or “thin” constructivist approach, which adopts, along with rationalism, a largely positivist epistemology that allows for the development of middle-range theories that can explain political behavior. It is this strand of constructivism that has been used to explore persuasion in international politics most thoroughly. Specific theories of persuasion motivated by the more general constructivist approach draw on social psychology and Habermas’ theory of communicative action.

One body of work uses insights developed by Habermas to address the conditions under which persuasion, or what he terms *arguing*, does and does not work (Risse 2000). This holds that in some situations actors communicate

honestly with each other to reach a reasoned consensus about cause-effect relationships and normatively correct behavior. Participants engage in communication without using material power resources to impose their views on others and are open to the possibility of being persuaded by the better argument. Risse uses these insights to explain how materially weak Western European states influenced American foreign policy during the cold war. The core of his explanation for such influence is that all of these states were liberal democracies, a factor which led them to de-emphasize power asymmetries when bargaining with each other. The United States and European countries saw each other as members of a community based on shared values of liberal democracy and the peaceful settlement of disputes. This sense of common identity was reinforced by norms of consultation through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which allowed the European governments to voice their concerns to the United States. Risse documents that the European members of NATO were able to exert significant persuasive influence on American policy choices during the Korean War, arms control negotiations, and the Cuban missile crisis. Furthermore, he demonstrates that this influence did not derive from the European states' material capabilities, since most of these issues did not directly concern European security and the United States did not need its European allies' material support to achieve its ends (Risse-Kappen 1995).²

Others use social psychology to delineate conditions for successful persuasion in international politics. Jeffrey Checkel (2001), for example, focuses on state compliance with international norms, particularly the conditions under which European governments adopt and comply with the human rights and nationalities norms of the Council of Europe. His theoretical and empirical work seeks to demonstrate how international institutions can create an environment conducive to persuasion that leads decision makers to revise policies regarding human rights and the treatment of national minorities.

The Habermasian and social-psychological lines of inquiry reach many similar conclusions about the conditions under which persuasion is most likely to be successful.³ The persuader and the target of the persuader's message must share basic political values and treat each other with the respect necessary to engage in meaningful and reasoned communication. These lines of inquiry also stipulate that decision makers are more open to attempts at persuasion when they hold weak prior beliefs and face uncertainty about the available policy options and the estimated net benefits of each option. Persuasion is believed to be more effective when the persuader and the target have an institutionalized relationship that allows them to interact in informal and private

settings. Finally, many of the constructivist accounts of persuasion emphasize how it influences the target's definitions of good and bad outcomes (Checkel 2001, 562-64; Risse 2000, 19-20). Finnemore (2003), for example, defines persuasion solely in the latter terms: "[p]ersuasion involves changing what people value and what they think is right or good" (18). Risse's (2000) position seems similar when he discusses how arguing can lead the target to alter its conception of normatively correct behavior.

A Rationalist Account of Persuasion

The constructivist framework's focus on how social interaction can change actors' identities makes it a natural starting point for analyzing persuasion in international politics. Some scholars working with the constructivist framework hold that its major contemporary theoretical rival, rationalism, provides little leverage over such social effects because its starting point is the assumption that actors' properties are not altered by communication (Checkel 2001, 556; Risse 2000, 20). This conclusion, however, obscures the important distinction in rational choice theories between actors' preferences over outcomes and their instrumental beliefs. Rational choice holds that actors make decisions based on expected utility calculations. Expected utility theory holds that actors have preferences over the outcomes that they may secure through the actions or policies available to them and the beliefs or expectations about the outcomes that these policies will produce. Preferences over outcomes are assumed to be fixed, but actors' prior beliefs are not. Instead, actors are uncertain about the accuracy of these beliefs and update their beliefs as they acquire relevant new information. Beliefs, according to rational choice theory, are purely instrumental descriptions of the external world, including the characteristics of other actors and the efficacy of available policies. Actors are willing to modify their prior beliefs when they receive relevant new information because doing so makes it more likely that they can accurately choose the policy that will allow them to maximize their utility. Persuasion, from this perspective, occurs when a persuader holds private information about some characteristic of the environment that is important to the target, such as the utility associated with each available policy, and provides this information to the target, who then uses it to alter its beliefs. Rationalism, unlike constructivism, does not allow for the possibility that persuasion could alter actors' preferences over outcomes, whether these are defined in terms of preferred outcomes, definitions of what is "right or good," or normatively correct behavior (Finnemore 2003, 154; Risse 2000, 20).

Rationalist theories of strategic information transmission, also known as "cheap talk," model situations in which communication between players does

not directly affect their payoffs but instead influences their beliefs.⁴ Cheap talk theory has been developed formally and applied to explain the effects of communication on behavior in many empirical domains, including voting, legislative organizations, the influence of political advisors, and lobbying (Austen-Smith 1993; Kriebhel 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). Cheap talk theory has been used to explore phenomena in international politics such as cooperation, mediation, and the development of reputation (Kydd 2003; Morrow 1994; Sartori 2002). While these theorists have identified cheap talk as potentially useful for understanding some aspects of international politics, they have not attempted to evaluate the theory in a rigorous manner or to distinguish cheap talk from other communicative behavior. The small body of rationalist literature on communication in international politics thus suffers from the same shortcoming as constructivist work in this area. In what follows I summarize informally the implications of cheap talk for persuasion in international politics and show that it identifies an additional and complimentary understanding of persuasion.

Consider a situation in which one state, the persuader, attempts to persuade another state, the target, to alter its foreign policy in a manner that the persuader posits will deliver net benefits to both. The target will accept this proposal only when it perceives the persuader as being both informed and credible. The first necessary condition for successful persuasion is that the persuader is seen by the target as possessing more accurate information or beliefs about the outcomes that will result from the policy choices available to the target. For attempts at persuasion to succeed, decision makers in the target state must face some degree of uncertainty about which of the policies available to them will maximize their utility. When this uncertainty about the relationships between policies and outcomes is low, they consider their beliefs to be an accurate guide to the net benefits that will result from each policy. In such situations the persuader's proposal is superfluous, since the target's decision makers would reject it in the belief that an alternative policy was more likely to succeed. Higher levels of uncertainty open a window for attempts at persuasion to succeed. When they face high uncertainty, decision makers in the target state search for and evaluate new information to determine more accurately the payoffs from each policy and more seriously consider the possibility that the beliefs underlying the persuader's proposal might better capture the true relationships between policies and outcomes than theirs.

The target might conclude that the persuader has superior information about the true relationships between policies and outcomes for at least two reasons: *information* and *credibility*. The persuader might have access to a

greater amount of and more relevant factual information than the target. For example, the persuader might have intelligence assets, such as reconnaissance satellites, that allow it to access secret information denied to the target, or it might be more familiar with the technical capabilities of a piece of military hardware that the target is considering adopting for its own military forces. In such cases the persuader can present the target with the superior factual information in its possession. Second, the target may have more experience with the problem at hand, which has allowed it to develop specialized interpretative information of the relationships between policies and outcomes. Examples of this sort of information might include cases in which the target state seeks to understand some quality about a third state that it cannot observe directly, such as its true intentions or resolve. In these sorts of cases, where superior information is based on factors that are difficult to measure, such as the persuader's ability to interpret and place in the proper context detailed factual information, the target is likely to base its assessment of the persuader's private information on its past performance in predicting the relationships between policies and outcomes. In other words, the target will treat the persuader as better informed if its earlier assessments have proven to be correct.

The second necessary condition for successful persuasion is that the target perceives the persuader to be credible in the sense that it has incentives to communicate its superior information honestly. The target's policies might have an impact on the utility of the persuader. The persuader thus may not be a neutral advisor but instead hold preferences over which policies the target decides to adopt. This creates incentives for the persuader to manipulate its private information so that the target adopts the policy that produces the outcome most preferred by the target. The most credible persuaders are those that have preferences over outcomes that are similar to those of the target. When decision makers in the target state believe that their counterparts in the persuading state wish to secure the same outcomes, they know that the persuader has an incentive to communicate honestly its information of the true consequences of its proposal. Even if it believes the persuader to have superior information, the target still might reject the persuader's proposal if it fears the two states do not share similar preferences over the outcome that results from the policy it selects. The reason is that a persuader with divergent preferences might deliberately communicate incorrect information to convince the target to select the action that produces the outcome most favorable to the persuader. The target state's estimate of the degree to which the two states share similar preferences may be based on previous interactions with the persuader, experiences interacting with other states in similar situations,

or general beliefs about international behavior. The persuader can attempt to bolster its reputation for shared preferences by taking actions that demonstrate its commitment to its proposal regardless of the actions of the target. In game-theoretic terms, the persuader may choose to undertake “costly signals” or actions that are too costly for a state with preferences that diverge from those of the target to implement and that only a state that shared preferences would carry out (Austen-Smith and Banks 2000; Lupia and McCubbins 1998).⁵

Figure 1. Conditions for Rationalist Persuasion

		Does Persuader Have Superior Information?	
		No	Yes
Is Persuader Credible?	No	Unsuccessful Persuasion	Unsuccessful Persuasion
	Yes	Unsuccessful Persuasion	Successful Persuasion

Figure 1 summarizes the conditions for successful persuasion. The two independent variables, *information* and *credibility*, are arrayed on the horizontal and vertical axes. The figure displays these as dichotomous variables for the sake of convenience; in fact the theory of strategic communication treats these as continuous variables. Figure 1 illustrates that *both* superior *information* and *credibility* are necessary for persuasion to succeed. The target cannot be convinced to change its behavior by a very credible but poorly informed persuader, or vice versa. The target accepts the persuader’s proposal only when it perceives that the persuader has superior *information* and the *credibility* to communicate this information honestly. In this case it acknowledges that the persuader has a more accurate understanding of the relationships between policies and outcomes and trusts the persuader to communicate this information honestly. When the persuader has superior *information* but lacks *credibility*, the target concludes that the persuader may have more accurate instrumental beliefs. The target, however, may be unwilling to act on the latter’s communication of these beliefs, fearing they

have been manipulated to convince the target into selecting the action that will deliver maximum benefits to the persuader. If the target perceives the persuader as credible but lacking in superior *information*, it trusts the communication from the persuader but has little reason to believe that the persuader's causal beliefs are superior to its own and, therefore, will reject the proposal. The combination of no superior *information* and lack of *credibility* leads the target to conclude that the persuader does not possess useful information and that the persuader will manipulate its communication to serve its own ends.

Implications

While constructivism is not the dominant paradigm in the study of international politics, analyses drawing on constructivism have been most prominent in the study of persuasion in international politics. This work represents an advance in theorizing because it establishes the importance of paying serious attention to how beliefs and ideas influence international political outcomes. Our understanding of persuasion will be strengthened if we take two additional steps: specify rationalism's contribution to persuasion and broaden our bases of comparison from materialistic theories to ones that allow for the influence of beliefs and ideas. First, works that develop explanations of persuasion inspired by constructivism have either rejected the possibility of a rationalist theory of persuasion applied to international politics or have incorrectly characterized what such a theory would look like (Checkel 2001; Risse 2000, 8). These works do not discuss how persuasion might lead actors to alter their instrumental beliefs, which might result in substantial changes in foreign policy. Developing the rationalist alternative is an important first step towards allowing a serious comparison of the contributions that both approaches make towards our understanding of when persuasion succeeds or fails in international politics. It seems likely that both constructivist and rationalist theories have the power to explain some variation in the success of attempts at persuasion. Specifying rationalism's contribution in this area also allows scholars to begin to draw on an additional intellectual tradition to understand more fully the true conditions under which persuasion succeeds or fails.

To date such a comparison has been difficult to make because scholarship on persuasion in international politics has compared insights from specific theories based on constructivism only to those that draw on materialist theories that allow little scope to the importance of beliefs and ideas in explaining international co-operation and conflict. Risse-Kappen (1995), for example, uses a sophisticated comparative case research design that contrasts his

constructivist theory with structural realism, traditional realism, and institutionalism. We can strengthen our understanding of persuasion in international politics and better understand the limits of constructivist theories of persuasion by comparing their predictions to a rationalist theory that takes ideas seriously but offers another explanation of how persuasion alters actors' beliefs.

I take up both of these tasks of distinguishing rationalist and constructivist accounts and demonstrating that the former has the value of being able to explain cases of persuasion that the latter cannot. Both the constructivist and rationalist accounts maintain that uncertainty about the relations between policies and outcomes makes a target more open to attempts at persuasion, but the theories differ regarding the additional variables that must be present for persuasion to succeed. Constructivist theories hold that the persuader and target must share fundamental political values and have an institutionalized relationship based on norms of open and regular consultation. Persuasion in the rationalist vein, in contrast, can occur in the absence of these variables as long as the target perceives the persuader to be better informed and hold similar preferences over the outcomes that result from the policy it selects. Such preference similarity is conceptually distinct from the shared norms and values that are at the center of the constructivist account of persuasion. States with divergent norms and values may share preferences over outcomes. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, for example, shared a preference for dividing up Eastern Europe between them in 1939, and Communist China and the United States effectively forged an alliance against the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s. The different expectations create the possibility of distinguishing effects of persuasion identified by constructivist and rationalist theories. If the rationalist approach has explanatory merit, we should see attempts at persuasion succeed only when the target becomes convinced that the persuader holds superior information and is credible, regardless of the degree to which it shares values and norms of communication with the persuader. These differences are illustrated in the case study that follows which analyzes attempts by Britain to persuade the United States to form an alliance with Western European states in the early cold war period. Britain's persuasion succeeded when the United States negotiated the outlines of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1948. As both the constructivist and rationalist accounts would lead us to expect, Americans became more open to British ideas as their uncertainty about true Soviet intentions increased. The Americans were convinced to follow the British advice only when the British took steps to reassure them that the two countries shared similar preferences over outcomes.

The additional variables identified by constructivism as necessary for successful persuasion—shared norms and values and institutionalized consultation—either did not vary over time within the case or varied in the incorrect direction. While this does not invalidate the constructivist account of persuasion, it does provide convincing evidence that rational choice theory also can explain this phenomenon.

Persuasion and the Negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty

This section evaluates the theory of persuasion developed above through a case study of the negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty in 1948 and 1949. What became the North Atlantic Treaty was first proposed by British Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin to United States Secretary of State George Marshall in late 1947. Until this point American decision makers had resisted calls to provide a formal security guarantee to Western Europe. Consistent with the theory developed in the previous section, I conclude that two developments led them to change policy on this question. More intense conflicts with the Soviet Union, particularly the breakdown of negotiations over the future status of occupied Germany, led American decision makers to question their initial policy of cooperating with the Soviets and to search for alternative ways of stabilizing Western Europe. Bevin's proposal to achieve this goal through an alliance came at a time when American decision makers were open to reconsidering the merits of alternative approaches. Further, the British supported their argument about the importance of a formal guarantee for Western European security by providing one themselves through the March 1948 Brussels Pact, in which Britain pledged to defend Western Europe, and by reorienting British war-fighting strategy from abandoning to defending the continent. This committed Britain to the security of Western Europe and demonstrated to the United States that the country shared its goals in this regard and was itself willing to back up this preference with concrete action.

Two types of evidence support these contentions. The first is the congruence between the values of the independent variables and the dependent variable over time within the case. Following standard research design advice to maximize the number of observations, I divide the case into three time periods corresponding to different values of the independent variables (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). In the first time period, lasting from the end of the Second World War until late 1947, American decision makers face low uncertainty about their policy of negotiating with the Soviet Union, leading them to reject the British proposals for a security guarantee for Western Europe that might antagonize the Soviets. In the second period, beginning in

late 1947 with the breakdown of negotiations with the Soviet Union over the future status of occupied Germany, American decision makers are less certain that engagement with the Soviet Union will succeed and are willing to consider alternative strategies more seriously, including that of a Western military alliance. However, they were concerned that Britain and other European countries desired such an alliance so that the United States will bear the brunt of the costs of securing Europe. In the third period, after March 1948, the signing of the Brussels Pact by Britain and other European countries assuages this American concern by demonstrating that the Europeans are committed to providing for their own security. It is only in this third period that both of the independent variables, *information* and *credibility*, shift towards the values that are expected to produce successful persuasion.

The second type of evidence is the private speech and writings in the form of internal, declassified documents of senior American decision makers in the State Department, Pentagon, and White House during the negotiation of the North Atlantic Treaty. Private speech is useful for evaluating if the causal claims I identify were seen by participants as important influences on their behavior (Van Evera 1997). It indicates that American decision makers did become more attracted to the idea of a Western alliance as their uncertainty about the likelihood of success of their current strategy of engaging with the Soviet Union declined. It also demonstrates that the key reason they held off from accepting Bevin's proposal was their concern that Britain and other European states hoped to rely on American military support while devoting few resources to their own militaries and that the signing of the Brussels Pact did a great deal to reduce this concern.

The theory of persuasion developed here compliments, rather than competes with, other explanations of when one state influences another to change its foreign policy. My goal is to establish the plausibility of this theory rather than to demonstrate its superiority over other explanations of such influence. The remainder of this section evaluates the proposition that Britain was knowledgeable and credible enough persuade the United States to sign the North Atlantic Treaty. I assess alternative theoretical explanations of this case and demonstrate that the variables they identify as important causes of persuasion are either of the incorrect value or invariant over the course of the negotiations.

Information: The Americans' Uncertainty and British Information

By early 1947 the Truman administration had defined the United States' paramount interest as ensuring that continental Europe would not be dominated

by a hostile great power. Germany and the Soviet Union were seen as the states with the economic and military potential to become European hegemons. Since defeated Germany was occupied by the United States and its allies, France and Britain, as well as the Soviet Union, it posed little immediate threat. The Truman administration instead saw the Soviet Union as the most significant challenge. Analysts of the cold war largely agree that the United States wanted to prevent a hostile power from controlling the economic and military resources of Europe; they differ over the reasons the United States attached such importance to this goal.⁶ While the administration had by mid-1947 articulated in general terms the goals it wished to achieve, its senior members had not decided exactly which policies would allow them to achieve their objectives most efficiently. This uncertainty created an opening for the British to attempt to persuade the Americans that a formal alliance could play an important role in achieving the general goal of reducing Soviet influence in Western Europe.

Bevin approached Marshall after the close of the London Conference of Foreign Ministers of Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States in December 1947. The primary agenda item for the Conference was the future status of occupied Germany, and the meeting collapsed when it became clear that the foreign ministers were no closer to reaching agreement on this issue than they were when it began. Bevin initially proposed to Marshall that they should “. . . devise some western democratic system . . . This would not be a formal alliance, but an understanding backed by power, money and resolute action. It would be a sort of spiritual federation of the west. . .it would then be clear to the Soviet Union that having gone so far they could not advance any further. . .” (quoted in U.S. Department of State 1974, 1-2). Bevin emphasized the effect that such an arrangement would have on the French government, which was concerned about both the activities of the French Communist Party and the steps being taken by the Americans and British to create a West German government. Bevin’s idea of a “Western Union” would meet these problems by creating “confidence in Western Europe that further Communist inroads would be stopped” (1-2) and by providing an American assurance that a reconstituted German government would not pose a threat to its neighbors. Marshall’s initial response to this informal suggestion was non-committal, but more encouraging than American reactions to earlier calls to form an Atlantic alliance.

This was not the first time that American decision makers had faced a British call to create a Western alliance, but it was the first time that they took such a call seriously. The Churchill and Atlee governments had consistently

pushed for the United States to take a harder line towards the Soviet Union, viewing it as the principal threat to European security after the war. American decision makers, however, initially disagreed with this diagnosis, believing instead that continued co-operation with the Soviet Union was still possible. President Harry S. Truman had moved quickly after the termination of hostilities against Japan to distance the United States from Britain, abruptly ending Lend-Lease and quickly winding down the Combined Boards that coordinated the Anglo-American war effort, in part to avoid “conveying the impression that London and Washington were ‘ganging up’ on Russia” (Hathaway 1990, 12). In his famous “Iron Curtain” speech attended by President Truman in 1946, former British prime minister Winston Churchill had advocated a renewed alliance between the United States, Britain, and other countries against the Soviet Union; Truman publicly distanced himself from Churchill’s remarks. British ministers and officials continued to believe that an alliance would be a very valuable step but largely dropped the issue because of American disinterest. Canadian decision makers, including external affairs minister Louis St. Laurent and official Escott Reid, in August and September 1947 promoted the creation of a regional self-defense organization but received no concrete reply from their American counterparts. In the United States Hamilton Fish Armstrong, editor of *Foreign Affairs*, called for the creation of a similar institution and Dean Rusk, the State Department official responsible for United Nations affairs, had considered the advantages of a defensive treaty with selected countries. None of these proposals evoked even the hint of a positive response from senior American decision makers (Armstrong 1947; Owendale 1985; Reid 1977).

Until late 1947 American officials saw few advantages to allying formally with Western Europe. American occupation forces remained in Germany and any military threat to Western Europe, therefore, would implicate the United States in the continent’s defense. Military planners feared an alliance would divert resources from the development of new weapons such as atomic bombs and missiles, but the most important reason was that American officials held out the hope that they could reach a comprehensive settlement with the Soviet Union on the security of Europe. During the course of 1946 and especially in 1947 they increasingly came to see Soviet-inspired subversion as the key threat to continental security. The failure of their policy of attempting to cooperate with the Soviet Union led the United States devote more attention to countering the appeals of domestic Communist parties by implementing the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan and encouraging political integration in Western Europe (Trachtenberg 1999, 66).

The final break with the Soviets came at the London conference in December 1947. Marshall and Bevin held out little hope that the meeting would result in success, an expectation that proved correct when the meeting collapsed without any agreements or decisions to meet again. The British, Americans, and more reluctantly the French responded in December 1947 and January 1948 by moving towards the creation of a West German state. American decision makers worried that this step would worsen relations with the Soviets but had few ideas about how the Western powers could counter the expected renewal of Soviet moves. This was certainly the impression of the British team, one of whom wrote in an internal memo at the time that the Americans “have no clear idea of what to do after the Conference if it ends in deadlock” (quoted in Deighton 1990, 211).

Bevin’s renewal of the British proposal to form an alliance was thus well-timed to take advantage of the renewed uncertainty in American policymaking circles about the future behavior of the Soviet Union and the best way to provide security for Western Europe. It served to direct American thinking about European security towards the idea of a military alliance and away from other options. As the ensuing debate within the administration and with key members of Congress made clear, other viable steps were proposed that the United States could have taken to achieve the end of securing Western Europe. Some combination of continued Marshall aid, a unilateral presidential guarantee to defend Western Europe, military assistance, and the creation of an alliance with membership limited to Western Europe but supported informally by the United States were all circulated by American officials or members of Congress in the coming months. Bevin’s proposal placed the option of an alliance at the center of the debate.

Bevin followed up with a written proposal in January 1948 to the American and European governments (U.S. Department of State 1974, 4-6). Marshall’s response, in the form of a conversation with and letter to British ambassador Lord Inverchapel, was very supportive of an alliance limited to Western Europe. Marshall felt that a Western European union would be an important step that should be encouraged by the United States, although he remained uncertain if it was best for the United States to join a formal alliance. Marshall wrote, “I wish to see the United States do everything which it properly can in assisting the European nations in bringing a project along this line to fruition” but he preferred to defer consideration of American participation (Henderson 1982, 4-5; see also U.S. Department of State 1974, 8-9). This nonetheless marked something of a change in the American position. Prior to Bevin’s proposal the Americans had rejected outright the idea of an alliance; now,

influenced by his arguments, they would at least consider it.

Marshall's uncertainty about the security benefits of an alliance was reflected in the divided opinions of his senior advisors. All of these officials believed that the Soviet Union posed a threat to Western Europe and thus to American interests, but they differed in their estimations of how successful a military alliance would be in countering this threat. George Kennan, then director of policy planning at the Department of State and Charles Bohlen, the Department's councilor, advocated supporting the Europeans with a unilateral security guarantee and military equipment, but opposed a military alliance as irrelevant for the threat of internal Communist subversion and unnecessarily provocative towards the Soviet Union (Kennan 1967, 398-400).⁷ The Joint Chiefs of Staff and Secretary of Defense James Forrestal worried that an alliance would require the commitment of more military resources to Europe than were currently available (Wiebes and Zeeman 1983). John Hickerson and Theodore Achilles of the State's Office of European Affairs strongly supported the idea of a North Atlantic alliance including the United States and effectively lobbied Marshall throughout early 1948 to commit the United States to it. Their thinking on this issue and their memoranda to Marshall clearly reflect the influence of the British, for they repeat many of the arguments that Bevin had made in person and in writing about the value of an alliance. Their arguments appear to have influenced Marshall's thinking in important ways, but behind them was the influence of Bevin and the British. Before discussing the issue with Bevin, Marshall had effectively opposed the idea of an alliance. He now supported it, at least in principle, on grounds that corresponded quite closely to those that Bevin had advanced. The timing of Marshall's change in position thus supports the contention that Bevin's influence was decisive. Bevin's influence flowed not from access to more or better factual or intelligence information; instead, British officials' past predictions about Soviet behavior were deemed more important. The fact that Bevin, Churchill, and others had long warned the United States about Soviet intentions, and that such an interpretation seems to be an accurate description of actual Soviet behavior, gave British officials particular credibility with their American counterparts (U.S. Department of State 1974, 40-42; Best 1986, 162).

Bevin used every opportunity to impress upon Marshall and other Americans the importance of rapidly concluding a military pact. In late February 1948 he argued that the Communist-led overthrow of the democratically elected government of Czechoslovakia could be repeated in Western Europe (U.S. Department of State 1974, 32-33). On March 8 Inverchapel used what turned out to be an inaccurate rumor of Soviet pressure on Norway to warn

Marshall about the threat of Communist subversion and to repeat Bevin's call for an alliance (U.S. Department of State 1974, 46-48). Three days later Bevin wrote to Marshall to draw his attention to recent Soviet actions against Czechoslovakia, Norway, and Finland, arguing that these demonstrated the necessity of rapidly negotiating an "Atlantic Approaches Pact of Mutual Assistance" that included the United States. He argued that through this "[w]e could at once inspire the necessary confidence to consolidate the West against Soviet infiltration and at the same time inspire the Soviet Government with enough respect for the West to remove temptation from them" (quoted in Cook 1989, 125).

Credibility: The British Commitment to Continental Security

While by early 1948 Marshall and others had begun to show serious support for the proposal to create an alliance with Britain and other European countries, Marshall declined to commit the United States to this objective immediately. Once he had been convinced by Bevin and some of his advisors that an alliance was the best way to ensure European security, his concerns shifted to the possibility that an alliance would lead the Western European states to take few steps to provide for their own defense. In other words, American officials worried that the British and other Europeans were proposing an alliance not because they genuinely saw this as the best policy for all the countries involved, but as a way to manipulate the United States into providing a disproportionate share of the burden of European defense. Bevin and his continental counterparts recognized this concern and took steps to assure the United States that their calls to form an alliance were credible.

The Americans began to communicate to the British that they could not commit to join it until they saw concrete indications that Britain and other European countries would make more significant sacrifices to provide for their security. Achilles (1979) writes that the United States government responded to British and European calls for an alliance with the attitude "[s]how us what you are prepared to do for yourselves and each other and then we will see what we can do" (12). In a conversation with British Ambassador Lord Inverchapel in Washington in mid-January 1948, Hickerson said "The important aspect of this question was, however, that any such concept should be and should give the impression that it is based primarily on European initiative" (quoted in U.S. Department of State 1974, 11). The American desire to see Britain and other European states commit themselves to the defense of the continent is clearly reflected in the discussions between Undersecretary of State Robert Lovett and Inverchapel that took place on January 26, 1948.

Bevin instructed Inverchapel to propose to Lovett that the United States “consider with Great Britain entering into a general commitment to go to war with an aggressor and reinforce the Western European defense project.” Lovett replied that such a commitment would amount to a military alliance and that the United States was unwilling to consider such a pledge before the Europeans themselves had taken steps in this direction, arguing that the British request amounted to “in effect asking us to pour concrete before we see the blueprints” (U.S. Department of State 1974, 21-23; see also Henderson 1982, 7-8). He went on to hint that the United States would consider it if the Europeans committed themselves first, writing to Inverchapel after their meeting that “[w]hen there is evidence of unity with a firm determination to effect an arrangement under which the various European countries are prepared to act in concert to defend themselves, the U.S. will carefully consider the part it might appropriately play in support of such a Western Union” (U.S. Department of State 1974, 17-18).

Bevin already had concluded that his appeals for American support would fall on deaf ears until he could convince the British government as well as the governments of other European countries to take the concrete steps the United States was demanding. He thus focused his attention in January and February 1948 on negotiating a military alliance with the other Western European states, the Western Union, and revising British military doctrine to hold that British forces would be committed in larger numbers to the defense of continental Europe. Bevin knew that the European countries could not defend themselves against a Soviet invasion, but saw a Western Union as a way to demonstrate to the Americans his country’s commitment to this goal. Gladwyn Jebb (1972), the foreign office official responsible for negotiating the pact, later summarized Bevin’s thinking in the following terms: “[w]hat seemed certain was that the more the Europeans showed willing, the more the Americans were likely to do” (214).

This first tack of Bevin’s diplomacy resulted in the signing of the Brussels Pact and creation of the Western Union alliance by Britain, France, and the Benelux countries on March 17. The Brussels Pact marked an important change in Britain’s diplomatic commitment to European security, a change that is clear when the pact’s provisions are compared with those of the Anglo-French Dunkirk Treaty signed 1947. The Dunkirk Treaty committed Britain to the defense of France, but Bevin had been careful to limit the treaty’s specific commitments as much as possible. The Dunkirk Treaty identified only Germany as the aggressor against which it was aimed; pledged that Britain would come to France’s aid only in the event of a direct attack, rather

than the looser “menace” that the French preferred; and did not require that the British and French engage in staff talks to plan for war. In other words, the Dunkirk Treaty merely involved a British promise to come to France’s aid in the case of direct attack—a step the British surely would have taken without the existence of such a treaty (Greenwood 1983). In contrast, the Brussels Pact committed Britain to come to the assistance of France as well as the Benelux countries, did not restrict the conditions under which such military aid could be offered, did not limit the aggressors against which British forces could be used, and included provisions for staff talks among the signatories.

Bevin’s second tack was to revise Britain’s war-fighting doctrine to give priority to defending Western Europe. He intended this change to serve as a signal to the Americans that Britain was committed to contributing in important ways to the immediate defense of the continent. Before January 1948 British strategy in case of Soviet attack called for a rapid withdrawal of occupation forces from Germany and counterattacks by air from bases in Britain and the Middle East. Military planners and senior political figures, including the prime minister, had agreed to this strategy on the grounds that Britain could not mobilize sufficient ground forces to hold off the Soviets effectively. In a meeting with prime minister Clement Atlee on 6 February, Bevin and Field Marshall Montgomery, then the chief of the Imperial General Staff, argued that a commitment to the defense of the continent was necessary for political reasons. Atlee was initially skeptical of this approach but was persuaded by Bevin’s argument that such a change would be they keystone of the Western Union and would convince the United States to commit itself to Europe. By March 17 the Chiefs of Staff had outlined a new strategy that replaced defense of the Middle East with the defense of continental Europe as the country’s top priority in a war with the Soviet Union (Montgomery 1958).

American military and diplomatic officials were well informed about these changes. British military officials coordinated their war plans with American counterparts in April 1948 after the Czech coup led to fears of Soviet military moves against western Germany. The British committed their existing forces on the continent to remain and fight rather than immediately withdraw, as had been envisioned in earlier plans. Updated British war plans, communicated to Americans in discussions in July, declared that the British aim was now to stop invasion on the continent (Best 1986, 180-85). On April 30 the Western Union states formed a military committee to coordinate strategy. The clear goal in taking this step was to convince American government and congressional leaders that European states were working to provide for their own security. The British asked that the Military Committee invite American

observers to its meetings in London. The conclusion of the military committee's preliminary work in June stated that the countries were committed to mobilizing their military resources jointly to contain the threat of a Soviet invasion.

The Outcome

The negotiation of the Brussels Pact and the shift in British military strategy had an immediate influence on American policy. Marshall replied positively the day after Bevin requested talks on the creation of an Atlantic Approaches Pact of Mutual Assistance, suggesting that negotiations could begin in Washington within the week. This was shortly after the commitment in British military strategy to have as a goal the defense of continental Europe, rather than a retreat to the British Isles and Middle East. It also came six days after the start of talks on the Brussels Pact between the Western European countries. On March 17, the same day that the Brussels Pact was signed, President Truman delivered the most positive public statement to date on the question of a military alliance, stating in an address before Congress that "[t]his development [the Brussels pact] deserves our full support. I am confident that the United States will, by appropriate means, extend to the free nations the support which the situation requires" (*Congressional Record* 1948, 2996-98).

A more concrete American commitment came in the secret talks conducted at the Pentagon between the United States, Britain, and Canada from March 22 to April 1. At the conclusion of these talks the American representative, Hickerson, agreed to negotiate a formal alliance to include Western Europe, North America, and North Atlantic states (U.S. Department of State 1974, 72-75). Hickerson was quick to add that this was not a formal commitment to ally but "only a concept of what is desired at the working level, and that British expectations should be based on nothing more than this" (quoted in Best 1986, 165). However, substantial evidence suggests that the Pentagon talks marked a high-level American commitment to proceed with the creation of an alliance and that the subsequent delay in opening formal talks with European countries and ratification of the treaty in 1949 were driven by the administration's desire to build support for it in Congress and avoid injecting the proposal into the 1948 presidential election campaign. Escott Reid (1977, 99) and Gladwyn Jebb (1972, 215), who were members of the Canadian and British delegations to the Pentagon talks, imply that American officials insisted on keeping the talks secret and treating the resulting agreement as an informal working document not because they were unconvinced by the argument for alliance or internally divided on this question, but so that the

administration could go to Congress and build support for the idea before revealing that talks had taken place. Lovett met with British and French ambassadors on April 19 and asked them “not to nurse the impression that the US were backing away from their previous standpoint [in the Pentagon agreement]. It was a question of the best way of presentation from the point of view of the US Congress and public opinion” (Forrestal 1951, 423-24). Secretary of Defense James Forrestal’s diary for April 22 indicates that senior American decision makers had decided to support conclusions of the Pentagon agreement. His entry summarizes a discussion in the National Security Council in which Lovett outlined tactics for gaining domestic and Congressional support for a security treaty: “to have action initiated by the Republicans and to have the ball picked up immediately by the President, who would state his interest in the plan . . .” (Forrestal 1951, 423-24). This is exactly what happened. Marshall and Lovett met with Republican senator Vandenberg and John Foster Dulles, then still in private practice but an important Republican voice on foreign policy issues, and all agreed on the idea of military alliance. They also agreed to secure support for such a step by having Vandenberg introduce a Senate resolution supporting European security efforts before having the Brussels Pact countries approach the President about forming an alliance and having the President agree to open negotiations. On June 11 the Senate passed the *Vandenberg Resolution* which advocated “association of the United States, by constitutional processes, with such regional and other collective arrangements as are based on continuous and effective self-help and mutual aid” (U.S. Senate 1985). On June 23 the United States announced to the Brussels Pact countries that it was willing to open secret negotiations one week later. Negotiators completed a draft treaty in September and the Senate ratified it in 1949 after the conclusion of the 1948 elections (Best 1986, 168-72; Wiebes and Zeeman 1983, 361-63).

Alternative Explanations

The most widely accepted explanation for the formation of alliances is that states ally to balance against the rising power or threat posed by another state (Walt 1988; Waltz 1979). Many historical accounts hold that the perception of a Soviet threat motivated the decision to form the alliance. Henrikson (1982) argues that the United States was unwilling to enter an alliance until a series of crises—the Communist overthrow of the democratic government of Czechoslovakia in late February 1948, allegations of Soviet pressure on Norway and Finland in March 1948, and most importantly the

Berlin crisis beginning in June 1948—led decision makers to conclude that alliance was the best way to maintain American influence on Europe.

At some fundamental level the American decision to ally was motivated by the perception of a Soviet threat. However, this perception seems to have had relatively little to do with concrete Soviet actions in late 1947 and early 1948. Many of the threatening events mentioned previously took place after the American decision to negotiate the North Atlantic Treaty in late March 1948, and this list of events overlooks a number of simultaneous perceived setbacks for the Soviets, such as failure in late 1947 of Communist-inspired strikes in France and Italy to bring down pro-American governments and the victory of the Christian Democrats in the Italian election of April 1948. American decision makers' response to the question of alliance was much more of a response to Bevin's call for such a step than to an objectively higher level of Soviet threat. Bevin was able to get some of his American counterparts to conclude that such a threat existed and that an alliance, rather than the other steps they considered, was the most effective response.

A second explanation of British influence over the American decision to negotiate the North Atlantic Treaty draws attention to the country's bargaining power. States that have viable options to provide for their security outside of an alliance have greater bargaining power to extract concessions from other potential alliance members (Snyder 1997). Britain did have significant material capabilities that made it a useful ally of the United States, including a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, intelligence capabilities, a stable political system, large military forces, and the willingness to spend more on defense than most other European countries (Buchan 1976). However, the United States had a much wider range of options open to it than did Britain. While British decision makers saw an alliance with the United States as the only way to provide a reasonable degree of security against the Soviet Union, American decision makers were able to and did seriously consider not allying with Western Europe. Furthermore, Britain's relative bargaining power did not change in value significantly between the time when Bevin proposed a security treaty in December 1947 and the time the United States accepted this proposal some three months later, leaving it unclear how such bargaining power convinced American decision makers to ally with Western Europe.

Theories of persuasion based on constructivism would seem to be the most powerful way to explain this ability to get American decision makers to redefine the threats they faced and their preferred foreign policy actions, but a constructivist account of persuasion in this case encounters two empirical difficulties. According to the constructivist account, persuasion is most likely

to be successful when the persuader draws on values shared with the target. Bevin's initial approach to Marshall in December 1947 drew heavily on shared values. Bevin called for the creation of an informal "spiritual federation of the west" among countries that shared democratic political institutions and practices. This appeal to common values was not meaningless rhetoric, but instead shaped the content of Bevin's proposal in important ways. He argued that participation by Spain and western Germany would be crucial for the success of this "federation," but concluded that they could not be invited to join until the restoration of democracy was complete. Bevin's attempt to persuade based on shared values and norms seems to have had little effect on the Americans. Marshall's response to Bevin's argument in December 1947 was that precisely because it was based on such general values it was too vague to serve as a guide to action. It was only when the British proposals dropped the discussion of a "spiritual federation" and called for the creation of a straightforward military alliance in January 1948 that the Americans took them seriously. Another empirical difficulty is that regular and institutionalized consultation out of the public eye, a variable that constructivist accounts of persuasion identify as important, does not vary during this time period. British and American decision makers did discuss issues of common concern very frequently in public and private during this period, and British diplomats were envied by their continental counterparts—particularly the French—for their access to Washington. Such institutionalized consultation may have made British attempts at persuasion more likely to succeed than similar attempts from other countries, but it cannot alone explain why British calls for an alliance were ignored by American decision makers until early 1948 but picked up quickly thereafter. The third variable emphasized by constructivist theories of persuasion, the target's uncertainty, does vary in this case. This variable is conceptually very similar to the role of *information* in the rationalist theory of persuasion developed here. The key difference between a rationalist and constructivist account of persuasion in this case is the second necessary condition identified by the rationalist account, the *credibility* of the persuader. American decision makers only accepted Britain's call for an alliance in late March or early April 1948, after the British had convinced them with the Brussels pacts and preliminary plans to defend Europe that they shared the goals of a transatlantic alliance and were willing to take steps to achieve these goals. This change in British policy was the key to securing American acceptance of the alliance proposal, but it is not identified as causally important for successful persuasion by constructivist theory. While the constructivist and rationalist understandings of persuasion are compatible rather than

competing, in this case rationalism can explain an episode of persuasion that constructivism cannot. This indicates that the two explanations are tapping quite different causal pathways through which persuasion can occur.

Conclusion

Two challenges remain for those who take seriously the goal of explaining changes in ideas and beliefs in international politics. In recent years an implicit division of labor has developed in theorizing about international politics wherein theories based on constructivism explore the role of ideas and those based on rationalist premises seek other sorts of explanations. This division needs to be reconsidered. The theory of persuasion developed here is clearly rationalist in origin, yet it explains ideational phenomena. To date constructivists have not taken seriously the possibility that theories based on rationalist premises might rival or complement their own theories, instead evaluating constructivist theories of behavior against alternatives that do not treat ideas and beliefs as important. Influential strands of rationalist thinking have important things to say about ideas and beliefs, and our understanding of their role in international politics will be stronger if we supplement constructivist approaches with insights drawing on rationalism as well.

Additionally, an important limitation of the theory of persuasion developed here is that while it may explain changes in beliefs over which polices will allow the target to achieve its objectives most effectively, it cannot explain why the target prefers some objectives to others. The rationalist theory of strategic communication I draw on brackets the sources of preferences over outcomes, although other rationalist theories seek to explain the origins of such preferences (Moravcsik 1997). Constructivist theories of ideational change may be on strongest ground when they address the sources of preferences over outcomes, particularly those which have a strong basis in actors' more fundamental ideas about right and wrong and their self-identities.

These theoretical conclusions have implications for how the United States and other countries deal with contemporary threats to their security. The United States government identifies states developing weapons of mass destruction or sponsoring terrorism as key threats to its security. American policymakers in the Clinton and Bush administrations have described such countries as "rogue states" or members of an "axis of evil." The United States shares few, if any, political values with these countries and has sought to minimize institutionalized ties by isolating these countries in international organizations and by cutting formal diplomatic relations. American

policymakers also have seen fundamental change in the nature of the internal characteristics of their foes, such as their transformation into capitalist democracies, as the only basis on which to base stable and peaceful relations. This approach is broadly consistent with the constructivist understanding of persuasion. Since the United States shares few values or institutionalized ties with its foes, persuasion is unlikely to succeed. Instead, the interests of the United States are best served by confrontation. In contrast, I would argue that opportunities may exist for successful persuasion by the United States of the countries it identifies as enemies. Rationalist theory holds that such attempts at persuasion should succeed when the persuader has credible information and common interests with the target regardless of any shared values or institutionalized ties. If the United States can identify some common interests with its enemies—such as the common desire to prevent a mutually destructive armed conflict—and holds pertinent information—such as inside knowledge of the true preferences of third states—it may be able to persuade them rather than coerce them into changing their behavior.

Notes

¹ For further reading on rhetorical action, see Schimmelfennig (2003); on heresthetics, see Riker (1986).

² The line of inquiry based on the work of Habermas holds in principle that all the actors' identities, preferences, and beliefs may be redefined through interaction and communication. In practice, empirical work in this tradition has focused on how one actor (or group of actors) attempts to change the cognitions of another. See also the case studies in Risse (2000).

³ One major difference concerns the role of audiences in persuasion. The approach based on Habermas sees arguing and persuasion as most effective when it occurs before an audience, while the social psychology approach holds that private, bilateral communication facilitates persuasion.

⁴ The seminal formal paper is Vincent Crawford and Joel Sobel's (1982) "Strategic Information Transmission." Other works that apply limited information game theory to international politics include Fearon (1995), Morrow (1994), Powell (2000), Schultz (2001), Werner (1998), and Zagare and Kilgour (2004).

⁵ Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 55-58) conclude that persuasion is more likely to succeed even when the persuader and target do not share similar preferences over outcomes if the persuader's causal statements can be verified by a neutral and knowledgeable observer or the persuader suffers penalties for lying. Neither of these conditions is likely to be met in the anarchic environment of international politics which lacks authorities above the state that can verify causal statements or punish states that dissemble.

⁶ Important works with different perspectives on this issue are Alperovitz (1965), Gaddis (1982 and 1997), and Offner (2002).

⁷ Bohlen (1973) does not mention this opposition to an alliance in his memoirs but it comes out clearly in the documentary record. See U.S. Department of State (1974, 108-9).

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