

THE *WHATS* AND *WHYS* OF COALITIONS

By ANNE M. DIXON

The rules of the coalition game have changed. The high hopes for multinational coalitions as responses to crises in the wake of Operation Desert Storm are threatened by disillusionment and disorientation. Suddenly problems of *interest creep* and *mission creep* have arisen.¹ We do not seem capable of *containing* political interests and military objectives any longer.

It has now become commonplace to view Desert Storm as a post-Cold War exception that proves the new post-Cold War rule. We have even surveyed the world and described the kind of *situation* that will be the rule: internal conflicts involving breakdowns of civil order. But we have not looked at how the rules for our proposed *response* to these situations—multinational coalitions—have changed. Nor have we thought about the implications of these changes in setting American political and military objectives. Let's first review the old rules.

▼ America was the head honcho—and set the agenda which others followed.

▼ The West accepted the U.S. lead because of a shared vision.

▼ America did the big ones—from Korea to Kuwait—which were the real coalition wars and the United Nations got smaller countries to do the noncombat peacekeeping operations.

▼ In American-led coalitions, the U.N. role was limited to providing the seal of legitimacy.

▼ U.S.-led military coalitions were against clear adversaries.

▼ Soviet vetoes in the Security Council limited what the United Nations did and where.

▼ Americans believed in Cold War orthodoxy, and since the United States had deep pockets its leaders had the leave of the people to use national treasure to project ideals abroad.

These Realities Died Along with the Cold War

But to a large extent we still want to plan for coalitions and to sometimes, at least, set our objectives according to the old rules even though we know the rules have changed and say as much while discussing the problems of U.N. *incrementalism*.

Interest creep, mission creep, and incrementalism—these phrases describe real difficulties, but they are not post-Cold War conundrums. We've seen them before in Vietnam and Lebanon. Our preoccupation with them suggests a larger sense of loss of control, of unclear goals. But do these seemingly prevalent problems in post-Cold War, U.N.-sponsored coalitions have solutions?

To better understand these problems, we need to explore two important questions: Why do we hold onto the old set of rules (with some modifications)? How can holding onto them frustrate our efforts to define viable, limited objectives for involvement with coalitions? Examining these questions will not yield clear-cut answers to the dilemmas confronted in Bosnia, Somalia, or Haiti. But it will provide insights into implications for setting political and military objectives as well as into the prospects for the kind of coalitions currently envisioned.

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The Old Rules

First, we prefer the old rules because we liked calling the shots. We set overall coalition objectives or at least sat at the head of the table. Thus national goals coalesced with

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coalition goals. Furthermore, because we provided *and controlled* most coalition forces, we could tailor missions to our political objectives, or reevaluate the ends if the available military means seemed insufficient or ill-suited. Because we could be vigilant about both political ends and military missions, any interest or mission creep would have been of our own making.

Second, the old script for coalition warfare was relatively simple. There was an identified villain, like Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War. For the most part, U.S. forces played the role they knew best, a combat role. And when the enemy was beaten in the field we knew who had won. This is the theater that grabs and holds public attention.

it took a lot of work to build a Cold War vision, to create institutions and processes that buttressed it. Now that the foundation upon which that vision rested—the bipolar world—is gone, we are trying to simply slide a looser foundation, the new international order, underneath the old buttresses. But the result is shaky: there is no new shared orthodoxy built upon this less firm foundation.

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Since most of us recognize this deficiency, we and our former Cold War allies tinker a bit with the ideals of the old vision and make a few modifications to fit the new world in which we want to live. This is our dream of a world of cooperation, of burden-sharing, of a combined police force rather than a world policeman.² Like jointness,³ *combinedness* is a peacetime ideal that tells us we can't invest as much in force structure as we did in the past, but working together perhaps it won't be necessary. The world is less dangerous: there may be ugly scraps, but no Evil Empire.

Past and Future

How does holding onto the modified past affect how we choose our objectives? How can it result in interest or mission creep? First, the Washington foreign policy establishment still wants to lead. It's like having a leadership reflex, and it will make choosing our battles harder in a world where choice is less clear-cut. Although few conflicts pose direct threats to U.S. security, there are a lot of troubles in the world with strong moral appeal. And many voices will call out to us for help including some Americans who are linked by satellite to countless tragedies. Ironically, some may pine for the old constraints of a bipolar world and Soviet vetoes in the U.N. Security Council.

Second, it is unlikely our coalition partners and the United Nations will allow us to lead in the old-fashioned way. But they too are used to our leadership; many Europeans admit they await an American initiative on Bosnia, despite the talk about *European* solutions to *European* problems including some outside Europe's borders. And, when things get dicey in ongoing operations, our partners



Joint Combat Camera Center (Melvin C. Farrington)

U.S. and Korean marines during Team Spirit '93.

By contrast, post-Cold War peace-enforcers can't demonize one of the parties to an internal conflict. For starters, taking sides is now seen as a violation of the internal political process of the conflict-torn country which is to be restored with the resolution of the conflict. Furthermore, more inclusive post-Cold War coalitions are likely to have partners who differ in their sympathies for the parties to a conflict. Choosing a side may mean turning one part of the coalition against another.

Third, we see the past as a system that worked. We won the Cold War, after all. And

expect the U.S. cavalry to ride over the hill. Their reflexes complement our own.

Third, we are bio-engineering a hybrid type of coalition which blends the two traditional varieties of multinational coalitions: peacekeeping operations and coalition warfare. But we are not observing this process with the scientific detachment of Mendel: we *are* the hybrid. The American military knows the characteristics of coalition warfare better than it knows the traits of a pure blue-helmeted force. These traits are better understood by the United Nations and its smaller members. So the hybridization is not complete.

Incomplete integration means partial understanding. We probably see the risks and costs of fighting more clearly (although we have lessons to learn when it comes to urban guerrilla warfare) while others will be better prepared for long-term peacekeeping operations. Almost 1,500 troops are assigned to the U.N. Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP), which has been there since 1964, and some 5,200 troops make up the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), which was formed in 1978. So hybrid coalitions may have shorter life spans than peacekeeping operations. Some are apprehensive about the magnitude of forces which coalitions might eventually require. The bottom line is that both interest and mission creep are likely due to a poor understanding of what is needed to achieve objectives.

Finally, military planning does not fit the new idea of coalition operations. Conditions for committing forces include limited objectives with clear exit strategies based on an attainable notion of victory, overwhelming or decisive force, and a clear U.S. interest.⁴

The criteria will be hard to pin down. But the Armed Forces, Congress, and the American people still expect them to be met. Initially supportive public opinion could prove fickle as the cost of operations rises above expected levels. When satellites no longer transmit images of our troops helping hungry people but instead show American casualties, this reversal will limit involvement. On the other hand, leaders will have no victory to declare and no compelling justification to commit resources if we leave too soon and a pasted-together situation unravels again.

Such costly dilemmas may engender not only case-by-case popular rejection of new types of coalitions but opposition to them in principle. And the aversion to global combinedness would not be confined to America. People in other societies would respond in similar ways.

So what does this mean for coalitions? Remember, all wars—even tribal wars—are made up of coalitions of directly interested groups. So the reaction to failed global combinedness would not mean a rejection of coalitions. But it would mean that coalitions would look different from what we expect at present. The new coalitions might be more:

- ▼ situation-specific, with objectives tailored to a conflict rather than to broad global norms
- ▼ regionally-based, as most countries directly interested are likely to be proximate
- ▼ ad hoc, not within an existing framework—though U.N. legitimacy might be sought.

Would this spell an end to the pursuit of moral and humanitarian objectives? Probably not, for it is too natural a trend to only be pushed or stalled at the margins. What it may mean is more of a free market approach which seems slower and more uneven, but which may be more enduring and effective as a means of response. For political decisionmakers and military planners it may mean that future coalitions could be very different from what we now expect. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ *Interest creep* describes situations in which original national interests in resolving a crisis or conflict—that determine political objectives or the ends sought by American leaders—widen in the absence of conscious decisionmaking. This can happen in coalitions when U.S. objectives fall short of those of our coalition partners or of the United Nations. *Mission creep* is its military counterpart and occurs when the Armed Forces take on broader missions than initially planned.

² This might imply that strengthening the United Nations as a world police headquarters could become an interest in and of itself, with all manner of possibilities for interest creep.

³ See “By Our Orthodoxies Shall Ye Know Us,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, no. 2 (Fall 1993), pp. 108–10.

⁴ As found in former Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger’s “six major tests” for using U.S. forces abroad in combat.