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# COALITIONS

## Building and Maintenance

### The Gulf War, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and the War on Terrorism

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2002

A WORKING GROUP PROJECT

Institute for the Study of Diplomacy  
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service  
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF DIPLOMACY

## Foreword

We were asked by the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University and the American Academy of Diplomacy to co-chair a series of working group meetings on building and maintaining coalitions. The participants analyzed recent case studies of U.S. military intervention that spanned three regions of the world and included three fundamentally different motivations for military action. The bipartisan group included distinguished diplomats, military officers, academics, journalists, and politicians who first heard from practitioners involved in each case and then discussed the role of coalitions in that effort.

Coalitions have become a fundamental instrument of U.S. diplomacy and warfare during the past decade. The Cold War presented America with a specific set of enemies who had ideologies incompatible with ours. We formed regional alliances to contain and ultimately to defeat those enemies. Alliances were formal and somewhat inflexible because the challenge was clear and unambiguous. Today we are faced in most areas of the globe with less formal and more ambiguous challenges, and new instruments are needed. Coalitions of those nations willing to participate in settling a particular crisis have served this purpose. Coalitions have not replaced our traditional alliances but instead they draw heavily on the capabilities of our alliance partners, in combination with regional actors from the crisis area.

The cases of the Gulf War, Kosovo, and the Afghan conflict each demonstrate that coalitions are a powerful instrument of U.S. foreign policy. Coalitions provide legitimacy for U.S. policies, enhance our military capabilities, and help secure long term peace.

- In the Gulf War and Afghanistan, the U.S. operated under UN Security Council authority, which enhanced domestic support and eased the task of forming a coalition. In the Kosovo case, however, legitimacy flowed instead from NATO's resolve and the coalition that formed around it.

- Coalition military contributions were also important, with a differing mix of NATO and regional partners participating in each case. While the relative importance of direct military contributions from coalition partners might be declining as U.S. capabilities increase, fighting these three conflicts without access to coalition facilities and without overflight rights in coalition countries would have been impossible. Building the future military capabilities of potential coalition partners should receive higher priority.
- And, coalitions have helped sustain the peace in Kosovo and Afghanistan, with coalition countries contributing a large portion of the peacekeeping troops and economic assistance, thereby freeing up U.S. assets for other missions.

If coalitions were important in the three cases mentioned above, they are vital in the broader war against terrorism. The Bush administration has assembled six different coalitions, which in the study is called a coalition of coalitions, for this global effort. Beyond the military coalition that fought in Afghanistan, this coalition of coalitions includes diplomatic, financial, law enforcement, intelligence, and reconstruction efforts. In this sense, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was correct when he said that different coalitions would be formed to complete different missions. But that should not imply that we could disregard the legitimate concerns of coalition partners; in fact if the United States follows unilateral policies that ultimately undermine these various coalitions in the war on terrorism, then the effort will be bound to fail.

Coalitions carry some burdens for the United States. Military operations must be coordinated with other nations who do not necessarily have adequate capabilities. Coalition political deliberations can also slow down or complicate military operations. Both of these were particularly evident in the Kosovo case, where non-secure communications alerted Serbs to allied air operations and where differences of opinion existed about whether to strike tactical or strategic targets. But according to the U.S. commander in charge of

the war with Serbia, the negative implications of “war by committee” have been dramatically overstated. In the case of Afghanistan, too much reliance may have been placed on Northern Alliance forces at Tora Bora, but on balance our local partners played a critical role by providing both troops and knowledge of local affairs. In none of the cases that we reviewed were these burdens such that the United States would have been better off operating alone.

It has become fashionable to argue that coalitions and the alliances that underpin them are relics that simply constrain U.S. freedom of action. The arguments for unilateral action simply disregard the lesson of the past decade—that coalitions have been vital to US successes in conflicts in at least three different regions of the world. There may indeed be times when the United States must act alone to remove pressing threats, but these instances should remain the exception and clear evidence should be provided publicly to explain U.S. unilateral actions. Maintaining the ability to form a broad array of coalitions in the future will be key to America’s success in the decades to come.

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