

Coalition Leadership Imperatives

Colonel Larry M. Forster, US Army

COALITION COMMANDERS often head a symbolic presence as well as a physical force. They encourage cooperation among the various non-government organizations (NGOs), coordinate with UN personnel and correlate with different tribes and groups. However, the greatest operational challenge is often internal—maintaining intracoalition unity. Coalition contingents may live virtually isolated from one another and may display signs of dissension and dispirited conduct of essential operations. Trust binds coalitions, and often it must grow among nations with no background of working together or worse, with contentious histories. To harness the internal dynamics and accomplish the shared mission, coalition commanders must conquer extraordinary leadership challenges.

Such challenges are common to senior leaders during complex peace and humanitarian operations, which have been the main operational employment of the US Armed Forces since 1991. With the exception of the initial deployments to Somalia and Rwanda, recent peace and humanitarian operations have been multinational (most often coalition) operations.¹ In some cases the United States has led a coalition of the willing. In other instances the United States has been the lead nation in a UN-authorized force, the mainstay of a NATO operation or—as in the case of the ongoing Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in the Sinai—US personnel are under the operational control of a foreign commander.

US participation in coalition operations distributes the operational burden and establishes international legitimacy. While initially more difficult and inefficient than unilateral missions, coalition operations are usually more politically acceptable to both the international community and to the former warring factions in an intrastate conflict. There are also many intangible benefits of working with other nations, to include the variety of experiences accrued by US

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leaders, enhanced capabilities of foreign armed forces and strengthened US ties to international partners. As a residual bonus, those now-experienced foreign militaries may execute future regional operations—in ways that support collateral US interests but with minimal or no US involvement. Coalition operations, then, pay significant dividends to all participants beyond achieving the initial purpose.

Since the structure of a coalition is often more important for its political effect than its military capability, US commanders may have to accept a sub-optimal tactical organization to achieve key strategic objectives. To achieve coalition objectives with organizational constraints and in an environment where different military cultures are merged, leaders must maximize cohesion while carrying out difficult missions. Indeed, this multinational leadership requirement and the need for additional senior leader preparation was identified in the strategic-level action review of the Implementation Force (IFOR) operation in Bosnia.²

Leadership Challenges

This article addresses proven multinational leadership techniques derived from the experiences of senior US officers and feedback from coalition partners. It highlights the general dynamics of coalitions and provides context for understanding their unique leadership challenges. It also examines successful

multinational leadership and recommends specific actions for leaders working with non-US military members. As with national organizations, coalitions require clear and decisive leadership but with different skill sets. Compared to leaders of US-only

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operations, coalition leaders must be more sensitive to diversity and mission complexity to motivate professionals from different backgrounds.

The operational environment. Coalition leadership challenges are shaped by the unique dynamics of specific operations. Often US leaders operate in coalitions activated after extreme deterioration of circumstances in a host nation or region. The organization is formed ad hoc to meet urgent requirements, has broad and often unclear mandates and missions, and is the result of hasty prior coordination with coalition partners. At least initially such operations often have media attention. Because such missions most likely constitute military operations other than war (MOOTW), knowledge of inherent noncombatant principles, techniques and actors is imperative. Skills developed for effective coalition operations will also apply when dealing with former warring factions, members of nongovernment organizations and international organizations, the media and the often-bewildering political entanglements.

In coalitions American leaders must contend with foreign contingents' different operating styles and distinctive rules of engagement. Conflicting, tactics, techniques and procedures (TTP) can cause dissension. However, a willing, flexible commander can often harmonize variances in coalition TTP into complementary procedures. Otherwise, friction from a rigid adherence to only one way of doing things can imperil operational success.

Interoperability limitations and restrictions on sharing national intelligence are also significant challenges for coalition leaders. In particular, a separate and restricted US intelligence cell tends to cause friction. While often necessary for intelligence production and dissemination, classification is an

issue to manage carefully with coalition partners. Appropriate "work arounds" can help assure coalition members that they are equally supported for the risks they incur. If restrictions on intelligence products must remain, they should be explained and coordinated to minimize adverse effects on coalition unity.

In addition, language barriers and different national cultures—including religion, history, values and life tempos—can create potentially adverse processes within a coalition unless understood and overcome. Coalition leaders usually realize quickly the vital requirements to learn as much as possible about the military cultures of the other coalition members and respect those sensibilities. Using that understanding of contingents, leaders can properly choose and resource officers as their liaisons and trusted agents. Likewise, the commander should make the contingent liaison officers part of his trusted inner circle so they can accurately convey his intent to their commanders. Of course, the commanders' personal touch in relationships with contingents is still fundamental to binding the organization together and facilitating the command process.³

Command relationships. In a coalition operation, the force commander will likely not be the head of mission—that distinction usually goes to the special representative of the secretary general (SRSG) of the UN or a special representative of the lead nation. This dynamic is significant because the commander may have to contend with an operational chain of direction separate from his national chain of command, balance multinational and national perspectives and deal with many outside authorities over which he has no control. The commander will also need to develop cooperative relationships with heads of the other coalition components. For example, in a UN mission he would need to cooperate with coequals: the civilian police commissioner, the humanitarian aid coordinator and the chief administrative officer. Further, he must balance these relationships to retain consent and credibility for the military operation with both beneficiaries and participants—no easy task.

Within the coalition, foreign commanders with operational control relationships to US leaders have command relationships with their national superiors similar to those that US commanders have with the regional commander in chief and National Command Authority. The fully effective US leader remembers this dictum: "You will need to understand that they [multinational forces] may have subtly different agendas, although completely rational for their purposes."⁴ Like US officers, coalition partners are duty-bound to advance their national agendas,



US and coalition personnel listen intently during a Gulf War briefing.

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which US leaders must consider when providing coalition policy and direction.

Coalition structures. Leaders and planners must assess contingents to best integrate military formations into the overall force structure. A primary consideration is each contingent’s assigned area of operation (keeping in mind the compatibility of adjacent units, the contingent’s relationship with host-nation factions, and other appropriate historical and cultural considerations). In addition, the coalition must include optimum control mechanisms appropriate to its structure, response force, reserve and national logistics support.

Other important issues to resolve include contingent representation on the force commander’s staff. One method arranges staff representation roughly proportionate to contingents’ contribution to the operation. While individual qualifications and ex-

perience must match the requirements of specific appointments, there will still be rigorous competition for key jobs by qualified officers from various contingents. This competition (and any unrealistic expectations that accompany it) may require arbitration by the commander to resolve representation issues amiably.

In addition to structural and staff issues, the force commander will have multiple logistic challenges. While fully integrated logistic support would enhance coalition effectiveness, national prerogatives, legal constraints and incompatible systems often make this impossible. Bosnia illustrates this problem. The British commander of the Allied Rapid Reaction Corps (ARRC) requested that the US commander of Multinational Division North (MND-N) provide logistic support to the Slovak battalion in the MND-N area of operation, but the United States

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did not have a cross-servicing agreement with Slovakia. As a result, the MND-N Commander could not legally comply with the request of his coalition superior. The ARRC Commander then had to find another means to support this politically important IFOR member assigned to the US sector.⁵

Leadership Requirements

Coalition dynamics and special challenges require leaders to focus on intracoalition cohesion and multinational success. These skills and techniques often differ from the direct, aggressive, dominant styles nurtured while operating in national tactical formations. Retired Lieutenant General Walter F. Ulmer states that this leadership style is often highly successful at the tactical level and most often rewarded in efficiency reports. However, as he points out, this style is often dysfunctional at levels where circumstances require contemplation, patience with ambiguity and appreciation for participative decision making—the very skills coalitions demand. This need for indirect leadership skills shifts from one set of leader behaviors to another and is especially evident in coalition operations—and at lower levels than common in national units.⁶

When some American officers confront mismatched leadership style and requirements, they exhibit an “if you don’t like it, tough” attitude—which quickly becomes counterproductive to the coalition mission. Others continue to use “slash and burn” direct leadership techniques inappropriate to multinational applications. Such failures to build consensus create unnecessary friction, resentment and confusion in multinational organizations.

In addition, some US leaders with a strong “can do” attitude and a lack of patience often attempt to bypass foreign officers who have their own work tempo and techniques (which may be more effective in coalitions than common US variants). This happens, for example, when a US leader ignores several subordinate coalition staff officers to reach down to a US “iron major” for a quick staff product. In the process, he would likely alienate the capable foreign officers he bypassed and adversely

affect the motivation of that entire contingent. Actions taken for short-term expediency may inadvertently, but profoundly, degrade long-term relations among partners.

US coalition leaders are now discovering that these challenging missions require embedding multinational leadership skills at lower organizational levels. In these operations, a junior leader’s action can have strategic significance, especially if captured on television. Combined activities [such as multinational patrols, checkpoints, training and exercises, or morale activities] often depend on junior leaders to enhance coalition cohesion. This reality requires senior leaders to mentor subordinates and model the skills and sensitivities that enhance coalition cohesion. The skills imparted to junior leaders do not supplant the direct leadership expertise that they must develop but are meant to strengthen the leadership tools historically employed by their superiors.

In its essence, then, multinational leadership often requires skills that are more readily thought of as strategic. Consensus-building, focusing mechanisms and “buy-in” techniques are all important to overall success. With the right leadership approach, many operational challenges can be overcome through trust and good will generated among coalition participants. Furthermore, a coalition force is more likely to remain credible, retain support of the contributing nations and be considered professional and effective if properly led within an optimum command climate that permeates down to the lowest levels.

Imperatives for Coalition Leaders

Successful commanders in multinational environments focus on and inculcate a vision that infuses the whole coalition. Leaders must find common ground in the varying agendas of participants, instill pride and purpose into the mix of coalition partners and focus limited resources to get the greatest return. Effective coalition leaders treat all members with respect, listen well and settle differences and misunderstandings rapidly. When national legal restrictions or other obstacles prevent optimum coalition arrangements, good leaders work together on the best possible resolution and attempt to offset any residual ill-will if desired arrangements cannot be executed. To deal with some of these problems, US commanders have often benefited from having staff officers who specialize in the region and international law.

When possible, effective commanders develop streamlined staff procedures and arrange staff training to integrate the different nationalities into an ef-

fective team before deploying. These commanders choose key staff officers with care and develop the perception that each contingent is properly represented and respected. They also try to influence the training of other contingents before their deployment and do what they can to assist sponsoring governments. When practical, these commanders include all contingents in planning and promote the coalition as a special, high-performing military organization.

The US commanding general of the UN Mission in Haiti, under an Algerian SRSG, provided a model for multinational success. He used the time between his appointment and the transfer of authority from the initial US-led Multinational Force to ensure success of the new UN operation. He did this by training the core of his multinational staff in country, developing a transition plan with the existing US force, gaining the trust of his foreign contingent commanders and working out the complex structural details to integrate foreign contingents. As a key achievement, he fostered a professional relationship with the SRSG.⁷

In past operations, successful commanders ensured predeployment training was conducted by participating contingents. This training included cultural and operational factors of the mission, orientation to the various contingents in the coalition, rules of engagement, individual skills and force protection. Senior leaders discovered that they benefited from training in mediation and negotiation techniques, orientation to key influential players, and reinforcement of consensus building and interpersonal skills.

Once in the area of operation, these commanders promoted an effective reception and orientation program; encouraged professional development programs, operational situation permitting; and created an effective command information program. Furthermore, they encouraged senior subordinate leaders to teach and model the techniques of successful multinational leadership. They led by example, set the appropriate command climate, and kept the coalition together by trust and mutual respect.

While the character, personality, expertise and leadership styles of coalition leaders vary; a few tips from after-action reviews, anecdotal experiences and coalition partners may help maximize multinational leadership. Many of these principles apply throughout an organization in which leaders find themselves working with foreign military colleagues. Recommendations for US senior leaders in coalitions include:

- *Place the highest priority on developing trust.* Invest the time and effort in those personal relation-

ships that are essential to success. Do not promise what may not be delivered, and always deliver what is promised.

- *Do everything possible to foster fairness and equality.* Distribute resources, assign tasks and missions, conduct meetings, speak publicly without bias and quickly dispel all perceptions of inequity.

- *Articulate and demand pervasive professionalism.* Set, publish and require high standards for training and performance. Foster intensive coalition

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training sessions and live-fire exercises. Form a united front within the organization and present that unity externally. Encourage officers to be advocates for the coalition.

- *Develop stakeholders.* Using the shared vision as a foundation, continually emphasize the common risks, rewards and responsibilities. Taking on a collective, coalition identity develops a new level of pride, cohesion and sense of achievement.

- *Be patient.* Many problems result from different techniques and will challenge all participants. It is extremely important that leaders tolerate unavoidable irritations. Coalition colleagues will praise a commander's ability to remain calm amid chaos and make decisions at the right time (not unduly pressured by national considerations).

- *Praise in public; correct and counsel in private.* This is an especially critical technique when dealing with coalition partners. Inevitable disagreements must not become public or personal. Wisely follow a modified golden rule: treat others as they expect to be treated. Make a special effort to commend the coalition members' outstanding performances.

- *Give others credit for your ideas.* Make suggestions and reinforce responses to your ideas as if their response was the original idea. If done subtly, this can have amazing results in terms of support, ownership and overall execution of tasks.

- *Encourage others to speak their minds—foster initiative.* Be approachable, listen and consider coalition partners' suggested alternatives. Effective leaders avoid talking too much and are good listeners.

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- *Be willing to take prudent risks and avoid micromanagement.* Focus on mission-type orders and encourage coalition partners to do it their way. Delegate where practicable. Recognize that other contingents can often accomplish the mission using methods that are equally or more effective.

- *Learn about key, non-US participants.* Show interest in the other military contingents. Honor their national holidays or military commemorations and value their traditions. Identify the essential nonmilitary components and become comfortable working with civilians from other cultures.

- *Honor coalition colleagues by being sensitive to their religious or cultural concerns.* Consider the need of some partners for special consideration to support their religious practices (such as the physical limitations Ramadan fasting may place on Muslims). Be sensitive to words, gestures and actions that may offend others from different cultures. If possible, learn a few words of a contingent's native language.

- *Choose and use liaison officers well.* A US coalition commander should choose trusted American liaison officers with the professional expertise, lan-

guage skills and cultural sensitivity to be accepted and incorporated in foreign units. Conversely, he should find ways to include the liaisons of coalition partners among his trusted assistants so they can accurately transmit his intent to their contingents.

- *Establish an operating tempo that supports all coalition members.* As a battle rhythm is developed for the operation, make sure it is appropriate for all contingents. Coalition subordinates often comment that the workaholic approach of US leaders does little to contribute to operational success. Obviously, a balanced approach to this issue is of greatest utility in a multicultural military force.

Effective coalition leaders blend contingents' "best practices" and develop fair policies and procedures—they are known for their caring and respectful attitude as well as specific actions. Coalition leaders also tend to be highly valued for their character, expertise and overall credibility. The best of these leaders consistently use techniques that build consensus, mediate differences and show appreciation.

Given the complexity of coalition operations and the numerous obstacles to success, senior military professionals must hone skills and develop competencies that work well during multinational operations. They must also avoid the assumption that leadership techniques that have worked in national tactical applications will be effective with foreign militaries. Given the likelihood of US participation in coalitions and the importance of these operations to American interests, Army leaders must carefully prepare now for the associated professional challenges. The payoff—for national objectives, international peace and personal fulfillment—can be profound. **MR**

NOTES

1. The term "coalition" is used here interchangeably with the broader term, "multinational." Coalitions operations generally pose a greater challenge than those within an established alliance or other multilateral applications because they exist only as long as they are politically expedient and merge components that may have no prior experience together.

2. Maxwell G. Manwaring, "Peace and Stability Lessons from Bosnia," *Parameters* (Winter 1998-1999), 31. This article reports on two strategic after action reviews on Bosnia conducted by the US Army Peacekeeping Institute.

3. Joint Warfighting Center, *Joint Task Force Commander's Handbook for Peace Operations*, (Joint Warfighting Center, June 1997), xvi.

4. Robert H. Scales Jr., "Trust, Not Technology, Sustains Coalitions," *Parameters* (Winter 1998-99), 9.

5. Glenn Bowers, "Legal Issues in Peace Operations," *Parameters* (Winter 1998-99), 66.

6. Walter F. Ulmer, "Military Leadership into the 21st Century: Another Bridge Too Far?" *Parameters* (Spring 1998), 20.

7. US Army Peacekeeping Institute "Success in Peacekeeping, United Nations Mission in Haiti: The Military Perspective" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: US Army Peacekeeping Institute, 1996).

Colonel Larry M. Forster is the director of Military History, Department of National Security and Strategy, US Army War College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He received a B.A. from the University of California and M.A. degrees from the University of California and John Jay College of Criminal Justice. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, and the US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the Continental United States, Germany, Egypt and Iraq, to include chief of staff, Multinational Force and Observers, Sinai, Egypt; director, US Army Peacekeeping Institute, Carlisle Barracks; commander, Military Coordination Center, Operation Provide Comfort, Zakho, Iraq; and chief, Operations Division, Office of the Provost Marshal, US Army Europe, Mannheim, Germany.