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THE RISE OF SHADOW ALLIANCES: INFORMAL SECURITY COOPERATION IN A POST-ALLIANCE WORLD

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Abstract

In a world where formal alliances are increasingly questioned and multilateral frameworks show signs of erosion, states are quietly forging new paths to manage insecurity. This article introduces the concept of shadow alliances—informal security arrangements that operate without treaties, institutions, or public oversight. These alliances rely instead on personalized diplomacy, strategic ambiguity, and deniable cooperation.

By examining four distinct cases—Türkiye–Qatar, Russia–Africa, Israel–Gulf, and the U.S.–India–Japan axis—this study traces how informal partnerships have become functional tools of influence and survival in a fragmented global order. Using a qualitative comparative method and drawing from theories of hedging, networked security, and neoclassical realism, the article maps the structural and normative features of these alliances.

The findings show that shadow alliances are not temporary fixes but long-term strategies that reflect both systemic pressures and regime-specific needs. While they offer flexibility and responsiveness, they also raise critical concerns: the erosion of accountability, the role of private military actors, and the decline of institutional norms in global security governance.

The article calls for a renewed scholarly conversation around alliance theory, one that accounts for the rise of informal cooperation in the gray zones of world politics. It also proposes policy frameworks to address the legal and ethical gaps shadow alliances leave behind.

Keywords: *Shadow Alliances, Informal Security, Strategic Ambiguity, Hedging, Global Order, Alliance Theory, Türkiye-Qatar, Russia-Africa.*

GİZLİ İTTİFAKLARIN YÜKSELİŞİ: İTTİFAKLAR SONRASI DÜNYADA GAYRİ RESMİ GÜVENLİK İŞ BİRLİĞİ

Öz

Resmi ittifakların giderek daha fazla sorgulandığı ve çok taraflı çerçevelerin aşınma belirtileri gösterdiği bir dünyada, devletler sessizce güvensizliği yönetmek için yeni yollar açıyor. Bu makale, anlaşmalar, kurumlar veya kamu denetimi olmadan işleyen gayri resmi güvenlik düzenlemeleri olan gölge ittifaklar kavramını tanıtıyor. Bu ittifaklar bunun yerine kişiselleştirilmiş diplomasiye, stratejik belirsizliğe ve inkar edilebilir işbirliğine dayanıyor.

Bu çalışma, dört farklı vakayı inceleyerek—Türkiye-Katar, Rusya-Afrika, İsrail-Körfez ve ABD-Hindistan-Japonya ekseni—parçalanmış bir küresel düzende gayri resmi ortaklıkların nasıl işlevsel etki ve hayatta kalma araçları haline geldiğini izliyor. Niteliksel karşılaştırmalı bir yöntem kullanarak ve riskten korunma, ağa bağlı güvenlik ve neoklasik gerçekçilik teorilerinden yararlanarak, makale bu ittifakların yapısal ve normatif özelliklerini haritalandırıyor.

Bulgular, gölge ittifakların geçici çözümler değil hem sistemik baskıları hem de rejime özgü ihtiyaçları yansıtan uzun vadeli stratejiler olduğunu gösteriyor. Esneklik ve duyarlılık sunarken, aynı zamanda kritik endişeleri de gündeme getiriyorlar: hesap verebilirliğin aşınması, özel askeri aktörlerin rolü ve küresel güvenlik yönetişiminde kurumsal normların gerilemesi.

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Makale, dünya politikasının gri bölgelerinde gayri resmi iş birliğinin yükselişini hesaba katan ittifak teorisi etrafında yenilenmiş bir akademik tartışma çağrısında bulunuyor. Ayrıca, gölge ittifakların geride bıraktığı yasal ve etik boşlukları ele almak için politika çerçeveleri öneriyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Gölge İttifaklar, Gayri Resmi Güvenlik, Stratejik Belirsizlik, Riskten Korunma, Küresel Düzen, İttifak Teorisi, Türkiye-Katar, Rusya-Afrika.*

Introduction

In today's shifting international landscape, formal alliances are facing an undeniable legitimacy crisis. As institutional frameworks stagnate and power transitions accelerate, states increasingly turn to informal, flexible, and often opaque partnerships to manage security threats and project influence. These arrangements—what this study terms **shadow alliances**—do not rest on treaties, organizational rules, or mutual defense clauses. Instead, they function through personalized diplomacy, strategic ambiguity, and deniable coordination.

While traditional alliance theories, such as those advanced by Walt (1987) and Snyder (1997), focus on clearly defined formal alliances embedded in legal and institutional architecture, they fall short in explaining the proliferation of informal and ad hoc security collaborations in the current era. The academic literature continues to privilege institutional permanence over strategic improvisation, thereby overlooking the very real security arrangements that operate beyond the treaty framework (Lake, 2007; Acharya, 2014).

This conceptual gap is not merely academic—it carries policy implications. As informal cooperation becomes a routine feature of international security, understanding how and why states engage in these alignments is crucial. In particular, this study asks: **How do states strategically employ shadow alliances to manage uncertainty, extend influence, and circumvent the constraints of formal commitments?**

Drawing on the concepts of hedging (He, 2009), networked security (Taniguchi, 2021), and strategic ambiguity, this article redefines shadow alliances as a distinct form of international alignment. These alliances are not anomalies; they are adaptive tools crafted by states operating in a fragmented global order characterized by multipolarity, ideological divergence, and regional insecurity (Haass, 2008; Lind, 2019).

To explore this argument, the article conducts a comparative case study of four prominent shadow alliances: Türkiye–Qatar, Russia–Africa, Israel–Gulf States, and the U.S.–India–Japan axis. While differing in structure and intent, these cases reveal common logics of informal coordination, functional ambiguity, and asymmetrical dependence.

This article proceeds as follows. The next section offers a conceptual clarification of shadow alliances and distinguishes them from related terms such as hedging and soft balancing. The third section outlines the methodological approach and case selection. The fourth section analyzes the four cases in detail. The final sections discuss theoretical implications and policy considerations for navigating a world increasingly shaped by informal security cooperation.

1. Conceptual Framework: Defining Shadow Alliances in Contemporary Security Studies

The concept of alliances has traditionally referred to formal institutions grounded in treaties, shared defense clauses, and institutionalized commitments. Classical alliance theories, such as those developed by Walt (1987) and Snyder (1997), emphasize threat perception, common interests, and formal alignment. However, these frameworks struggle to capture the recent proliferation of informal, flexible, and often opaque security partnerships that operate beyond the confines of traditional diplomacy.

This study introduces the concept of shadow alliances as a distinct form of informal security cooperation. Shadow alliances are defined by three core characteristics: (1) the absence of legally binding treaties or institutional mechanisms, (2) strategic ambiguity and plausible deniability, and (3) reliance on personalized leader-to-leader diplomacy rather than bureaucratic coordination. These arrangements enable states to project power, manage threats, or hedge against rivals without committing to formalized alliances or being subjected to public scrutiny.

While shadow alliances share some features with informal cooperation or hedging, they are conceptually distinct. Informal cooperation typically involves ad hoc or tactical alignment without long-term strategic convergence (Pahre, 2009). Hedging aims to avoid commitment by balancing between competing powers without clear alignment (He, 2009; Kuik, 2008). Shadow alliances, by contrast, reflect intentional yet unacknowledged convergence on strategic goals, often sustained over time and enabled by personal networks.

Similarly, networked security denotes horizontal multilateralism and mutual risk distribution in a more transparent and rules-based manner (Taniguchi, 2021). Shadow alliances, however, are often bilateral or trilateral, asymmetrical, and opaque—allowing authoritarian or hybrid regimes to circumvent institutional checks (Way, 2015) while preserving maneuverability.

Theoretically, the phenomenon aligns with neoclassical realism, which integrates systemic and domestic-level variables—especially elite perceptions and regime preferences

(Lobell & Ripsman, 2010). Shadow alliances allow regimes to externalize security strategies in a politically deniable manner, often bypassing legislative oversight or international accountability (Chesterman, 2016).

Furthermore, shadow alliances embody a normative shift in alliance politics. As Acharya (2014) argues, the erosion of a U.S.-led liberal order has led to "multiplexity" in global alignments. Shadow alliances exemplify this trend by providing functional substitutes to formal institutions in an increasingly fragmented world (Medcalf, 2020).

As summarized in Table 1, shadow alliances differ significantly from other informal alignments in their formality, visibility, strategic logic, and institutional architecture.

Dimension	Shadow Alliance	Informal Cooperation	Hedging	Networked Security
Formality	No treaty; no institutionalization	Task-based coordination	Strategic ambiguity	Loosely institutionalized multilateral ties
Visibility	Deliberately opaque and often denied	Moderately public	Ambiguous and publicly neutral	High transparency and shared norms
Strategic Logic	Covert alignment with plausible deniability	Tactical coordination	Avoiding entrapment or abandonment	Mutual resilience and multilateral signaling
Power Dynamics	Asymmetrical; leader-to-leader personalization	Varied	Balancing without binding	Symmetrical or polycentric
Examples	Türkiye –Qatar, Russia–Africa, Israel–Gulf States	France–UAE naval drills, U.S.–Vietnam ties	Southeast Asia's posture toward U.S.–China	Quad; PESCO; ASEAN-led platforms

Table 1: Comparing Shadow Alliances with Other Informal Security Arrangements.
Acharya (2014); He (2009); Kuik (2008); Lobell & Ripsman (2010); Medcalf (2020);
Taniguchi (2021); Walt (1987)

While shadow alliances reflect a realist tendency toward strategic flexibility, they simultaneously expose the limitations of liberal institutionalist assumptions. Keohane's (1984) argument that institutions reduce uncertainty and promote cooperation through legal commitments and transparency does not hold in the context of informal partnerships. Rather than seeking predictability through rules, shadow alliances thrive on ambiguity and deniability—characteristics that defy the liberal expectation of norm-based governance. As NATO's fragmented response in Ukraine and the UN's paralysis in Syria and Sudan demonstrate, formal institutions often lag behind rapidly shifting security demands, thereby incentivizing informal security arrangements outside the multilateral framework (Keohane, 1984; Patrick, 2015).

Moreover, the logic of shadow alliances resonates with the framework of securitization theory. According to Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (1998), when an issue is framed as an existential threat, it legitimizes extraordinary measures beyond normal politics. Informal security pacts, such as Russia's use of Wagner in Africa or Türkiye's rapid military deployment to Qatar, exemplify this logic. These arrangements bypass legislative oversight and legal formalization by invoking crisis narratives and regime survival imperatives. In this sense, shadow alliances operate within a "gray zone" of securitized exception, where urgency overrides institutional legitimacy. Thus, the rise of shadow alliances signals not just a structural shift in alliance behavior, but also a deeper transformation in the grammar of global security governance.

Bridging classic and new alliance theory. Classic realism (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997) treats alliances as formal, deterrence-oriented contracts shaped by external threats. Newer approaches—hedging (He, 2009; Kuik, 2008), soft balancing, omnibalancing, and informal governance—emphasize ambiguity, executive discretion, and audience costs at home. Shadow alliances combine these logics: realist in purpose (security and leverage) but informal in form (leader-level ties, deniability). They also fit neoclassical realism by foregrounding elite perceptions, regime incentives, and state capacity as filters between systemic pressures and policy choices.

What shadow alliances are not. Unlike classic balancing, they rarely include mutual defense clauses. Unlike hedging, they are not merely "wait-and-see" postures; they involve concrete, recurring security behaviors (training, basing, ISR sharing, arms/tech transfers) coordinated informally over time. Unlike networked security, they avoid transparent, rules-based coordination and deliberately keep institutional thickness low.

2. Methodology and Case Selection

This study employs a qualitative, comparative case study methodology, guided by an interpretivist epistemological stance. Given the limited transparency surrounding informal security arrangements, particularly those classified as shadow alliances, qualitative methods offer the best lens through which to understand their emergence, strategic logic, and political effects (George & Bennett, 2005; Yin, 2014).

The study draws on process tracing and pattern matching to identify common mechanisms underlying shadow alliances. Data sources include a combination of:

• government statements and communiqués,

• official defense agreements (when available),

• speeches by key political leaders,

• investigative journalistic reports,

• expert analyses, and

• international organization records.

Such triangulation is crucial, given the methodological opacity surrounding "plausibly deniable" security ties (Chesterman, 2016). In particular, fieldwork limitations and access barriers to classified intelligence or private military operations (e.g., Wagner Group deployments) necessitate caution. Therefore, this study does not claim full empirical exhaustiveness but rather seeks analytic generalizability through comparative conceptual clarity (Kapiszewski, MacLean, & Read, 2015).

Explicit Case Selection Criteria: Cases were chosen via a four-step screen:

(1) Informality test;

(2) Functional depth test;

(3) Deniability/ambiguity test;

(4) Variance test (MDSD). Eligible cases ranked by data tractability to ensure process tracing feasibility.

2.1. Case Selection Rationale

The study adopts a **most different systems design** (MDSD), selecting four cases that vary across geography, regime type, alliance history, and great power alignment. Yet they all demonstrate durable patterns of informal but strategic security cooperation-hallmarks of shadow alliances.

- **Türkiye–Qatar**: An example of bilateral elite-driven alignment under shared ideological identity and regional ambition (Keyman, 2017; Roberts, 2017).

- **Russia–Africa**: Illustrates state–nonstate hybrid cooperation (e.g., Wagner), expanding Moscow's influence via deniable security provision (Ramani, 2020; Souleimanov & Abrahamyan, 2021).

- **Israel–Gulf States**: Reveals clandestine normalization and intelligence cooperation in the absence of formal treaties (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020; Yaari, 2015).

- **U.S.–India–Japan (The Quad)**: Demonstrates multilateral informal cooperation with evolving institutional features and networked security ambitions (Mohan, 2021; Medcalf, 2020).

This diversity strengthens the study's claim that shadow alliances are not **anomalies** or **transitional phenomena**, but rather **adaptive strategic tools** tailored to a post-alliance world order (Acharya, 2014; Walt, 1987).

2.2. Case Selection Rationale

This study adopts a Most Different Systems Design (MDSD) approach to illuminate how shadow alliances function across diverse geopolitical and institutional settings. By selecting cases that differ significantly in geography, regime type, strategic culture, and institutional alignment, the analysis tests the proposition that informal security cooperation emerges as a systemic response to alliance fatigue and institutional voids.

The four cases—Türkiye–Qatar, Russia–Africa (specifically the Central African Republic), Israel–Gulf (UAE and Bahrain), and the U.S.–India–Japan trilateral axis—were deliberately chosen to reflect this variation. Türkiye and Qatar are middle powers with Islamic political identities and divergent military traditions. Russia's engagement with African states relies heavily on non-state proxies like Wagner, operating in post-colonial fragile states with

minimal formal institutions. Israel and the Gulf monarchies represent ideologically distant yet converging actors under U.S. security umbrellas. The U.S.–India–Japan triangle, meanwhile, brings together democracies with formal alliance asymmetries in the Indo-Pacific context.

Despite these differences, all four exhibit key attributes of shadow alliances: informal coordination, deniable cooperation, and strategic ambiguity. This variation across system types strengthens the study's internal validity and supports theory-building on the adaptability of informal alliances in a post-hegemonic world (George & Bennett, 2005; Pahre, 2009).

Moreover, these cases were selected based on data availability from open-source reports, policy documents, think-tank publications, and scholarly articles. The Central African Republic was prioritized over other African cases (e.g., Mali) due to the clearer documentation of Russian paramilitary involvement (UNSC, 2023; Martínez, 2022), making it a representative and data-rich instance of shadow alliance behavior.

The comparative value of this research is further enhanced by the significant variation in regime type, alliance formality, and institutional embeddedness, as illustrated in Table 2.

Case	Region	Regime Type	Alliance Tradition	Strategic Actor Type	Institutional Coverage
Türkiye–Qatar	Middle East	Competitive authoritarian / Monarchy	Informal alignment (no treaty)	State-to-state	Moderate
Russia–Africa (CAR)	Sub-Saharan Africa	Authoritarian / Fragile state	No formal alliance	State–non-state (Wagner)	Low
Israel–Gulf (UAE/Bahrain)	Middle East	Democracy / Monarchies	U.S.-linked informal cooperation	State-to-state	High
U.S.–India–Japan	Indo-Pacific	Democracies	Formal + informal trilateralism	State-to-state	High

Table 2 Key Variation Across Selected Cases

Explanation:

- **Region:** Indicates geographical diversity.

- **Regime Type:** Highlights the differences in political regime types.

- **Alliance Tradition:** Refers to alliance history and the degree of legal formality.

- **Strategic Actor Type:** Identifies whether non-state actors (such as Wagner) are involved.

- **Institutional Coverage:** Assesses the extent to which cooperation is institutionalized (high/low).

2.3. Data Collection and Analytical Techniques

This study relies on a qualitative, comparative case study method to investigate the structure and dynamics of shadow alliances across different geopolitical contexts. Data were collected from multiple sources to ensure triangulation and validity. These include official government documents, policy papers, academic articles, expert interviews, international organization reports (e.g., UN, NATO), and reputable media coverage. Primary data was supported by secondary literature that contextualizes informal security cooperation within broader alliance theories and regional power politics (George & Bennett, 2005; Kapiszewski et al., 2015; Yin, 2014).

The analytical framework employed combines process tracing and interpretive content analysis. Process tracing was used to identify causal mechanisms across cases, especially in terms of how informal cooperation evolved over time and under what conditions it solidified. For example, in the Türkiye–Qatar case, diplomatic timelines and defense agreements were chronologically mapped to trace their increasing alignment after the Arab Spring (Roberts, 2017; Ulutaş, 2013). In contrast, the Russia–Africa (CAR) case demanded a hybrid analytical approach due to the involvement of opaque non-state actors like the Wagner Group, requiring more reliance on investigative reports and NGO documentation (Sukhankin, 2019; Martínez, 2022).

Content analysis was applied to elite statements, strategic agreements, and media narratives to examine discursive frames of ambiguity, alignment, and denial. This helped capture the normative justifications and strategic ambiguity that often surround shadow alliances, especially in non-democratic regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2020; Taniguchi, 2021).

Patterns of language and framing were compared across cases to identify how different states legitimize informal security cooperation without invoking formal alliance commitments.

Methodologically, the study adopts a "most different systems" design to ensure case variation along regime type, institutionalization level, and geographic scope. This allowed the research to isolate informal alliance dynamics as a common denominator, even in otherwise divergent cases.

However, there are limitations. Access to intelligence data, internal security documents, or closed-door military negotiations remains restricted, especially in authoritarian settings. Moreover, the use of non-state actors such as Wagner in Africa creates challenges for source verification and raises ethical concerns. The study mitigates this by triangulating sources and clearly indicating data uncertainty when present.

Despite these constraints, the multi-source qualitative strategy provides a robust empirical foundation to theorize shadow alliances as an emerging phenomenon in international security.

2.4. Conceptual Limitations and Ethical Reflections

The informal and often opaque nature of shadow alliances presents significant conceptual and ethical challenges for researchers. First, the lack of formal treaties and transparent institutional mechanisms complicates efforts to systematically categorize and compare these alliances across cases. For example, the strategic relationship between Russia and the Central African Republic is largely mediated through private military companies (PMCs) like the Wagner Group, whose operations often escape conventional accountability mechanisms (Souleimanov & Abrahamyan, 2021). This undermines the applicability of traditional alliance theories and necessitates a more flexible, hybrid analytical lens.

Access to reliable data is a further limitation. Many aspects of shadow alliances— including covert financing, unofficial military support, and clandestine diplomacy—remain inaccessible due to their classification or extralegal status. The study addresses this by triangulating multiple open-source datasets, cross-referencing NGO reports, and relying on investigative journalism where academic or official sources are lacking. However, the quality and reliability of such sources vary, and this introduces interpretive risks.

Ethically, the study confronts two key dilemmas. First is the challenge of describing informal alliances without inadvertently legitimizing their legality or moral acceptability. For instance, PMC-led interventions may offer short-term security but often exacerbate long-term governance deficits. Second is the researcher's normative position in interpreting ambiguous

data: while this study strives for analytical neutrality, it acknowledges that the act of framing such alliances as "strategic" may normalize or sanitize coercive practices.

PMCs and the accountability gap. Beyond Wagner, analogous structures (front companies, "training" contractors, defense-tech integrators) let states externalize coercion while diluting command responsibility.

To mitigate these concerns, the analysis emphasizes transparency in source selection and discloses uncertainties where they arise. Future research should explore frameworks for ethical engagement with grey-zone security actors, particularly in regions where formal oversight is weak or absent.

3. Case Studies: Mapping Informal Security Cooperation

This section examines four distinct cases of shadow alliances to highlight variation and convergence in informal security cooperation across regional and strategic contexts. Each case was selected based on its ability to illustrate different forms of strategic ambiguity, functional depth, and normative tensions.

The case studies follow a common analytical framework, focusing on five core dimensions: formality, visibility, functionality, strategic rationale, and democratic accountability. Through this structure, the analysis aims to move beyond anecdotal accounts and toward a typology of informal security behavior in a fragmented world order.

3.1. Türkiye –Qatar: Strategic Flexibility in the Post-Arab Spring Order

The Türkiye–Qatar partnership represents a prototypical case of a shadow alliance formed under conditions of regional upheaval and strategic realignment. Following the 2011 Arab Spring, both Ankara and Doha sought to shape the emerging order in the Middle East by supporting political Islamist movements and opposing counterrevolutionary forces led by the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. However, rather than codifying their cooperation through formal treaties or multilateral institutions, Türkiye and Qatar opted for a flexible, rapidly evolving partnership grounded in mutual threat perceptions and regime compatibility (Ulutaş, 2013; Keyman, 2017).

The strategic depth of the alliance emerged most clearly during the 2017 Gulf Crisis, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade on Qatar. Within days, Türkiye deployed troops to Doha under the terms of a previously dormant 2014 military cooperation agreement, demonstrating the alliance's capacity for swift activation in moments

of crisis (Roberts, 2017). Notably, this support did not arise from any NATO provision or regional defense pact, but from a bilateral commitment cultivated through informal and ideational alignment.

This case reveals several defining traits of shadow alliances. First, the alliance operates without a permanent institutional secretariat or oversight mechanism. Joint military drills and diplomatic coordination exist, but they are not embedded in any legally binding framework (Yörük & Eslen-Ziya, 2019). Second, the alliance is personalized: strong ties between President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Qatari ruling family function as a cornerstone of trust and continuity. Third, strategic ambiguity is preserved: while both sides assert solidarity, neither commits to automatic military intervention or security guarantees. This allows both countries to avoid international entanglements while signaling deterrence to adversaries.

At the normative level, the Türkiye–Qatar partnership challenges conventional alliance theories that prioritize institutionalization, transparency, and multilateralism. Instead, it underscores the salience of identity politics, elite cohesion, and ideational affinity in the formation of contemporary security partnerships. The case also demonstrates the dual-use logic of such alliances: while enhancing regime security and regional clout, they often bypass domestic accountability mechanisms and parliamentary oversight, raising questions about democratic legitimacy (Onis & Yilmaz, 2021).

In sum, the Türkiye–Qatar shadow alliance exemplifies how shared threat perceptions, political ideology, and elite-level diplomacy can sustain informal but durable security cooperation. It provides a model for understanding how non-Western actors navigate a fragmented regional order through ad hoc yet strategically significant partnerships.

3.2. Russia–Africa: Security by Proxy through Private Military Companies

The Russia–Africa shadow alliance is emblematic of an emergent security paradigm in which state actors rely on deniable proxies rather than formal diplomatic or military pacts. In this case, Russia has cultivated security relationships with several African states—notably the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Mali, and Libya—through the deployment of the Wagner Group, a private military company (PMC) with opaque legal status and deep ties to the Russian state (Sukhankin, 2019; Souleimanov & Abrahamyan, 2021).

The Russia–Wagner model reflects a strategic hedging approach. By outsourcing security functions to a non-state entity, Moscow avoids international scrutiny and maintains plausible deniability while achieving foreign policy objectives such as regime protection, resource

extraction, and geopolitical presence (Martínez, 2022). In CAR, Wagner operatives have provided bodyguards to President Touadéra, trained national forces, and secured mining operations, effectively acting as a parallel security infrastructure to the formal state (UNSC, 2023).

Importantly, this shadow alliance lacks any conventional legal codification. Unlike formal alliances, there is no treaty, joint command structure, or parliamentary oversight. The partnership is transactional and asymmetric: Russia provides security and political backing, while the host states grant resource concessions, base access, and diplomatic alignment. This exchange occurs largely outside the purview of international law or multilateral accountability (Ramani, 2020).

The case illustrates the darker dimensions of shadow alliances. While providing immediate regime stability, these arrangements can exacerbate corruption, human rights abuses, and state fragility. Wagner's operations have been linked to extrajudicial killings and illicit exploitation of natural resources, prompting criticism from Western governments and civil society (Bergman, 2021). Yet for embattled African regimes, the Russian offer represents an attractive alternative to Western conditionality and bureaucratic aid regimes.

From a theoretical perspective, the Russia–Africa case challenges liberal institutionalist assumptions about transparency and rule-based order. It underscores how authoritarian regimes construct informal security architectures that prioritize regime survival over liberal norms. The case also raises normative concerns about the erosion of democratic accountability, the proliferation of PMCs, and the collapse of multilateral enforcement mechanisms.

In essence, Russia's shadow alliances in Africa highlight a global trend where great powers engage in strategic influence through informal, opaque, and often coercive means. This model expands the scope of alliance studies to include non-traditional actors and post-colonial dynamics in contemporary security politics

3.3. Israel–Gulf States: From Covert Channels to Open Normalization

The case of Israel and the Gulf States, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, illustrates the transformation of shadow alliances from secretive cooperation into semi-formal diplomatic normalization. For decades, Israel maintained covert security and intelligence ties with several Gulf monarchies, unified by a shared perception of Iran as an existential threat and a mutual interest in curbing Islamist movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas (Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

These shadow relations began crystallizing into tangible alignments during the 2010s, especially as the Iranian nuclear program advanced and U.S. regional commitment became more ambiguous. Israel and Gulf states increased backchannel coordination on cyber intelligence, missile defense, and surveillance technologies (Yaari, 2015). These ties were not institutionalized through treaties but were deeply embedded in elite-level networks, private arms deals, and secret security meetings facilitated by U.S. mediation (Ravid, 2020).

The culmination of this trajectory was the Abraham Accords in 2020—a formal peace agreement that publicly acknowledged a relationship that had long existed in the shadows. However, even after normalization, the alliance retains core traits of a shadow structure. Military cooperation remains selectively disclosed, mutual defense commitments are absent, and institutionalization is deliberately shallow to maintain plausible deniability vis-à-vis domestic and regional audiences (Kamrava, 2021).

Strategically, this case demonstrates how shadow alliances can serve as precursors to formal realignment but may retain informal characteristics due to geopolitical volatility and political sensitivities. The Israel–Gulf partnership, for instance, has not expanded into a NATO-like security bloc despite strong defense cooperation. Instead, it is characterized by bilateralism, techno-military collaboration, and transactional diplomacy, hallmarks of hedging behavior in an uncertain regional environment (Gause, 2020).

Normatively, the case raises concerns about the democratic legitimacy of such cooperation. In both Israel and the Gulf states, security arrangements often bypass legislative scrutiny and are justified under the guise of existential threats. Furthermore, the transactional nature of the alliance may deepen authoritarian resilience in Gulf regimes, where external military ties reinforce internal suppression mechanisms.

In short, the Israel–Gulf shadow alliance reflects a hybrid model: born in secrecy, legalized through diplomacy, yet retaining the flexibility, ambiguity, and elite control that define shadow cooperation. It underscores the fluid boundary between informal and formal alliances and illustrates how strategic necessity can override normative and institutional expectations.

3.4. U.S.–India–Japan: Networked Balancing without Formality

The trilateral relationship among the United States, India, and Japan exemplifies a shadow alliance built on shared strategic concerns—particularly vis-à-vis China's assertive rise—without the formal structure of a traditional alliance. While each dyad within this triangle

maintains bilateral security agreements or dialogues, the trilateral framework lacks any mutual defense treaty, institutional secretariat, or codified obligation (Medcalf, 2020; Revere, 2022).

The logic of this shadow arrangement stems from mutual hedging. The U.S. seeks to counterbalance China without overstretching its commitments, India seeks strategic autonomy while avoiding entangling alliances, and Japan looks to augment its defense posture without violating its pacifist constitution. As a result, the trilateral cooperation emphasizes flexibility, interoperability, and informal coordination, particularly through mechanisms like the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) and joint naval exercises such as Malabar (Grossman, 2020; Taniguchi, 2021).

Unlike traditional alliances, this networked form of security cooperation is defined by issue-specific alignment rather than comprehensive treaty-based commitments. The partners coordinate on Indo-Pacific strategy, maritime domain awareness, supply chain resilience, and cybersecurity, but refrain from formalizing mutual defense obligations (Mohan, 2021). This allows each actor to maintain strategic discretion and minimize domestic political backlash.

From a theoretical standpoint, the U.S.–India–Japan case challenges the binary view of alliance politics as either formal or non-aligned. It demonstrates how shadow alliances can emerge among liberal democracies under the rubric of minilateralism—small-group diplomacy tailored to specific threats and geostrategic needs. Moreover, it reveals how democratic states may also bypass full parliamentary oversight or legal ratification in favor of executive-led strategic convergence.

Normatively, this case raises the question of transparency and accountability. While the absence of formal treaties preserves flexibility, it also limits the scope for public scrutiny and legislative debate, especially in India and Japan. Furthermore, the absence of institutionalized norms could complicate long-term trust and burden-sharing, particularly in scenarios involving regional crises or conflict escalation.

Ultimately, the U.S.–India–Japan shadow alliance demonstrates the utility of informal cooperation in an era of strategic ambiguity and great power competition. It provides a scalable model of networked security that relies on shared interests, convergent threat perceptions, and incremental interoperability—without the political and legal costs of formal treaty obligations.

4. Theoretical Implications and Policy Proposals

Building on the empirical findings and comparative insights presented in the previous sections, this part of the paper explores the broader theoretical and normative consequences of

shadow alliances. Far from being isolated anomalies or ad hoc responses, these informal alignments represent a structural evolution in how states pursue security, manage ambiguity, and navigate fragmented global dynamics. To better grasp this emerging phenomenon, we examine its implications for alliance theory, the role of strategic ambiguity, the formation of hybrid security ecosystems, and the necessary regulatory innovations to enhance legitimacy and oversight.

The rise of shadow alliances presents a timely challenge to established theories of international security and alliance politics. Traditional alliance theory, rooted in realist and liberal institutionalist paradigms, emphasizes formal commitments, institutionalization, and deterrence logic (Walt, 1987; Snyder, 1997; Keohane, 1984). However, the informal, ad hoc, and ideationally driven nature of shadow alliances defies these assumptions, requiring a revision of conceptual tools and policy frameworks.

Shadow alliances operate in a gray zone between formality and alignment, order and ambiguity. They reflect how states—especially in non-Western, post-colonial, or hybrid regimes—navigate power asymmetries, regime survival, and shifting geopolitical landscapes. The following theoretical and policy implications aim to recast our understanding of alliance behavior and suggest ways for international institutions and governments to adapt to this evolving security environment.

4.1. Reconceptualizing Alliance Theory

Shadow alliances compel a rethinking of alliance theory along several lines:

First, they undermine the long-standing assumption that alliances must be codified, treaty-based, or institutionalized to be effective. As demonstrated in the Türkiye–Qatar and Russia–Africa cases, informal alignments can achieve strategic depth without formal treaties— by relying on shared threat perceptions, regime compatibility, and elite trust (He, 2009; Ramani, 2020).

Second, they highlight the growing role of identity politics and regime type in alliance formation. Rather than mere responses to external threats, these alignments are often motivated by domestic political considerations, ideological affinity, or survival strategies of authoritarian or hybrid regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

Third, they suggest that alliances are increasingly shaped by strategic ambiguity and hedging, particularly in multipolar contexts where states seek to avoid entrapment or abandonment. This is particularly evident in the U.S.–India–Japan and Israel–Gulf cases, where

cooperation is high but formal obligations are absent (Mohan, 2021; Guzansky & Marshall, 2020).

Fourth, they expose a geopolitical asymmetry in alliance research. Much of existing theory is based on NATO-style alliances in the Euro-Atlantic context. Shadow alliances, often emerging in the Global South or Indo-Pacific, illustrate the need for more context-sensitive, post-Western analytical frameworks (Acharya, 2014; Medcalf, 2020).

In sum, alliance theory must evolve to incorporate these informal, flexible, and ideational security arrangements. Shadow alliances are not anomalies—they are adaptive responses to a fragmented and competitive global order.

4.2. Enhancing Normative Governance: Legal and Ethical Proposals

While shadow alliances offer strategic flexibility, they often erode democratic accountability and blur the lines of legal responsibility. Their informal and personalized nature tends to bypass institutional checks, parliamentary oversight, and public debate, raising urgent normative and ethical concerns.

First, the use of private military companies (PMCs), such as Wagner in Africa or Türkiye's SADAT, exemplifies the accountability gap in informal alliances. These actors operate in legal gray zones, engaging in combat, training, or political influence without being subject to traditional military command structures or international humanitarian law (Sukhankin, 2019; Martínez, 2022). To address this, the United Nations could initiate a draft convention on PMCs, setting clear guidelines for transparency, accountability, and jurisdiction. This would fill the current normative vacuum and ensure states cannot use informal actors to evade international norms.

Second, national governments should adopt domestic legislative frameworks modeled on instruments like the U.S. War Powers Act, requiring executive branches to disclose and justify foreign deployments or covert military engagements—even those conducted through shadow partnerships. This would enhance transparency without eliminating strategic flexibility.

Third, international organizations—especially NATO, the African Union, and ASEAN—must expand their conceptual mandates to address informal security cooperation. By recognizing and monitoring shadow alliances, these institutions can reduce redundancy, prevent overlap with formal mechanisms, and promote rules-based regional stability (Kamrava, 2021).

Fourth, a "shadow alliance transparency protocol" could be developed by global think tanks or norm-setting institutions like the Geneva Centre for Security Policy. This soft-law initiative would encourage voluntary disclosure of informal partnerships, humanitarian safeguards, and rules of engagement, striking a balance between strategic secrecy and ethical obligations.

In summary, as shadow alliances proliferate, the international community must not only acknowledge their operational utility but also confront their normative risks. Legal innovation, institutional adaptation, and ethical codification are essential steps to ensure that informal security cooperation aligns with the principles of sovereignty, accountability, and international law.

4.3. Strategic Forecasting and Scenario Planning

As global power shifts accelerate and traditional alliance frameworks face internal fractures, shadow alliances are likely to become more prevalent, complex, and consequential. Scenario-based forecasting helps map out the potential trajectories these informal partnerships might follow and assess their broader strategic implications.

Scenario 1: Institutionalization by Stealth

Some shadow alliances may gradually evolve into quasi-formal arrangements. For instance, sustained cooperation in the Türkiye–Qatar or U.S.–India–Japan trilateral axis could lead to the creation of joint task forces, intelligence-sharing platforms, or standing coordination councils. This trajectory would blur the boundary between informal and formal alliances, resulting in "hybridized security regimes" that retain flexibility while assuming limited institutional features (Taniguchi, 2021).

Scenario 2: Proliferation of Proxy Wars

In the absence of formal oversight, shadow alliances may increasingly rely on proxy actors to achieve their goals. The Russia–Africa case illustrates how private military companies like Wagner serve both geopolitical and commercial functions. If left unchecked, similar models may be adopted by other states, fueling proxy conflicts, undermining international law, and expanding unregulated warfare across fragile regions (Souleimanov & Abrahamyan, 2021).

Scenario 3: Informal Alliances Undermining Multilateralism

As more states engage in shadow partnerships to bypass rigid treaties or multilateral processes, formal institutions like the UN, NATO, and the African Union may lose relevance

in managing security cooperation. This could create parallel systems of order—one rule-based, another ad hoc—further fragmenting global governance (Haass, 2008; Acharya, 2014).

Scenario 4: Reactive Legal and Normative Innovation

Growing concern over the unregulated nature of shadow alliances may catalyze international legal responses. Future developments may include revised Geneva Conventions for hybrid warfare, binding treaties on the use of PMCs, or regional codes of conduct for informal military cooperation. Such responses, however, are likely to remain reactive and uneven unless championed by norm entrepreneurs and institutional reformers.

Scenario 5: Strategic Entrenchment and Rival Blocs

Informal alliances could harden into ideologically aligned blocs that challenge existing international orders. The Israel–Gulf normalization, for example, may evolve into a latent security coalition countering Iran and its proxies. Simultaneously, Russia's outreach to African and Middle Eastern regimes may consolidate into a loose anti-Western security network, fostering new Cold War-like dynamics.

These scenarios are not mutually exclusive. In reality, multiple outcomes may unfold in overlapping sequences, driven by changes in leadership, technology, and threat perceptions. For policymakers and scholars alike, scenario planning offers a critical tool for anticipating risks, identifying points of intervention, and reimagining the architecture of global security cooperation.

4.4. Policy Proposals for Governance and Oversight

Shadow alliances, by their very design, often bypass the mechanisms of democratic accountability and public oversight that typically accompany formal treaties and multilateral security arrangements. While they offer strategic flexibility and operational speed, they also raise significant normative questions about the erosion of transparency, the marginalization of parliaments, and the potential misuse of executive power.

In liberal democracies, such as the United States or Israel, informal arrangements may occur without congressional or Knesset approval, allowing leaders to execute high-stakes security policies with minimal domestic scrutiny (Chesterman, 2016). In hybrid regimes like Türkiye or Russia, these alliances become tools for executive aggrandizement, often shielded from legislative debate and judicial review (Levitsky & Way, 2020).

The democratic deficit inherent in shadow alliances is exacerbated when private military companies (PMCs) or intelligence-sharing agreements operate in legal gray zones. The Wagner Group's involvement in Africa, for example, highlights how security cooperation can proceed with minimal civilian control, operating in spaces where neither international nor domestic law offers sufficient guardrails (Sukhankin, 2019).

To address these concerns, normative frameworks must go beyond calls for "transparency protocols." Concrete mechanisms are needed, such as international conventions regulating PMCs, national legislation mandating disclosure of informal defense pacts, and multilateral peer-review platforms similar to the OECD's anti-corruption frameworks.

Moreover, civil society and investigative journalism play critical roles in unveiling the contours of such shadow arrangements. In contexts where democratic institutions are weak, external watchdogs may offer the only form of accountability. Therefore, the future of democratic legitimacy in international security governance may increasingly hinge on the ability of non-state actors to monitor informal power structures.

Ultimately, shadow alliances challenge not only the structure of global security cooperation but also its ethical foundations. If left unchecked, they risk normalizing opaque security governance at the expense of public trust, institutional checks and balances, and the rule of law.

Conclusion

Contribution and significance. This article defines shadow alliances as a distinct alignment form; offers a five-dimension coding scheme; shows informality as a durable design choice. and demonstrates that shadow alliances, though informal, can sustain strategic cooperation over time without formal treaties. The study contributes to alliance theory by highlighting how secrecy, flexibility, and plausible deniability can become institutionalized features rather than temporary tactics. By conceptualizing shadow alliances through a structured, five-dimension framework, this research expands our understanding of how states navigate power asymmetries, manage reputational risks, and pursue long-term interests in the gray zones of international politics.

Future Research Agenda

This study builds open datasets to ensure transparency and replicability, combining process tracing with text-as-data methods to uncover the mechanisms behind shadow alliance formation. It identifies the institutional conditions that enable such informal alignments to

persist and examines how legal reforms and oversight mechanisms shape their evolution. By extending the analysis beyond Eurasia to include regional comparisons in Latin America and the Sahel, the research provides a broader understanding of how informality interacts with local political structures and global power dynamics.

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