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Band of Brothers or Dysfunctional Family?

A Military Perspective on Coalition Challenges During Stability Operations

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Summary

A coalition, “an ad hoc arrangement between two or more nations for common action,” is the 21st-century norm when the United States commits military forces to an international venture. Frequently, such entities involve members in numbers greater than was the norm even a decade or two before the close of the 20th century. In this and other ways, coalition operations today are often different from those of the past. It is the challenges for coalition leadership associated with this greater quantity, related variety of member and collective needs, and different operational demands that are the focus of the pages that follow. Though the discussion will frequently draw its examples from and thereby have more pointed application to some situations—in particular, those involving stability operations—the resultant observations and recommendations will often also have application to coalition undertakings more generally. The extent to which this is the case will, unsurprisingly, be very much situation dependent.

It is valuable both to distinguish coalitions from their more settled brethren—alliances—and to appreciate the many similarities. The kinship is a close one, and a student of either is fortunate in that both offer many lessons of value regarding the other. Yet, as difficult as alliances have proven throughout history, coalitions can be more challenging still. It behooves us to consider both, but, herein, it is the greater demands of coalitions that merit our primary attention even as we occasionally draw on the lessons that alliances sometimes offer this investigation.

An alliance, “the relationship that results from a formal agreement (e.g., treaty) between two or more nations for broad, long-term objectives that further the common interests of the members,” can be envisioned as a tuxedo-clad affair, one whose members slouch in deep leather chairs while engaging in comfortable conversation with long-standing intimates. Each knows what is expected of the other when they meet. Surprises tend to be few, though old irritations may occasionally ruffle relationships. Coalitions are, in contrast, come-as-you-are events, with some participants properly attired while others arrive in a state completely unsuitable for the event at hand. Late arrivals are commonplace; some will decide to attend only after ensuring that participation does not threaten other opportunities. Mutual suspicions can arise after entry as members find themselves in strange, sometimes even exotic, company. All carefully monitor the host, who wines and dines newfound friends and old acquaintances alike. Some sit at the head table; others are treated kindly, if less favorably. The difference is ever a potential source of jealousy, despite the cuisine being a direct consequence of what each member offers the collective enterprise. Most will tolerate the disparity; some will depart in a huff, the host first seeking to convince the disgruntled to stay, then expressing condolences.

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3 JP 1-02 (2001 [2008a], p. 31).
at any misunderstanding and assuring the departing that the door remains open for a later return. Coalitions are, therefore, frequently tumultuous affairs in comparison to the more-refined alliance associations.

This raises the question of why anyone would choose to participate in a coalition. Two notable reasons are in immediate evidence. First, despite the variation in backgrounds, differences in motivations, and fickleness of some, most members arrive with one or more capabilities that, when combined with those of others, enhance the collective capabilities of the whole. The many thereby hope to accomplish aims that would be attainable only at greater expense were they undertaken unilaterally, if indeed they could be achieved at all. Second, while the international community often views with suspicion actions taken by a single nation alone, a cooperative enterprise can bolster legitimacy and soothe fears of what might otherwise mistakenly be interpreted as a renewal of colonial ambitions, pursuit of a less developed nation’s natural resources, or other unsavory objective.

As challenging as coalition warfare is during conventional conflicts, the difficulties are compounded in number and character when the contingency is instead a stability operation. The absence of a threat that puts survival interests at risk translates into weaker commitment and more-restrictive caveats on how a participant’s capabilities are employed. Yet, though the ties binding nations in a coalition are weaker during a stability operation, once conventional combat has ended, the potential benefits of membership can combine with reduced risk to swell the numbers wishing to participate. At that point, external parties may conclude that the victor is evident. Countries that previously feared alienating one or the other adversary flock to join the winner. The expansion of membership often includes representatives of developing nations less well equipped, trained, and disciplined than is desirable, conditions that present a challenge to coalition leaders having to incorporate these sometimes marginal and, at other times, outright unhelpful assets into operations. Liaison requirements will likewise expand, tasking human and equipment resources beyond the limits for which they were designed. Difficult decisions regarding the sharing of sensitive technologies and intelligence will test collective resolve. Day-to-day coordination and maintenance of a consistent message will become increasingly complex as the number of members and coalition affiliates expands. Already-complicated operations, such as completing the handover of responsibility in an area of operation, will become yet more difficult as differences in language, operational sophistication, commitment, economic resources, and other factors vary to an extent not previously seen.

The transition from conventional conflict to postwar recovery or other stability operation brings other challenges as well. Development of overarching guidance in the form of a campaign plan has proven elusive during such undertakings, any collective plans generally appearing months or years after initial deployment (if at all). Even when created, these plans are often products developed by one participant (generally the lead nation’s military component) rather than efforts that encompass substantive input from all participants. The result is overfocus on but a few components of the whole, a shortfall that virtually ensures suboptimal performance, given the broad palette of capabilities demanded during a stability operation. Member nations’ home governments can further complicate coalition effectiveness by treating stability operations as peacetime business as usual, meaning that those deployed can find

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Coalition leader, when used in this document, generally refers to an individual. Lead nation or lead organization instead designates the country, alliance, or other organization that assumes primary oversight responsibility.
themselves confronted by lethargy and a culture of nine-to-five activity in the national capitals or organizations on which they depend.

Coalitions inherently also suffer from the dissimilarity and unfamiliarity of their separate parts. Their ad hoc character means that members are less likely to be familiar with each other’s capabilities than they would be were they part of an alliance. The barriers to cooperation can therefore initially be considerable. A coalition leader expecting to command (or lead, in another context, should he or she be a civilian) with the authority he or she would the forces of a single nation’s military will be disappointed. The traditional C2 of command and control will more often than not have to be seen in terms of cooperation and compromise. Complete unity of command is rarely achievable; it must instead be measured in degree rather than as an absolute. Fortunately, the less demanding standards of unity of effort and unity of message may serve as channels of progress when unity of command proves unattainable.

Anything done to improve the cooperation between coalition members is a step forward. A solution employed very effectively during operations in the Balkans at the end of the 20th century involved using an alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), as the foundation for the larger coalition that sought to bring peace to that tumultuous region. Equipment commonalities, preestablished procedures, and established relationships served as a basis for any changes necessitated by unique operational demands, including the incorporation of non-NATO members into the coalition. The use of an established alliance streamlined coalition formation and helped during later operations. Employing an alliance as the basis for a coalition helped in reducing the impact of individual members’ agendas as well; many of those potential stumbling blocks had been dealt with during earlier exercises and over years of internal negotiation and compromise.

Mitigating Divisive Forces and Overcoming Obstacles to Coalition Effectiveness

Just as previous operations and exercises lubricated the workings of the NATO-based coalition in the Balkans, training, seminars, field and command-post exercise events, and the exchange of liaison officers can help coalition members to meld more rapidly. Exchange programs that send prospective coalition-member representatives to each other’s training programs have long been an effective way of improving mutual familiarity (though the benefits of these activities could be better capitalized upon were more countries to actively encourage students to maintain ties with former international or other-agency colleagues). Likewise, training, equipping, and assigning top-quality individuals to liaison positions during exercises and active operations improve coalition functioning.

It is evident, even in this brief, introductory summary, that individual relationships will make or break a coalition. The military leader noted for his or her adroitness at war fighting or bureaucratic know-how may lack the requisite diplomatic skills to succeed in a less overtly combative environment. Individual characteristics essential to sustaining a coalition include having a mind flexible enough to walk around the table—view issues from other members’ perspectives—and adapt accordingly. Having the right men and women in positions at every echelon will be crucial to collective success in achieving coalition objectives.
Expanding the Concept of “Coalition”

Security (e.g., military and police) forces cannot defeat an insurgency or build a nation alone. The broad spectrum of requirements requires the cooperation of participating nations’ governments across their capabilities. Experts in justice, diplomacy, economics, education, and many other areas are no less crucial than the soldier training a broken nation’s army or police officer molding an indigenous counterpart to walk the beat in a host nation’s cities. But Iraq, Afghanistan, and other stability operations’ challenges around the world tell us that even these coalitions of governmental organizations are insufficient to the immensity of the tasks at hand. National governments are not designed to build governing capacity; they are organized to perpetuate it. The post–World War II Marshall Plan benefited greatly from the strengths and support provided by the U.S. government, but it was, in many cases, the commercial world’s managers and civilian economic geniuses who deserve much of the credit for success. Unfortunately, we do not witness the same degree of government–private sector cooperation today. We do, however, see essential capabilities brought to stability operations by NGOs, IGOs, and—to a lesser extent—commercial ventures. And we (sometimes belatedly) recognize that an indigenous citizenry and its governing bodies (to the extent they exist) will be key to achieving coalition objectives. The current conceptualization of a coalition exclusively as “an ad hoc arrangement between two or more nations” is proving inadequate. Coalitions need to incorporate these other entities into planning and operational processes to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the capabilities a particular entity has to offer, its willingness to cooperate in the collective venture, and the nature of the challenge. Some will be members in a very robust sense; others may merit or choose to be little more than distant affiliates. Just as not all members of a coalition currently receive the same access to intelligence, so too will the extent of benefits vary with the addition of these other parties. A coalition today is more appropriately defined as “an ad hoc arrangement between two or more organizations in the interest of common action.” Prospective coalition leaders—whether military or civilian—need to understand that collective and individual members’ ends are better served by inclusiveness than by exclusivity.

Building Better Future Coalitions

Enhancing U.S. readiness to more effectively project its influence via the medium of coalitions is an ongoing challenge. Fortunately, it is one that has recently gained the attention of leaders in the federal government. Such initiatives as the 1997 presidential decision directive (PDD) 56,5 created to improve U.S. interagency cooperation; the more recent U.S. Department of State’s creation of its Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization; and that department’s accompanying efforts to form a group of resources to support future deployments (the Civilian Response Corps, or CRC, with its active [CRC-A], standby [CRC-S], and reserve [CRC-R] components) provide but three examples. Yet there remains much to be done in bettering U.S. leadership of and participation in coalitions. Expanding the understanding of what is meant by coalition is one step forward, as would be acting to capitalize on the grander spectrum of capabilities that expansion implies. Movement along that path will require a cooperative effort, the support of all participants, and more-than-occasional compromise.

5 See PDD 56 and FAS (1997).
Unfortunately, that path forward is, at present, poorly defined. Recommendations receiving attention herein that address shortcomings include the development of doctrine, training, and lessons-learned capabilities to guide future coalition leaders—civilian and military—and those who work with them. In the immediate term, it seems prudent to assign responsibility for the development of this doctrine, the design of much of the training, and collection and analysis of lessons learned to U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM), given its current duties regarding joint-service doctrine and training. Placing these responsibilities in a supradepartmental government agency or, better yet, an independent enterprise outside of government would be preferable from the standpoint of avoiding bureaucratic tensions, but the urgency of the need makes it advisable to capitalize on the human resources and past experience existent in USJFCOM for at least the first iteration of development in this regard.

The ad hoc nature of coalitions does not imply that organizations do not prepare individuals for the eventuality of leading these ventures. Expansion of current educational exchange programs to provide for attendance at government schools and NGO or IGO training courses has been mentioned. Contact information for individuals completing these courses should be noted in appropriate databases to allow for ready identification during future operations. Similarly, prospective liaison officers and those likely to serve in coalition leadership positions ought to attend graduate courses appropriate to pending duties. These longer-range preparatory programs should have collective exercise counterparts that bring representatives of future coalition members and affiliates together, much as national training centers offer combined-arms and joint training at present. Training conducted immediately prior to deployment should additionally bring national teams or smaller coalition components together as a precursor to deploying as teams. In-theater training should likewise be available after deployment for those joining a coalition belatedly or unable to partake of home-station preparation. Serious consideration should be given to creation of an interagency staff college to educate midlevel executives (i.e., equivalent to majors or lieutenant colonels in the armed forces) from all branches of government and representatives of NGOs or other organizations as appropriate. Assignment to interagency positions akin to military joint assignments would logically follow attendance. Policies regarding promotions and other personnel matters—whether dictated by the executive branch or by Congress—would likely be necessary to enhance the desirability of such assignments and preclude the professional marginalization of those serving in them.

Recent operations reflect that more needs to be done to enhance unity of effort and the achievement of unity of message in addition to approximating unity of command to the extent feasible for both a coalition’s senior leadership and that at subordinate echelons. Care in selecting leaders with the right mix of talents will aid in this regard, as it will in addressing the many individual participants’ and collective objectives inherent in the cooperative endeavor. Greater inclusion of relevant parties during coalition planning, during subsequent rehearsals and exercises, and in the formation and deployment of advance parties is strongly recommended in the interest of better orchestrating assets that currently too often compete with and undermine the effectiveness of coalition operations.

Coalition administration during stability operations too often suffers at the hand of lead-nation bureaucratic procedures that ignore other participants’ unfamiliarity or inability to meet stringent procedural guidelines designed for peacetime operational tempos. Excellent coalition leadership, superb training, excellence in common procedures, and a willingness to cooperate and compromise can all be frustrated by acquisition and other regulations inad-
equate to the demands of overcoming threats to peace, aiding the needy, and building govern-
ments capable of serving their populations.

Finally, coalition leaders conducting stability operations should question their initiatives,
asking, “Will this move the coalition toward accomplishment of its objectives?” Often, those
objectives will include establishment of capable self-government. In such cases, a coalition is
fundamentally failing if it is not preparing the indigenous population and those who will serve
it for that eventuality. The right choices in that regard may not be what they initially seem. Sur-
render of governing authority to indigenous leaders not yet ready, or permitting their selection
by a population ill prepared for its responsibilities as an electorate, may condemn a coalition
venture to ultimate failure and the local population to unnecessary suffering. Though policy
dictates to those leading coalition stability operations no less than it does to generals in war,
il-advised political expediency can be the dagger that kills prospects for success.