

Allies That Count: Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare

By Olivier Schmitt

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Reviewed by Kathleen J. McInnis

Years ago, when I was working on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) desk in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, we were asked by both the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations to help persuade allies and partners around the world to contribute additional forces to the mission in Afghanistan. To their credit, many countries around the world did so. But shortly thereafter, operators on the ground began signaling that many such contributions were so difficult to integrate into the mission that it was distracting from ISAF's ability to prosecute operations. Some states had caveats on their forces, others had interoperability issues, and still others approached the mission with wholly different strategic mindsets than many of their counterparts. In short, we

were building the coalition to help us win the war in Afghanistan, but in so doing, we were distracting our warfighters from *actually* being able to do so. Why were we spending so much time and effort recruiting forces from allies without accounting for the significant operational strains that their incorporation into the ISAF force laydown might cause?

It would be easy chalk up the NATO ISAF coalition force generation process—and its outcomes—to one of the many problems inherent in conducting complex operations, especially those that involve allies and partners from many states. But it seemed that there was something deeper at play: a failure to appreciate, at a conceptual level, what best practices in coalition-building and management looked like. What were the tradeoffs between adding flags to bolster a coalition's legitimacy and operational effectiveness? Was prioritizing numbers of boots on the ground the right way to think about force generation, or should we have prioritized quality over quantity?

No coalition warfare “best practice” playbook existed at the time. Indeed, despite how important it was from a national strategic perspective to get coalitions “right,” when I began my own research on coalition warfare in 2012, I found out quickly that the academic scholarship on these questions was limited. Lessons learned from the force generation experiences of prior post-Cold War coalitions such as the Balkans and the United Nations Operation in Somalia II interventions floated around, but most of them focused on the nuts and bolts of coalitions rather than defining heuristic models needed to help decisionmakers critically evaluate and make sense of the complex dynamics of coalition warfare. Especially when considering that successive U.S. national-level defense strategy documents have consistently noted the importance of coalition warfare to the overall advancement of U.S. national security objectives, more theorizing was—and is—necessary if we are going to be able to prevent ourselves from repeating past behaviors and expecting different results.

Fortunately, academia is increasingly turning its attention to these issues. Enter Olivier Schmitt's recently published book, *Allies That Count*. It is a volume that seeks to answer the questions that we had no theoretical or conceptual framework to answer when I was in the Pentagon: what qualities make allies useful in coalition warfare, and when are they more trouble than they are worth?

By comparing the experiences of select junior coalition partners in the Persian Gulf War, the Kosovo intervention, Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, and ISAF, Schmitt helps us understand when, and how, coalition contributions have the most utility for the overall conduct of the campaign, both strategically and operationally. In order to do so, he breaks down utility into two main categories: political and military. Political utility, according to Schmitt's formulation, comprises a state's international political standing and its behavioral norms, such as respect for humanitarian law. Military utility, by contrast, comprises a state's integration (both in terms of the size of the force element it contributes to a coalition and its ability to interoperate with coalition partners); responsiveness, or its ability to adapt to evolving circumstances; skill, which refers to a state's military being sufficiently trained and capable to the mission; and quality, which refers to the equipment that a military has as well as its ability to minimize tradeoffs between firepower, maneuverability, and others.

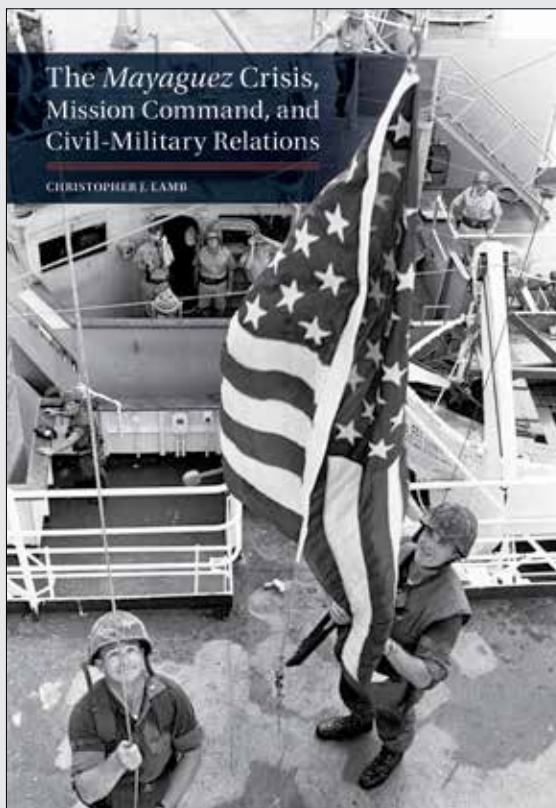
In evaluating these different attributes of a state's contribution to military coalitions, he finds that partners with the most utility have a high degree of integration and quality, as well as a high degree of international political standing. Standing helps bring international political legitimacy to an intervention—perhaps even more so than the number of flags associated with a given operation. Integration and quality are the key factors that allow fielded forces to get the job done. It is a good way to conceptualize the interaction of strategic- and operational-level dynamics, and a helpful rubric for assessing which partners will add utility to a campaign, and which ones may contribute

more strategic and operational headaches from the perspective of coalition leaders. Ultimately, Schmitt concludes that when it comes to coalition operations, “the more is not necessarily the merrier.”

As with any book, there are areas that the author could have further developed. For example, it would have been interesting for Schmitt to more fully explore a state’s strategic culture and its associated operational or political risk thresholds as part of the analysis. A state may have utility by Schmitt’s formulation, but if there is a limited political-level appetite to undertake hard tasks involving considerable military risk, that surely must diminish the usefulness of a state’s contribution.

Still, given what Schmitt set out to do—an enormous task in its own right—his analysis delivers a compelling answer to the question of how to judge a coalition partner’s utility. His work, in turn, compels us to assess its effects on how we build future multinational military operations. What does this mean for coalition construction and burden-sharing in the future? Many key U.S. allies have significantly shrunk their defense budgets in the 1990s and 2000s; it is therefore much more difficult for those countries today than it was in 1991 to deploy and sustain brigade-size force elements. Under these conditions, if integration, judged in terms of interoperability *and* numbers of forces that a state can contribute, is critically important, what does it mean when a state does not have the quantity of forces to sufficiently integrate? Moreover, especially given that the 2018 National Defense Strategy states the United States will continue to rely on coalition partners, is a state’s assumptions about its actual ability to contribute in a manner that does not constrain campaign effectiveness valid? If not, what must be done—both now and in the future—to rectify or ameliorate the situation? When is a larger and more robust coalition constellation worthwhile and when does it become a liability? JFQ

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By Christopher J. Lamb
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