



NEWPORT PAPERS

A Series of Point Papers
from the Naval War College and the
Navy Warfare Development Command
For Senior Leadership
In Response to Critical Issues

Strategy / CONOPS / Doctrine / Decision

United States Naval War College
Navy Warfare Development Command
Newport, Rhode Island

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**THE TERROR WAR:
PERSPECTIVES ON COALITION ISSUES**

Purpose: To examine coalition considerations unique to the war on terror.

Background: The Bush administration moved quickly to assemble a coalition to support its campaign against the perpetrators of the 11 September attacks specifically and against terrorists with global reach and their supporters generally. The adoption of a coalition strategy was not surprising. Multilateralism has long been central to U.S. foreign policy generally and U.S. military strategy specifically. Because the war on terror has significant unique dimensions, however, tried and trusted coalition formulas may not fit. Indeed, some of the advantages of traditional coalitions may be disadvantages in the current situation. In addition, a protracted war on terror may pose unique problems for coalition maintenance.

Discussion. The following set of three key coalition issues must be addressed as the strategy for the continuing war on terror unfolds.

1. Constraints on U.S. freedom of action. Because coalition partners inevitably attempt to influence the formulation of strategy and policy, U.S. freedom of action will be constrained by its coalition partners. The most pressing issue is the whether the benefits of a coalition outweigh their costs.

A broad coalition enhances the political legitimacy of U.S. actions, presents a united front to our enemies, increases the diplomatic, political, and economic pressures that can be brought to bear, adds to the military capabilities arrayed against terrorists and their supporters, and ties partner states more closely with American objectives, thereby increasing their level of commitment to the war on terrorism over the long term. By taking unilateral action or building only a small, select coalition of close partners, however, the U.S. could remain relatively free to define its objectives according to uniquely American security interests. Coalition partners will attempt to impose explicit or implicit constraints on the ability of the United States to define war aims, select military targets, and decide when military and political objectives have been achieved.

2. The purpose of a coalition. The calculation of potential benefits and costs will be influenced by the purposes for which a coalition is formed and the role(s) to be played by its members. Traditionally, coalitions are formed to enhance legitimacy and improve not only military but also diplomatic, political, and economic capabilities. The international community generally recognized the right of the United States to respond forcefully following the events of 11 September. Moreover, Article 51 of the United Nations Charter clearly provided the legal basis for any military action. Outside of the Muslim

world, the United States has encountered no significant opposition to measured actions aimed at holding accountable those responsible for the 11 September attacks and at preventing future attacks.

As the war on terrorism continues, all states should be encouraged to provide maximum diplomatic, economic, informational, and moral support; to cooperate fully in all matters related to intelligence-sharing and security coordination; and to search for ways to enhance their value as partners in a long-term campaign against terrorism. These broader contributions to the war effort may be of greater value than token military contributions.

Many states may wish to join a U.S.-led coalition for reasons of internal politics, prestige, or to gain favor with the United States. Piling on traditional allies in a war on Islamist-inspired terrorism, however, may do little to enhance coalition legitimacy, particularly in the eyes of the Muslim world. In the Greater Middle East and Central Asia, the participation of non-U.S. NATO forces other than those of Turkey in any military action could erode rather than augment the legitimacy of American actions as the war continues. Including too many Western coalition partners could be counter-productive. For purposes of maintaining legitimacy over the long haul, Arab and/or Muslim coalition partners may be of greater value than Western partners. Though the military forces they can contribute may be of limited practical use, these states can provide unique intelligence, basing, and access. Their participation in a coalition could well be the most effective means of enhancing and maintaining the legitimacy of American actions in those parts of the world where it really matters. It should be recognized, however, that the participation of Arab and/or Muslim states could seriously constrain U.S. freedom of action.

If large-scale, sustained military operations against states other than Afghanistan become necessary in the near future, the United States could consider building and maintaining a coalition with the smallest possible number of Western states—perhaps only Great Britain—and the maximum number of Arab and/or Muslim states. This will minimize the appearance that Western powers are "ganging up" on a particular state and help reduce any possible backlash against the United States. It should appear that Muslim states are playing a leading role in enforcing law and order in their own "back yard." Under this approach, possible constraints on U.S. freedom of action are viewed as a small price to pay for the advantages entailed in the enhanced legitimacy provided by regional support. The advantages of a carefully constituted coalition to achieve short-term objectives are seen as outweighing the potential advantages of unilateral action.

The case can be made, however, that maximizing Western participation in the U.S.-led coalition, despite the symbolic military contributions of some, will strengthen the U.S. position. By constructing a solid diplomatic, political, economic, and military front over the long term, the United States will both impress adversaries with the commitment of its coalition and help deter efforts to employ "divide and conquer" strategies against the U.S.-led coalition. After all, states in what has been called the "arc of crisis" have exploited tensions (and differing material interests) among the Western allies to further their own interests in the past. Moreover, the military contribution of even less capable

Western states is important because it compels coalition partners to take a public stand and gives them a vested interest in the success of coalition operations. According to this logic, concrete support from traditional allies should not be sacrificed in a quest for regional support and sanction that may well prove futile.

In a long-term, perhaps lower-intensity, war against terrorism, a traditional military coalition will not necessarily be appropriate. Under these circumstances, a coalition may need to be "floating," with the United States and selected other states as permanent members and others coming and going as they see fit to contribute, are called upon, or find politically expedient. In some cases coalition members might wish to keep their involvement covert so as to avoid unfavorable press both at home and abroad. The United States should find ways to enhance bilateral ties with partners in the long-term war against terrorism and the development of new organizations—security, political, and economic—that might both support the current campaign and lay the foundation for future regional security, political order, and economic development.

3. *Sustaining coalition support for a protracted war.* As the events of 11 September recede, the initial outpouring of international support for the United States will diminish. If military operations are prolonged, divisions within the coalition will increase and members may be tempted to withdraw. To maintain long-term international support, particularly that of Arab and/or Muslim states, the United States should demonstrate that it is responsive to the needs of the Greater Middle East and Central Asia, not just U.S. domestic demands for retribution. It should address the root causes of its problems in this part of the world. A more serious effort must be made to find viable solutions to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the situation vis-à-vis Iraq, and the oftentimes disruptive U.S. military presence in Southwest Asia, the most contentious issues presently alienating moderate regimes in this part of the world from the United States. If the United States demonstrates that it will be constructively engaged in the Middle East over the long term, moderate states within the region may be more inclined to remain in a U.S.-led coalition against other regional states (or states).

Recommendations/Actions: Policymakers must consider carefully the implications of the complexities of the unique war upon which we have embarked as they employ and attempt to maintain the coalition they have built.