



Alliances and Coalitions

Military alliances had their origins in the notion of collective security, whereby states banded together to ensure their safety as well as promote and defend their common interests. Eventually, however, such alliances came to be based on the distinction between “us” and “others,” the latter perceived as a threat against which alliance members joined forces to protect each other (reflected by the stance assumed by countries in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization toward those in the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War).

In actuality, true collective security does not differentiate between “us” and “others”; rather, it implies a universal and reciprocal commitment against any entity that would jeopardize the common integrity of nations. Based on a belief in the propriety of international well-being, a coalition reflects the inclusiveness of collective security and thus differs from a military alliance. As a particular type of alliance, a coalition is concerted, temporary, negotiated, complex, and timely.

Rather than assume defensive postures, countries that wish to survive in an increasingly dangerous multipolar world should make a more collective—if not global—response to threats. Given the proliferation of intrastate conflict and weapons of mass destruction, the weakening of the state, terrorism, insurgencies, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, coalitions represent the most appropriate systems in the post–Cold War environment.

Indeed, the capacity of these organizations to avoid the constraints of multilateral military alliances and quickly assemble a group of “allies” has made them the rule rather than the exception in military and international security. According to Guillaume Parmentier, “L’alliance devient alors un choix, une possibilité utilisable ‘à la carte’ et non une obligation inhérente à un des fondements de la politique étrangère de l’Etat” (The alliance is a choice, an option available ‘à la carte’ and not an obligation inherent in one of the foundations of foreign policy of the state).¹

Globalization and the mutable nature of threats justify such ad hoc coalitions at the expense of traditional territorial alliances. Responding to transnational terrorism and organized crime by forming an alliance seems less appropriate since its members do not confront such challenges with equal intensity and duration. In terms of defense, the only certainty in the current strategic context is that the armed forces of a state cannot act outside their borders without establishing a coalition. This implies a converging of rules governing the doctrinal engagement of forces in a theater of operations. In this construct, armies must also remain interoperable at all levels, affecting the entire spectrum of operations—namely, the strategic as well as the operational and tactical aspects.

In light of the increasing complexity of international threats, multilateralism offers a unique way of managing crises and resolving conflicts, made all the more effective because of the number of parties involved. Thus, the military alliance in the traditional sense of the term has now become outdated. As asserted by Stephen Walt’s “theory of the balance of threats,” states now ally against global threats instead of each other.²

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Notes

1. Guillaume Parmentier, “Les États-Unis et l’OTAN. De l’alliance à la coalition” [The United States and NATO: From the alliance to the coalition], in *AFRI 2005*, vol. 6 (Paris: Centre Thucyde, 2006), 679, http://www.afri-ct.org/IMG/pdf/afri2005_parmentier.pdf.

2. See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).