Network Embeddedness and Foreign Policy Alignment in Great Power Competition: Evidence from the US-China 5G Contest*

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Abstract

What drives states' alignment decisions in great-power competition? This study argues that alignment is shaped not only by power and ideology but also by the international networks in which states are embedded. A state's network position determines its exposure to peer influence and coercion from great powers, which shapes its alignment choices. To test this relational explanation of alignment, I conduct a large-N analysis of state decisions during the US-China 5G contest. Using a novel panel dataset on states' restrictions on Chinese telecom firms, I employ a Cox proportional-hazards model to estimate the effects of peer influence and US coercion on alignment decisions. The results show that states are more likely to impose restrictions on Chinese firms when more of their direct security partners have done so, but the likelihood decreases when more indirect partners have taken similar actions. Additionally, states with direct security ties to the US face stronger alignment pressures. The interaction between alliance status and network centrality further reveals distinct alignment patterns. These findings highlight the importance of global networks in shaping state behavior in great-power competition.

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1 Introduction

Great power rivalry is back. The United States and China, the two largest economies in the modern world, have ramped up their strategic competition in Asia and beyond. The outcome of this unprecedented competition, and perhaps more importantly, the future of the modern international order, will be shaped not only by the relative material and non-material capabilities of the two Titans, but also by the alignment choices of less powerful states caught in the middle. These states' foreign policy alignments serve as critical signals of which major power holds greater influence in the international arena (Jackson, 2020; Allison, 2020) and who can shape the rules and norms that underpin international order to benefit themselves while constraining their rivals (Bettiza and Lewis, 2020; Lascurettes, 2020).

How, then, do these states navigate the turbulent waters of great-power competition to make alignment choices? Conventional international relations (IR) scholarship emphasizes that unit-level attributes such as power and ideology play an important role in shaping foreign policy alignment. Theories such as balance of power (Waltz, 1979), bandwagoning (Schweller, 1994), and ideological similarity (Owen, 2005) have long explained why states align with (or against) great powers. More recently, scholars have increasingly recognized that weaker states are often reluctant to commit to one side. Instead, they seek to maximize their interests by hedging—pursuing strategies that allow them to play with rival great powers simultaneously (Kuik, 2008; Greitens and Kardon, 2024).

These perspectives, while valuable, are incomplete. Modern great-power competitions, including the US-China rivalry, are driven less by clear military threats or ideological divides (Brunnermeier, Doshi and James, 2018; Schweller, 2022). Moreover, while hedging may seem like an attractive default strategy, states sometimes lack the flexibility to remain neutral, especially when facing pressure to align with one side (Korolev, 2019).

These challenges raise an important question for IR scholarship: In great-power competitions where power and ideology offer limited guidance, how do hedging states navigate

alignment decisions when pressured to take a stance on critical foreign policy issues?

I argue that the broader structures of international relationships—specifically, the relational networks of states—are crucial in shaping foreign policy alignment in great-power competition. As existing studies have pointed out, these networks can exert a *significant* and *independent* influence on state behavior, even though their formation and evolution are often associated with state-level attributes such as power and ideology (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009; Goddard, 2018; MacDonald, 2018). A state's position within the international networks conditions both peer influence and great-power coercion, which shapes its alignment choices.

To test this relational explanation of alignment, I examine states' decisions in the US-China competition over fifth-generation mobile broadband (5G) technology. This contest is a key dimension of modern US-China technological rivalry and provides a unique lens to study alignment beyond traditional factors, as power and ideology play a lesser role, and most states prefer to hedge between Chinese and Western vendors. Despite US pressure to restrict Chinese telecom firms, state responses varied widely—some imposed restrictions, while others continued cooperating with China.

I developed a novel dataset that integrates states' various 5G policies with their positions in the global security partnership network from June 2019 to December 2022. Using a Cox proportional hazards model, I analyze the timing of states' alignment decisions and evaluate how network position shapes peer influence and US coercion, which ultimately shapes alignment choices. The findings show that states are more likely to restrict cooperation with Chinese firms when more of their direct security partners have done so. However, when more indirect security partners ("allies of allies") sever ties, states are less likely to follow suit. Additionally, US-aligned states face significantly stronger pressure to align, highlighting the role of networks in conditioning coercion. Finally, the interaction between US alliances and network centrality reveals four distinct types of states, each with different alignment patterns.

This study makes several contributions to IR research. First, it advances alignment

theories by demonstrating that international networks—in addition to material power and ideology—play a crucial role in shaping states' alignment decisions in great-power competition. This contributes to the growing literature on how network dynamics shape state behavior in power politics (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009; Goddard, 2018; Macdonald, 2014; Kahler, 2009; Cranmer, Desmarais and Kirkland, 2012). Second, it enhances our understanding of peer influence, showing that direct partners promote alignment while indirect partners can have counterbalancing effects. Third, by identifying the strategic role of network positioning in shaping great-power influence, this paper offers insights into how great powers like the US and China can leverage international networks to achieve foreign policy goals.

The paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews existing scholarship on alignment and great-power competition. I then introduce the network-relational approach and outline theoretical hypotheses on how networks shape states' alignment decisions. Next, I present the US-China 5G contest as a case study. I then describe the research design, data, and methodology before presenting the empirical results and analysis. The final section discusses the broader implications of the study and suggests directions for future research.

2 Alignment in Great Power Competition

The pattern of alignment is a key component of great-power competition.[1] In rivalries between major powers, securing the backing of less powerful states is not merely an advantage, but often a strategic necessity. Aligned countries can act as force multipliers, enhancing a great power's capabilities (Waltz, 1979), providing access to resources like oil and minerals (McFarland, 2020), and bolstering its ability to project influence (Morrow, 1991). Beyond security and economic benefits, alignment also confers symbolic and diplomatic advantages. It confers status recognition (Lin, 2024), lends legitimacy to lead-

[1] Although existing IR literature often uses "alignment" and "alliance" interchangeably, I distinguish between the two: alliances refer specifically to formal military agreements, while alignment encompasses a broader set of foreign policy behaviors that signal support for one side.

ership (Lake, 2011), and offers support for hegemons to establish or revise international rules and norms in their favor (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; Lascurettes, 2020).

Because alignment carries such strategic weight, scholars have long studied what drives weaker states to align with one major power over another. Traditional IR theories argue that material capability is the primary driver of alignment, particularly in the security domain. States either balance against a powerful actor or bandwagon with it for protection or gains (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). Subsequent studies refined this argument, showing that alignment also depends on threat perceptions (Walt, 1990), national interests (Schweller, 1994), and strategic cost-benefit calculations (Snyder, 1997; Morrow, 1991).

In addition to material considerations, many scholars emphasize ideational explanations for alignment. Shared ideologies, identities, or values can make alignment more likely by reducing political and strategic costs (Beek et al., 2024, 4) and shaping threat perceptions (Owen, 2005). From a constructivist perspective, alignment is significantly influenced by socialization (Wendt, 1994; Ikenberry and Kupchan, 1990). Some studies further argue that states may leverage norms to exert normative pressure, effectively "trapping" others into behavior consistent with the established group (Schimmelfennig, 2001).

Recent IR scholarship has shifted focus to the agency of weaker states, arguing that alignment is not a simple binary choice—either fully committing to one side or the other. Rather, less powerful actors often adopt hedging strategies, engaging simultaneously with rival great powers to maximize autonomy and benefits while avoiding overdependence (Kuik, 2008; Goh, 2007). This approach is prevalent in the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War and becomes increasingly popular in the modern US-China competition (Jones and Jenne, 2022; Marston, 2024; Greitens and Kardon, 2024).

Despite the advantages of hedging, weaker states caught between great-power rivals cannot always sustain a balanced stance. As competition intensifies, the space for strategic ambiguity shrinks, compelling states to make clear alignment choices (Korolev, 2019). However, in such scenarios, threat perceptions and ideological convergence are not always

the primary drivers of alignment decisions, particularly in economic and technological domains where neither an immediate military threat nor a stark ideological divide may be present (Schweller, 2022). Instead, hedging states often look to their security or economic partners when making decisions, as interdependence and complexity significantly reshape the calculation of foreign policy (Jervis, 1997).

More importantly, shifts from hedging to alignment rarely occur without great power influence. These powerful actors employ various tools, particularly coercion through economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, or security threats, to steer weaker states toward their preferred direction (Greenhill and Krause, 2018). Yet, the effectiveness of these coercive efforts is often mixed. The US's recent failure to deter many allies from joining China-led initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative, for example, demonstrates that coercion does not always lead to compliance.

Existing coercion theories typically adopt a bilateral approach to explain such mixed effects, arguing that the success of coercion mainly depends on the power gap, domestic politics, or the extent of direct leverage exerted by the coercer (George et al., 1994; Greenhill and Krause, 2018; Blanchard and Ripsman, 2013; Yin, 2022). While these accounts offer important insights, they largely overlook a critical reality: coercion rarely occurs in isolation. States are embedded in dense networks of alliances and economic partnerships, and these ties can significantly shape how coercion operates. In particular, networks are not merely instruments of control, as the burgeoning literature on weaponized interdependence argues (Farrell and Newman, 2019; Drezner, Farrell and Newman, 2021); they structure the pathways through which coercion travels and condition its effects, influencing whether coercive policies are reinforced, diffused, or counterbalanced.

All of this suggests that fully understanding alignment decisions requires moving beyond theories that focus primarily on power and ideology from a dyadic perspective. Instead, alignment choices are shaped by interdependence, which exposes states to peer influences and conditions the effectiveness of great-power coercion.

3 Networks and Foreign Policy Alignment

I argue that a weaker state's position in international networks determines the nature of its interdependence with others, which plays an important role in shaping its alignment choices in great-power competition. Of course, network position is not the only determinant of foreign policy alignment. States' decisions are also shaped by some exogenous factors, such as power, ideology, domestic politics, and leadership. Yet, network position exerts a powerful and independent effect. It can constrain or expand strategic options (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009), influencing how states shift from hedging to alignment.

Specifically, networks can affect alignment in two primary ways. First, interstate relationships that underpin networks enable peer influence, leading states to adjust their foreign policy based on the behavior of allies or partners (Cranmer, Desmarais and Campbell, 2020; Boyes et al., 2024). The more deeply a state is embedded in the network, the stronger the peer influence it is expected to experience. This occurs through two reinforcing mechanisms: information diffusion and social conformity.

Information diffusion means that networks serve as crucial channels through which states access critical policy-relevant information from their peers. Because interstate relationships such as alliance create structured patterns of elite interaction, they facilitate the exchange of strategic insights, risk assessments, and policy evaluations. This flow of information shapes a state's cost-benefit calculations, offering the knowledge needed to navigate uncertainty in international politics. When decision-makers have sufficient time to assess their options, such information can signal whether a policy is beneficial, leading to policy emulation or, alternatively, policy divergence (Cao, 2010; Jandhyala, Henisz and Mansfield, 2011; Gilardi, Füglister and Luyet, 2009).

On the other hand, social conformity suggests that networks can shape actors' behavior by generating social pressure to conform. States' connections in the network facilitate the establishment of shared understandings or expectations. When a majority of connected

peers adopt a particular stance, it creates strong social pressure for others to follow suit to maintain group cohesion and avoid marginalization (Boyes et al., 2024), much like the dynamics at the individual level (Kertzer and Zeitzoff, 2017). This pressure often stems from the logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen, 1998), or a fear of losing connectivity and influence within the network.

Combining these two mechanisms leads to the following theoretical hypothesis:

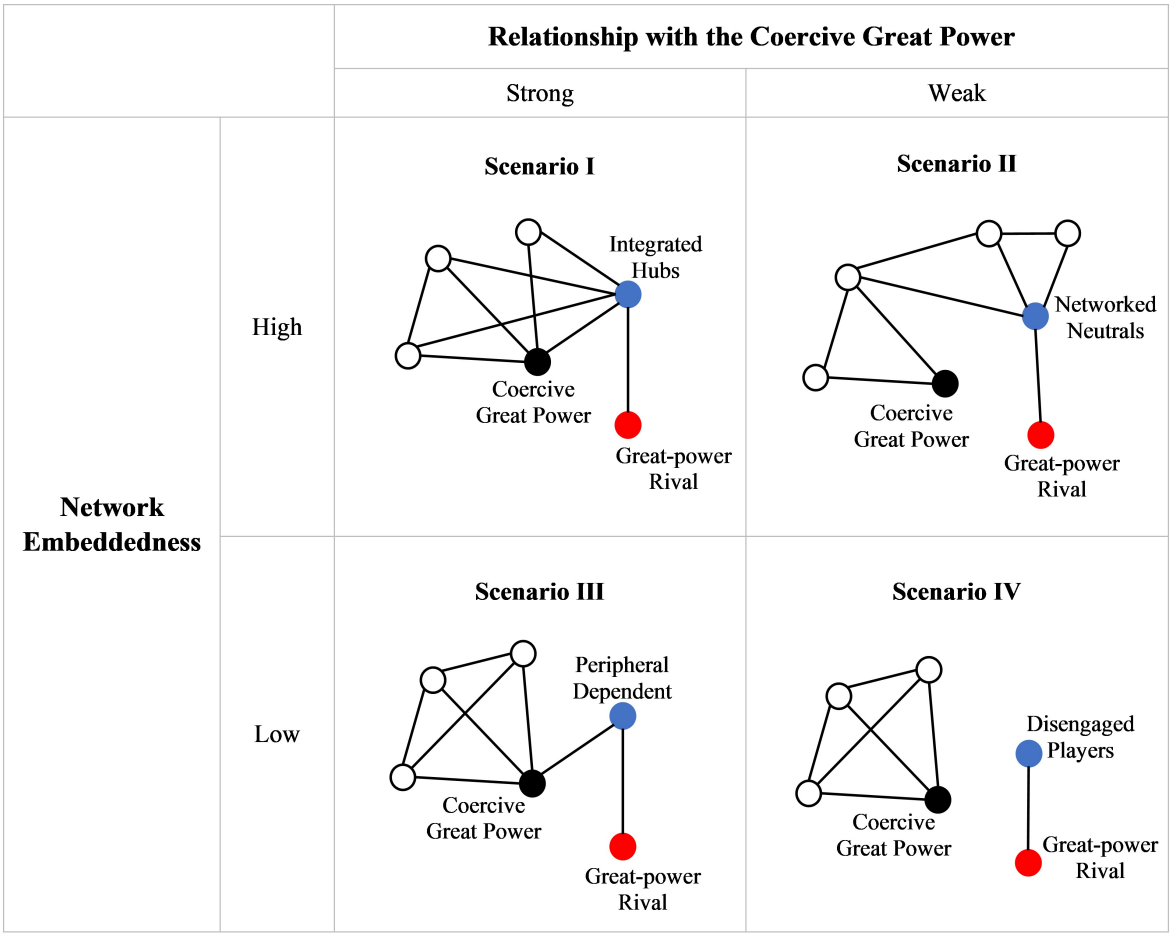
> **H1:** A state's foreign policy alignment is likely to be shaped by peer influence within international networks.

Second, networks also condition coercion from great powers. The structure of international networks (in security, economics, etc.) often reveals the social distance between states, shaping the extent to which great powers can exert pressure (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009). When a weaker state has a close relationship with a great power, it faces stronger alignment pressure due to heightened interdependence. Yet, indirectly connected states experience a more diluted form of coercion, as the great power's influence must pass through intermediaries who may not fully transmit or enforce its demands. While great powers can attempt coercion through common partners or third parties (Sobelman, 2022; Smetana and Ludvik, 2019), their ability to enforce alignment tends to weaken with each additional degree of separation. The greater the social distance between a weaker state and the coercing power, the less leverage the great power has over the state's foreign policy decision-making. Thus, a second hypothesis is:

> **H2:** The closer a state is to a coercive great power, the greater the pressure it faces to align.

The effects of these two factors—peer influence and coercion—are dependent on a state's network position and do not operate uniformly. Drawing on existing IR scholarship on network analysis (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009; Maoz, 2012; Cranmer, Desmarais and Kirkland, 2012; Goddard, 2018; Kahler, 2009), I identify two network

Figure 1: Four Types of Less Powerful States in Great-Power Competition



Note: *(1) The black circle denotes the "Coercive Great Power"; the red circle denotes the "Great-Power Rival", and the blue circle denotes different types of "the weaker state" caught in the middle. (2) The rest black circles denote other actors in the network.*

positions that structure these dynamics: (1) the degree of embeddedness—the number and strength of a state's relationships or ties within international networks—and (2) whether it has a direct partnership with a coercive great power. The interaction of these dimensions produces four distinct state types, each facing a unique mix of constraints and opportunities. These dynamics create feedback mechanisms that shape variations in alignment patterns.

3.1 Integrated Hubs

In the top-left quadrant of Figure 1, states both directly connected to a coercive great power and deeply embedded in the network are categorized as *integrated hubs*. In the

security domain, these states include the UK and France, which maintain close ties with the US while also having extensive security partnerships across Europe and beyond. These states may face direct alignment pressure from the great power due to their close ties, while also being influenced by peer dynamics within their network. When many of their partners align with the coercive great power, diffused information and social pressure—amplified by the high embeddedness—may reinforce coercion, making them more likely to shift from hedging to alignment.

However, such deep integration does not equate to automatic compliance. As existing studies have pointed out, integrated hubs also possess significant resources and relational leverage, allowing them to mobilize partners' support, coordinate resistance, or negotiate with the great power (Nicholls, 2020; Goddard, 2018). The likelihood of alignment thus depends on whether the integrated hub or the coercive great power can secure the backing of shared partners. If the integrated hub fails to rally opposition, the combined effects of direct coercion and peer influence can significantly intensify alignment pressure.

3.2 Peripheral Dependents

In the bottom-left quadrant of Figure 1, states directly connected to a coercive great power but not deeply embedded in broader networks are categorized as *peripheral dependents*. Real-world examples include US allies in Asia and the Middle East, such as the Philippines and Israel, which maintain security partnerships with Washington but lack extensive security or economic partnerships beyond their great-power patron.

Unlike integrated hubs, peripheral dependents experience weaker peer influence due to their limited network embeddedness. However, this relative isolation also makes them highly reliant on their great-power patron for security, economic resources, or diplomatic support (Huang, 2020). Asymmetric interdependence makes them particularly vulnerable to coercion, as Farrell and Newman's work on weaponized interdependence suggests (Farrell and Newman, 2019). Great powers can leverage their central positions to restrict these weaker states' access to broader networks, thereby limiting their strategic flexibility.

As a result, peripheral dependents are more likely to shift from hedging to alignment when facing direct pressure from a great power. Their ability to resist depends on whether they can secure alternative sources of support to counterbalance their reliance on the coercive power.

3.3 Networked Neutrals

States that are highly embedded in international networks but not directly tied to a coercive great power fall into the category of *networked neutrals*. Modern examples of this type include regional powers such as India and South Africa, as well as Scandinavian countries like Finland and Sweden, which maintain broad international ties while remaining relatively neutral between great powers.

Compared to integrated hubs and peripheral dependents, networked neutrals enjoy greater strategic autonomy due to their social distance from the coercer. However, their strong connectivity makes them sensitive to global alignment trends. When a critical mass of their partners aligns with a great power, social expectations may incentivize them to follow suit, particularly in security or diplomatic spheres. At the same time, their broad network ties provide leverage, allowing them to monitor alignment shifts, learn from peers, and adjust policies accordingly. Access to diverse information sources enhances their ability to make informed strategic choices in great-power competition.

3.4 Disengaged Players

Different from those deeply embedded in international networks or closely tied to coercive great powers, *disengaged players* operate at the periphery of global security and economic systems. With loose network connections and no direct ties to great powers, they experience minimal external pressure to align (as illustrated in the bottom-right quadrant of Figure 1).

While this structural position limits their access to resources and influence, it also grants the greatest strategic autonomy. Free from strong peer influence or coercive pressure,

disengaged players can navigate great-power competition with fewer constraints, selectively engaging with major powers while avoiding deep commitments. These states are often found in regions with a history of non-alignment or geographic insulation from great-power politics. Typical examples include Southeast Asian states such as Malaysia and Vietnam. They often maintain pragmatic and flexible foreign policies, balancing engagement without firmly aligning with any one power.

Put together, these four ideal state types demonstrate how network structures condition both peer influence and coercion to shape alignment patterns in great-power competition. Integrated hubs are deeply embedded in international networks while also maintaining close ties to a coercive great power. As a result, they experience both direct coercion and strong peer influence. Whether they align depends on their ability to mobilize resistance or negotiate favorable terms. In contrast, peripheral dependents rely on great-power patrons but lack deep network embeddedness. While this position protects them from peer influence, it also increases their patron's coercive power, making them highly vulnerable to alignment pressure.

On the other hand, networked neutrals are deeply embedded in international networks but are not directly tied to a coercive great power. Although they experience little direct pressure to align, their high centrality within global networks exposes them to social expectations and information diffusion, which affects their foreign policy decisions. Finally, disengaged players remain at the periphery of international networks and are not closely linked to a great power. With neither strong peer influence nor coercion, they enjoy the greatest strategic autonomy in navigating great-power competition.

These dynamics lead to a third theoretical hypothesis in this paper.

> **H3:** The effects of peer influence and coercion interact in shaping alignment decisions.

This framework provides a generalizable approach to understanding alignment in great-power competition. It illustrates how network structures shape peer influence and co-

ercion, producing variation in alignment outcomes. To empirically evaluate these theoretical arguments, the next section examines the US-China 5G contest, a recent case in which states faced both peer influence and coercive pressure in making alignment decisions. This case provides a valuable test of the framework by allowing us to assess how embeddedness and direct ties to a great power shaped states' decisions on the adoption of China's 5G technology and equipment.

4 The US-China 5G Contest

As the most updated cellular technology, 5G is poised to redefine our digital age. Unlike its predecessors, 5G drastically reduces latency, enabling real-time communication and powering innovations in AI, robotics, and autonomous systems (Lewis, 2018). These advances offer both economic opportunities and national security challenges for states competing in the international arena.

The economic stakes of 5G are enormous. By accelerating breakthroughs in industries like healthcare, smart infrastructure, and autonomous vehicles, 5G is projected to generate up to $13 trillion in global economic value by 2030 (Chow, 2021). The ability to set 5G standards and control infrastructure deployment also grants strategic advantages, allowing states and firms to shape the future of digital governance and economic interdependence (Rühlig, 2023). As a result, the global race for 5G is not just about technological advancement but also about economic power and geopolitical influence.

However, the same features that make 5G transformative also introduce significant security risks. First, due to its decentralized network architecture and reliance on software-defined networks, the expanded attack surface increases the risk of cyber intrusions. The transition to 5G eliminates traditional hardware-based security perimeters, making networks more susceptible to software vulnerabilities and supply chain threats (Khan et al., 2020).

In addition, concerns over vendor trustworthiness remain widespread. Critics worry that

5G vendors with state affiliations may embed backdoors or exert undue influence over network operations, creating potential security risks (Kaska, Beckvard and Minárik, 2019). Moreover, 5G networks enable large-scale data collection, intensifying fears over data privacy and surveillance (Rühlig and Björk, 2020). The integration of billions of IoT devices further complicates security risks, as many lack robust protection mechanisms, making networks more vulnerable to cyberattacks and data breaches.

All of this makes 5G technology a core aspect of the modern US-China competition. China is among the first to recognize 5G's economic (and perhaps security) potential. Beijing has pumped substantial resources into its telecom sectors. Bolstered by billions of state funding and strategic initiatives like "Made in China 2025," Chinese companies, primarily Huawei and ZTE, have emerged as key actors in the global telecom equipment industry, providing products and technical support for many countries' 5G infrastructure developments (Pongratz, 2019).

In contrast, the US, despite being a long-time global tech powerhouse, failed to take advantage of this 5G momentum to maintain leadership in related industries. By 2018, even though prominent US firms like Cisco and Ciena continued to be influential players in the telecom equipment market, their combined revenue share was less than 10%—not even half of what Huawei alone held (Pongratz, 2019). More importantly, these American companies lack the competitive technology and products to rival their Chinese counterparts in the 5G infrastructure race.

The growing gap between the US and China in 5G technology raised serious concerns in Washington (Mihalcik, 2019). The Trump administration viewed China's expanding telecom sector not only as a security threat but also as a direct challenge to US technological leadership. In particular, Beijing's push to set global 5G standards positioned China to shape the digital infrastructure of the future, allowing it to influence technological ecosystems, control supply chains, and consolidate long-term economic and military advantages (Rühlig, 2023). As a result, a central US strategic objective in the 5G race was clear: to counter China's growing influence in the global telecom landscape and secure control

over next-generation technology.

The Trump administration adopted a set of policies targeting Chinese telecom giants like Huawei and ZTE to counter China's 5G influence. First, it imposed a comprehensive ban on these companies operating in the US in May 2019, citing serious national security risks (Geller, 2019). Washington argued that, these telecom firms, given their close ties to the Chinese government, could be compelled to embed backdoors in their hardware or software, allowing Beijing to access sensitive data transmitted through global telecom networks (Kaska, Beckvard and Minárik, 2019; Pompeo, 2019).

Beyond domestic restrictions, the US pursued an aggressive international pressure campaign to deter other countries from adopting Chinese 5G technology. Washington warned that integrating Huawei equipment into national 5G networks could jeopardize intelligence sharing and security cooperation with the US and its allies (Castle, 2019; Olson, 2019). In August 2020, the Trump administration intensified its campaign by launching the "Clean Network Initiative," a multilateral effort urging states to exclude Chinese telecom vendors and adopt trusted 5G providers (U.S. Department of State, 2020*a*).

However, other states responded differently to these US efforts. Many in Europe and Asia decided to align with the US, restricting or banning Chinese telecom firms from their 5G networks (U.S. Department of State, 2020*b*). Some, like Australia and Japan, acted preemptively, imposing restrictions as early as 2018 (Zhang, 2018; Denyer, 2018). Meanwhile, a significant number of countries resisted US pressure and maintained cooperation with China on 5G. These included China's long-standing economic partners, such as many African and Central Asian states (Ehl, 2022; Imamova, 2020), as well as some US long-term allies like the Philippines and Turkey (Xinhua, 2021; Cuyegkeng, 2021).

Existing studies highlight domestic factors, particularly threat perception, as key explanations for these various 5G policies. States' assessments of the security risks posed by Chinese companies play a significant role in shaping their stances (Lee, 2022; Lee, Han and Zhu, 2022). National leaders who view China as a security threat and consider telecom infrastructure critical are more likely to align with the US (Lee, 2022). Some other

scholars emphasize that state-level attributes such as power and trade are also critical determinants (Christie, Jakobsen and Jakobsen, 2024).

These analyses provide important insights but do not fully capture the complexity of states' decision-making in the 5G contest. First, there is no clear consensus, even among key US allies, on the security risks of cooperating with Chinese telecom firms. While some countries shared the US's concerns that Chinese companies could pose a national security threat, many others did not. For example, Britain and Germany both initially resisted US pressure by including Chinese firms as 5G vendors, only to later reverse their decisions without presenting new evidence of security risks (Sabbagh, 2019; Wintour, 2020). These divergent views suggest that alignment decisions are not solely driven by threat perception.

Second, many studies often assume that states' decisions are independent, overlooking the strong interdependence in the security domain (Keohane and Nye, 1987; Fjäder, 2016). In practice, security networks facilitate intelligence-sharing, joint military planning, and policy coordination among allies. Since 5G infrastructure serves as a critical platform for transmitting sensitive information, a state's decision to collaborate with Chinese telecom firms can influence not only its own security but also that of its allies and partners (Olson, 2019). This interdependence suggests that states may not make alignment decisions in isolation but are likely to be shaped by the choices of their network peers.

At the same time, the US's coercive strategies—such as threats to suspend military cooperation and intelligence sharing—do not affect all states equally in this 5G case. Close US allies, such as those in Europe and East Asia, obviously experienced the strongest pressure, as their security partnerships with Washington are integral to their national defense strategies (Pompeo, 2019). In contrast, states with weaker or indirect ties to the US, such as those in Africa or Southeast Asia, faced much less pressure and had more room to maneuver.

These conditions suggest that states might experience peer influence and coercion differently depending on their network positions—specifically, their embeddedness within

security networks and relational distance from the coercing power (the US). In the next sections, I test my theoretical expectations by examining how security networks shape states' decisions on restricting Chinese telecom firms. Specifically, I assess how network position conditions peer influence and US coercion, and how these factors interact to drive alignment patterns.

5 Research Design

To test my hypotheses, I conduct a large-N analysis of 191 countries' alignment decisions during the US-led campaign against Chinese 5G technology (June 2019–December 2022). As US officials emphasized, this campaign aimed to pressure or coerce states into suspending cooperation with China on 5G infrastructure (Rithmire, 2021). This provides a compelling case of alignment in great-power competition, as it forced states to reconsider hedging and take sides.

5.1 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable measures *whether a state restricted its local telecom companies' cooperation with Chinese tech giants, such as Huawei and ZTE*. While Christie, Jakobsen and Jakobsen (2024) provides a valuable dataset on states' 5G decisions, it does not cover all countries and does not fully align with the scope of my analysis. To address these gaps, I substantially expand their dataset, drawing on publicly available sources—including international news media and scholarly analyses—to systematically code these decisions.

I treat the dependent variable as a dummy variable, coded as "1" when a country publicly declared it would or has imposed restrictions or a full ban on Chinese telecom companies, and "0" otherwise. This coding approach accounts for states that chose not to explicitly declare their positions. Given the US's strong push to ban Chinese telecom companies, non-announcement is treated as a strategic decision to continue hedging or pursuing a neutral stance.

Additionally, two important points about the coding rule need to be highlighted. First, even if a country did not explicitly announce restrictions, its participation in the Clean Network Initiative was treated as a proxy for alignment with Washington. This is because joining this initiative means one country is expected to use non-Chinese vendors to build its telecom infrastructure. As such, these countries were coded as "1" (aligned with the US) in the dataset.

Second, several countries had shifted their positions over time. For example, Serbia declared to join the Clean Network Initiative in 2020 but did not impose any actual restrictions on Huawei and ZTE (Ruge and Vladisavljev, 2020). Similarly, Brazil initially banned Huawei in 2020 but later reversed its policy in 2021, allowing Chinese companies to operate there (Reuters, 2021). These inconsistencies introduce challenges in coding alignment decisions.

To systematically account for these shifts, I applied two coding rules: *consistency between 2019 and 2022*, and *prioritizing behavior over rhetoric*. A country is coded as aligning with the US (or "1") only if it has shown a consistent attitude during this period and no conflict between behaviors and rhetoric. If a country claimed to ban Chinese firms but allowed its presence in the domestic market, the decision was coded based on its behavior rather than rhetoric. Thus, for the examples listed above, Serbia and Brazil were both coded as "0" (hedging) in the analysis.

Based on this approach, I identified 47 countries (including the US) that publicly decided to cut or restrict their 5G ties with China between 2019 and 2022. Table 1 below lists these countries alongside the timing of their alignment decisions, providing a foundation for further analysis.

5.2 Independent Variables

The key explanatory factors in my analysis are (1) *peer influence*, which captures the decisions or actions of a state's security partners, and (2) *US coercion*, which reflects the direct pressure a state faces from the US based on its security partnerships. These factors

Table 1: List of Countries Imposing their 5G Restrictions on China

Date (Month/Year)	**Country Names**
August 2018	Australia
November 2018	New Zealand
December 2018	Japan
May 2019	United States
September 2019	Poland
December 2019	Norway
January 2020	Vietnam
February 2020	Latvia
June 2020	Israel, Singapore
July 2020	United Kingdom, France, Portugal
August 2020	Albania, Slovenia
September 2020	Austria, Czech Republic
October 2020	Kosovo, North Macedonia, Greece, Belgium, Croatia, Sweden, Italy, Bulgaria, Dominican Republic, Slovakia
November 2020	Cyprus, Malta
December 2020	Finland, Luxembourg
January 2021	Nauru, Palau, Georgia
March 2021	Ecuador
April 2021	Romania, Germany
May 2021	Denmark, India, Netherlands, Lithuania
June 2021	Spain
July 2021	Malaysia
September 2021	Guyana
November 2021	Estonia
May 2022	Canada
October 2022	Ireland

correspond to Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively, while their interaction tests Hypothesis 3, which argues that peer influence and US coercion jointly condition alignment decisions in great-power competition.

Given that the US framed the 5G contest primarily as a security issue, I define peer influence based primarily on security partnerships, where states may look to their security allies or partners for cues on whether to restrict cooperation with Chinese telecom firms.

I propose two forms of peer influence. The first one, *direct peer influence*, captures immediate exposure to alignment trends by assessing the number of direct security partners that had already restricted 5G cooperation with China before a given state made its decision. Based on existing studies (Cranmer, Desmarais and Menninga, 2012), it is expected that a state is more likely to follow suit when a greater number of its closest security allies or partners impose restrictions.

The second form, *indirect peer influence*, expands the scope beyond immediate ties by capturing the number of indirect security partners—states that are not directly connected but share common allies (or a "friend of a friend" with two degrees of separation)—that had already restricted 5G ties with China. This variable accounts for broader network effects, where a state may internalize second-degree alignment trends even if its immediate partners have not yet aligned (Cranmer, Desmarais and Campbell, 2020). Both measures help test H1, which posits that peer influence shapes alignment decisions.

Moreover, US coercion is treated as a binary variable, indicating whether a state has direct security ties to the US ("1" = direct US security partner, and "0" = no direct security partnerships with the US). Direct US partners—those bound by formal alliances or long-term security commitments—are expected to face stronger coercive pressure to comply with Washington's position on Chinese 5G vendors. This helps test H2, which argues that alignment pressure is stronger when a state has direct security ties to a coercive great power.

Finally, to test H3, I include an interaction term between US coercion and peer influence. This approach captures how a state's network position conditions the effects of peer influence and coercion in shaping alignment decisions. I use the total number of security partners (states' degree centrality) rather than only those that have already cut ties with China because peer influence, as discussed above, can operate both directly and indirectly.

States embedded in dense security networks may be shaped not only by direct partners who have severed ties but also by broader network effects. This approach accounts for a state's broader structural position in the security network rather than focusing solely on immediate peer defections, allowing for a more comprehensive test of how peer influence and coercion interact to shape alignment outcomes.

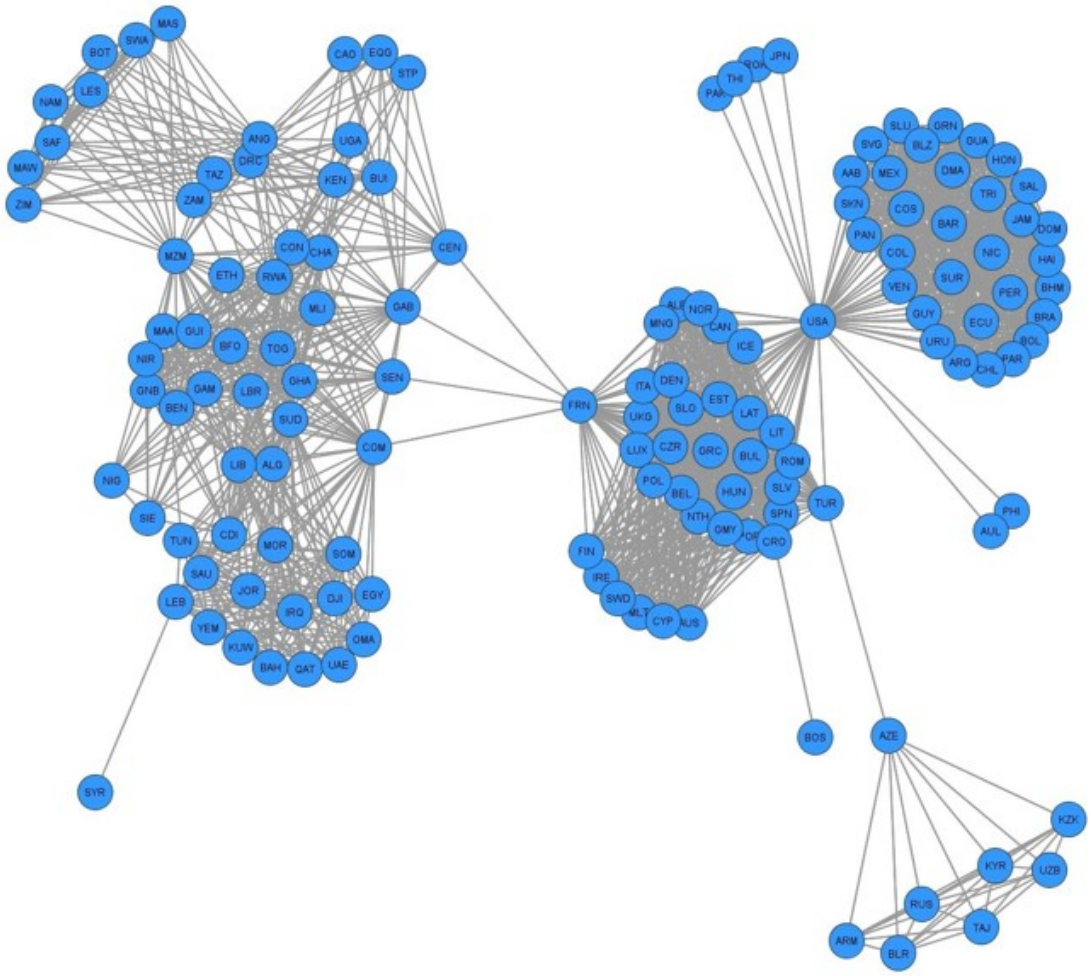
This interaction term allows us to empirically test the alignment patterns of four state types proposed in the theory section: Integrated Hubs that may experience strong dual pressure, Peripheral Dependents driven by great-power coercion, Networked Neutrals shaped by peer influence, and Disengaged Players that remain largely autonomous. By evaluating these dynamics, the analysis assesses whether network position systematically conditions how states respond to peer influence and coercion, shaping their foreign policy alignment in great-power competition.

5.3 Security Partnership Networks

The global security partnership network serves as the foundation for key variables in this analysis. To construct this network, I rely on the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) dataset, version 5.1 (Leeds et al., 2002), which provides the most comprehensive and reliable data on formal security commitments until 2018. Unlike other datasets, ATOP offers detailed, consistent, and up-to-date coverage of alliance structures, making it particularly suited for assessing security ties in the context of great-power competition.

Although bilateral defense cooperation agreements (DCAs) have been used in previous studies to capture contemporary security cooperation (Kinne, 2018), the most recent available data on DCAs is limited to 2010, making it less suitable for analyzing alignment decisions in the US-China 5G contest, which unfolded in 2019-2022. Given that defense cooperation can shift over time, relying on outdated DCA data risks misrepresenting the current structure of security networks. Thus, I focus exclusively on offensive and defensive alliances from ATOP, as these relationships represent durable and bind-

Figure 2: Global Alliance Networks



ing security commitments that are highly relevant to understanding states' alignment behavior.

Using ATOP alliance data from 2018, I construct the global security partnership network, identifying each state's direct and indirect security partners and calculating their centrality and relationships with the US. By integrating this alliance network with my dataset on states' decisions regarding Chinese telecom companies, I derive the key explanatory variables for my analysis.

5.4 Alternative Explanations and Control Variables

To account for alternative explanations and confounding factors, I include several key variables in the analysis. The first is a state's level of democracy. Democratic countries

tend to cooperate more frequently in security matters due to shared political values and mutual trust (Lai and Reiter, 2000). Additionally, democracies may perceive greater security threats from non-democratic powers like China, especially through advanced telecom technologies such as 5G. To control for these potential correlations, I include *a composite score* of political constraints, political rights, and civil liberties from Freedom House. This measure is drawn from 2018 to 2021, throughout the key phase of the 5G contest.

Economic ties with China also play a crucial role, as China often uses its economic leverage to influence or penalize states that do not align with its policies. To account for these dynamics, I include two economic variables: GDP per capita and imports from China. These indicators capture the extent of economic dependency and the potential costs of resisting China's influence. Both variables are retrieved from the World Bank, ranging from 2018 to 2021.

Finally, 4G LTE mobile coverage can influence a state's decision to cooperate with China as well. States with extensive 4G infrastructure may have less incentive to engage with Chinese telecom firms, while those with limited coverage might view such cooperation as essential. The 4G coverage data, sourced from the World Bank, reflects the situation from 2018 to 2021.

These control variables provide a robust framework for accounting for alternative explanations, ensuring that the analysis captures the independent influence of peer networks and centrality on states' decisions.

6 Empirical Results and Analysis

6.1 Model Formulation

Temporal network models, such as Temporal Exponential Random Graph Models (TERGM) and Stochastic Actor-Oriented Models (SAOM), are widely employed to examine how social networks evolve, including the formation and dissolution of relationships. These

models, however, primarily focus on the dynamics of the entire network structure. In contrast, my analysis centers on the egocentric networks of states, specifically investigating how the decisions of other states shape an individual country's alignment choice.

Since the dependent variable—whether a state cuts its 5G ties with China—is binary and the timing of decisions plays a critical role, I adopt a Cox proportional-hazards model for the analysis. This model offers a more appropriate framework than temporal network models for capturing the influence of peers on a state's decision-making over time. The analysis is conducted at the month-country level and spans from June 2019 to December 2022, a period that captures the key phase of 5G-related geopolitical developments. The data are right-censored. Once a country decides to ban Chinese telecom firms, the remaining countries will enter a new period of observation with updated network information.

The hazard function for country i at time t is specified as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} P_i(t) = \beta_0 \cdot \text{Polity}_i + \beta_1 \cdot \text{GDP per capita}_i + \beta_2 \cdot \text{ChinaImport}_i + \beta_3 \cdot \text{USPartners}_i \\ + \beta_4 \cdot \text{4GCoverage}_i + \beta_5 \cdot \text{Number}_{\text{direct}}(i,t) + \beta_6 \cdot \text{Number}_{\text{indirect}}(i,t) \\ + \beta_7 \cdot \text{Centrality}_{i,t} + \beta_8 \cdot \text{USPartners * Centrality}_{i,t} + \varepsilon_{i,t} \end{aligned}$$

In this equation, Polity represents the country's level of democracy, while GDP per capita reflects the country's income level. ChinaImport captures the volume of imports from China, serving as a proxy for economic interdependence, and 4GCoverage measures the percentage of the country's 4G LTE mobile coverage. All control variables are drawn from 2018 to 2021 to account for possible lagged effects.

The key explanatory variables align with the theoretical framework. Peer influence is tested through two measures: the number of direct security partners that have severed 5G ties with China before the state makes its own decision, captured by $\text{Number}_{\text{indirect}}(i,t)$, and the number of indirect security partners—those that share partners with the target state—who have also cut 5G ties, represented by $\text{Number}_{\text{indirect}}(i,t)$. These variables

directly test Hypothesis 1 by assessing whether a state's decision to restrict Chinese telecom firms is influenced by the actions of its security partners.

US coercion is captured by "USPartners", a binary indicator of whether a country is a formal security partner of the United States. This variable tests Hypothesis 2, which posits that states directly tied to the US experience stronger coercive pressure compared to those without such ties.

To examine how network position conditions the effects of peer influence and coercion, I include an interaction term between US security partnerships and total security partners. This interaction term, "USPartners*Centrality", evaluates whether US security partners are more susceptible to peer influence than non-US partners. This adjustment ensures that the analysis captures a state's broader structural position within the security network rather than focusing solely on immediate peer defections.

Table 2 presents the key results of the Cox proportional-hazards models on the role of peer influence and network embeddedness in shaping states' 5G restriction decisions. The findings reveal that both the decisions of allies—whether direct or indirect—and a country's position in the alliance network, measured by its total number of allies, play critical roles in influencing 5G policy alignment.

6.2 Peer Influence: Direct and Indirect Effects

The results underscore the critical role of direct peer influence in shaping states' decisions on 5G cooperation with China. Specifically, the number of direct security allies that have already imposed restrictions on Chinese telecom companies before a state makes its own decision has a positive and significant effect across all models. This indicates that states are more likely to abandon a hedging strategy and align with the US when more of their direct security partners have already done so. This pattern suggests that social conformity plays a dominant role in direct peer influence—when immediate security partners restrict Chinese firms, alignment becomes the expected course of action.

Table 2: Cox Models of 5G Policy Alignment

DV: States' 5G Restriction Decision				
Models	1	2	3	4
Freedom Score	0.032*	0.035*	0.035*	0.064*
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.012)	(0.005)
US Ally	0.160*	6.188*	6.188*	7.836*
	(0.071)	(0.259)	(2.178)	(0.922)
4G Coverage (% of Pop.)	0.203*	0.131*	0.131*	0.164*
	(0.015)	(0.012)	(0.041)	(0.021)
Ln GDP per Capita	0.065	0.288*	0.288	0.797*
	(0.048)	(0.047)	(0.224)	(0.112)
Ln Export to China	0.141*	0.085*	0.085	0.218*
	(0.012)	(0.013)	(0.064)	(0.032)
Ln Direct Ban-Adopting Allies	—	0.945*	0.945*	1.361*
		(0.094)	(0.470)	(0.185)
Ln Indirect Ban-Adopting Allies	—	-2.447*	-2.447*	-3.628*
		(0.104)	(0.582)	(0.236)
Num. Direct Allies	—	0.142*	0.142*	0.159*
		(0.008)	(0.064)	(0.018)
US Ally × Num. Direct Allies	—	-0.162*	-0.162*	-0.175*
		(0.009)	(0.072)	(0.028)
Events	1045	1045	1045	1045
Observations	6590	6590	6590	6590
AIC	15615.8	12120.35	12120.35	5869
Stratified by Time	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clustered SE (Country)	No	No	Yes	No
Mixed Effects (Country)	No	No	No	Yes

Significance: *p < 0.05

At the same time, indirect or second-order peer influence also affects states' 5G policy alignment—but in the opposite direction. The number of indirect allies, or security partners of a state's direct allies, that have imposed restrictions has a negative and significant effect. This diverges from prior research, which often finds that indirect connections reinforce behavioral contagion in social networks (Cranmer, Desmarais and Campbell, 2020). However, my findings reveal a contrasting pattern: when more indirect peers suspend their 5G cooperation with Chinese telecom companies, states become less likely to follow suit.

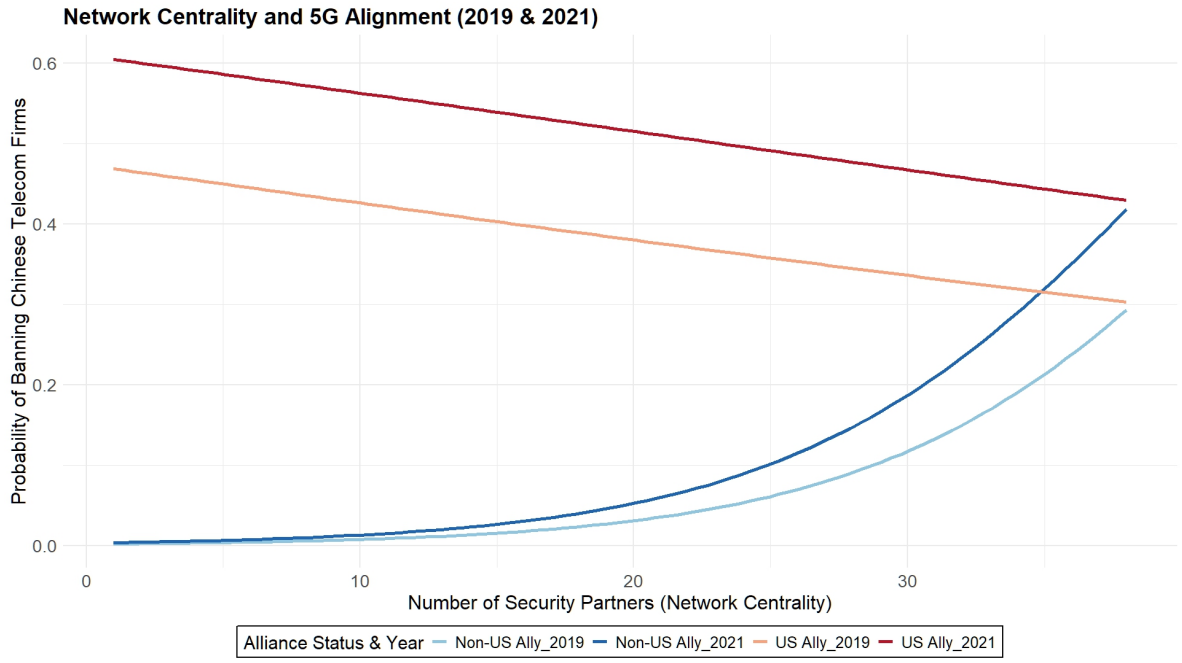
One possible explanation for this pattern is that coercion is more diffused when it comes from indirect partners, making it less binding. Additionally, an information mechanism prevails at the indirect level—instead of simply learning about the risks of using Chinese technology, states with many indirect partners restricting Chinese 5G technology are in a better position to assess whether abandoning hedging remains beneficial. As more states align with the US, those still uncommitted gain stronger incentives to continue hedging. By maintaining neutral, these states can extract greater economic or technological concessions from China, which has a strong interest in retaining them, while the US—having already secured key commitments—may exert less pressure on additional joiners. Rather than simply conforming to broader network trends, states strategically navigate competing pressures to maximize their bargaining power.

Together, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1: states' alignment decisions, in addition to power or ideology, are shaped by the decisions of their peers in security networks. They also highlight the nuanced nature of peer influence. While states respond strongly to direct allies' decisions, they are more resistant to broader network trends. This finding challenges conventional wisdom on policy diffusion and alliance contagion, demonstrating that states do not simply follow the majority within their broader network in great-power rivalries. Instead, their alignment decisions reflect a layered calculation of geopolitical and economic risks, reinforcing the idea that in highly interconnected global networks, strategic decision-making remains dynamic rather than automatic.

6.3 US Alliances, Network Embeddedness, and Alignment

The results also demonstrate that allying with the US and network embeddedness jointly shape states' decisions on 5G restrictions. Figure 2 illustrates how the probability of banning Chinese telecom firms varies based on a state's centrality in the security network, measured by the total number of security allies, and whether the state is a US ally. The findings substantiate Hypothesis 2, as US allies exhibit significantly higher probabilities of banning Chinese firms than non-US allies, reflecting the direct coercion exerted by

Figure 3: The Effects of Alliance Status and Network Embeddedness on 5G Decisions



Washington. However, the role of network embeddedness further conditions this effect, highlighting different alignment patterns for US and non-US allies.

For US allies, the probability of banning Chinese firms is consistently high but declines slightly as centrality increases. This suggests that highly embedded US allies are somewhat more resistant to direct US coercion, likely because their extensive security partnerships provide alternative strategic options. However, this resistance is limited. Over time, even the most embedded US allies such as Canada and Germany remain under strong pressure to align, particularly in 2021, as more of their direct security partners followed the US in restricting Chinese telecom firms. The downward slope of the red lines in Figure 2 captures this dynamic: while centrality moderates coercion to some extent, US allies still overwhelmingly align with Washington.

For non-US allies, the probability of banning Chinese firms follows a different trajectory. Less embedded non-US allies—those with fewer security partners—maintain lower probabilities of banning Chinese firms, reflecting greater autonomy to hedge or maintain economic ties with China. However, as their network centrality increases, the probability of banning Chinese firms rises steadily across all years. This pattern suggests that

highly embedded non-US allies are increasingly exposed to network-wide peer influence and alignment pressures, making it more difficult to sustain hedging strategies over time. The upward slope of the blue lines in Figure 2 illustrates this effect, showing that embedded non-US allies increasingly conform to the broader trend, even in the absence of direct US coercion.

These patterns map onto the four-state typology proposed in the theory section. Integrated hubs (high centrality, US-aligned) show some initial resistance but eventually align due to a combination of peer influence and direct US pressure. Peripheral dependents (low centrality, US-aligned) exhibit the highest probability of banning Chinese firms, as they are directly subject to US coercion but lack the network depth to resist. Networked neutrals (high centrality, non-US aligned) demonstrate increasing alignment pressure over time, driven by peer influence rather than direct coercion. Disengaged players (low centrality, non-US aligned) maintain the lowest probability of banning Chinese firms, reflecting their insulation from both peer influence and coercion.

These findings provide empirical support for Hypothesis 3, demonstrating that network position—both in terms of embeddedness and direct ties to a coercive power—conditions the effects of peer influence and coercion. The interaction term further explains the differences between the four types of states identified in the typology, reinforcing the argument that security networks shape alignment in great-power competition. While centrality can provide states with strategic leverage, it also creates vulnerability, as states positioned at the center of networks may influence others but are also more susceptible to alignment pressures over time (Kahler, 2009).

7 Conclusion

With intensifying great-power rivalry between the US and China, states today face increasing pressures to shift from hedging to alignment on critical foreign policy issues. Using the 5G contest as a case study, this paper demonstrates that alignment decisions in the great-power competition are shaped not only by material and ideological factors

but also by relational determinants—particularly peer influence and social distance from great powers. States do not make foreign policy decisions in isolation; rather, their choices are structured by their position in international networks and the actions of their peers. This highlights the need for a network-relational perspective in understanding alignment behavior (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery, 2009; Jackson and Nexon, 1999; Goddard, MacDonald and Nexon, 2019).

The analyses of the US-China 5G contest reveal several important dynamics. First, peer influence on alignment is complex and non-linear. While direct security partners cutting ties with China significantly increases the likelihood of alignment, indirect peer influence—measured through second-order partners—has the opposite effect. States appear less likely to align when many of their indirect partners sever ties with China, suggesting that indirect influence may encourage counterbalancing rather than conformity. This finding challenges conventional wisdom on diffusion processes and calls for further investigation into the conditions under which indirect influence strengthens or weakens alignment pressures.

Second, US coercion plays a critical role in driving alignment. The results reveal that US-aligned states are significantly more likely to impose restrictions on Chinese telecom firms than non-US partners, even when controlling for other factors. This confirms that direct security ties to the US intensify alignment pressure, reinforcing the idea that alliances serve as key conduits for great-power influence.

Third, network embeddedness conditions how states respond to both peer influence and coercion. The interaction between US alliance status and overall security partnerships reveals important variation across the four ideal types of states outlined above. Integrated hubs, which are deeply embedded in international security networks while also maintaining close ties to the US, show some initial resistance to US pressure but ultimately align when a critical mass of their partners does the same. Peripheral dependents, which are tied to the US but have weaker network embeddedness, exhibit the highest likelihood of banning Chinese firms early, suggesting they are the most vulnerable to direct US

coercion. Networked neutrals, which are highly embedded but not US-aligned, display a steady increase in alignment probability as their partners impose restrictions, indicating that peer influence, rather than US coercion, is the dominant force shaping their decisions. Disengaged players, which are neither deeply embedded nor US-aligned, remain the least likely to ban Chinese firms, demonstrating the greatest autonomy from both US coercion and peer alignment pressures. These findings highlight that network effects in great-power competition are not uniform. Instead, peer influence and coercion interact with network position to produce distinct alignment patterns.

While this paper provides the first systematic analysis of network-driven alignment in the 5G contest, several areas warrant further investigation. The dynamics of indirect peer influence remain untested. The finding that second-order partners reduce the likelihood of alignment suggests that indirect influence may encourage hedging rather than alignment. Future research should explore whether this is unique to the 5G case or a broader feature of networked alignment decisions. Expanding beyond the security domain would also enhance our understanding of relational explanation of alignment. While this study focuses on security partnerships, economic or technological networks—such as trade agreements or supply chain interdependencies—may exert distinct effects on alignment. Examining cross-domain linkages could reveal whether security and economic networks reinforce or counteract one another in shaping alignment choices. Additionally, alternative measures of network embeddedness could offer new insights. This study focuses on security partnership ties, but states' positions in other international networks may also play a role in alignment behavior. Future work could explore whether states with high economic centrality are more resistant to US security pressures or whether interdependence with China mitigates the effects of peer influence.

The network-based effects identified in this paper suggest that as interdependence among states continues to deepen, great powers like the US and China must carefully navigate their relationships, balancing coercion and cooperation in order to maintain influence over less powerful states. The outcome of the 21st-century great-power competition will

hinge not only on material power and ideological narratives but also on the ability to shape and leverage the topology of global networks.

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