Military Coalitions and the Problem of Wartime Cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

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Military coalitions are everywhere in international politics: deterring wars, waging wars (when deterrence fails), and enforcing (or tolerating) the peace that follows. Alex Weisiger's recent ISQ article, "Exiting the Coalition," (2016) studies the challenges of sustaining military cooperation during interstate wars, showing that coalition partners are more likely to pull out of the war effort when fighting separately from their partners and when things aren't going well on the battlefield—two factors that make cooperation difficult to sustain even in the face of the side payments that often secure military cooperation. The contributors to this symposium, Marina Henke and Daniel Morey, engage Weisiger's study by exploring the limits of specific coding rules and how they relate to underlying concepts of abandonment (versus, say, entrapment) and the extent to which a coalition's aims are fixed (across either time or the membership). In his response, Weisiger notes that coding rules generally hold up to some specific objections, but he also argues that his key hypotheses should be robust even to the possibility that states try to compensate their partners to prevent abandonment when things go poorly on the battlefield.[1] It's a rich symposium on a topic that feels very present—especially as (a) coalition efforts continue against ISIL in Iraq and Syria and (b) the peacetime coalition that has managed the Postwar global order for over seven decades has begun to show some cracks in its foundations.

I'll let the contributors' comments and the author's response stand on their own below, but I do think it worth mentioning that each piece in this symposium reflects a tension that all scholarship on coalitions must face: the lack of a common, shared idea of what constitutes a military coalition. Glenn Snyder noted twenty-six years ago that alliances are relatively easy to identity and describe, but coalitions less so (Snyder 1991). During wartime, we often think it's easy to know them when we see them, but in the crises before the war and in the peacemaking and enforcement phase afterwards, it's less clear.[2] Operational definitions in prewar, wartime, and postwar phases abound (if you'll pardon the self-promotion, see Wolford 2015, Chapter 2), yet even as Weisiger focuses quite reasonably on a clear, obvious environment—shared war efforts—the contributions to this symposium show that there's still plenty of space to fill in describing the core elements of what it means to participate in a coalition, to build one, and to leave one. To be sure, as the contributors and others (Wolford and Ritter 2016; Kreps 2011; Tago 2007, and Vucetic 2010, inter alia) have shown, states join military coalitions for different reasons and on different terms, and the terms of military cooperation must often be renegotiated as battlefield realities or war aims evolve. This requires that we think hard about integrating theories of military cooperation with theories of crisis bargaining, of war prosecution and termination, and of restoring peace after wars end. Engaging in debates like this, which will allow us to work out a few agreed features of the object under study, not only when deterrence fails and coalitions go to war but also when they pursue their aims short of war (Wolford 2013) and when they try to

[1] Which presumably implies that the relationships uncovered in the observational data underestimate the true relationships, because a number of defections that would've occurred are now kept off the equilibrium path by compensation schemes. But I digress.

[2] Alliances, of course, are one solution to that problem, as they try to clarify who will and won't be part of wartime coalitions. But they're neither necessary nor sufficient for us to see a coalition form in practice.

manage their victories (Wolford 2017), will ultimately prove useful for identifying the role of military coalitions in both war-time and peacetime.

Abandoning Who, When and What Exactly?

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In April 2004, Spain "abandoned" the Iraq War coalition. The newly elected Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero announced the withdrawal (BBC 2004) of Spain's 1300-strong contingent just hours after he had been sworn in. If Alex Weisiger got it right in his recent ISQ article (2016), Spain's decision can best be explained by battlefield developments: The Iraq campaign was going real bad leading to Spain's decision to throw in the towel. Weisiger also points to an alternative explanation, which only applies, however, to coalitions fighting on separate fronts. In the latter case, Weisiger suggests, successful wedge strategies frequently play a role: fighting on separate fronts signals that interests among allies differ in important areas. Some of the allies thus might be inclined to accept a preemptive settlement with the enemy in an attempt to maximize their own benefits. Weisiger's theory is interesting because it flies in the face of much of what has been said about coalition abandonment in the past. Most notably, Weisiger debunks conventional realist theories that suggest that coalition cohesion depends on threat perceptions (i.e., the greater the threat, the less likely states will abandon the coalition). He also questions arguments that point to problems of collective action (i.e., weak and small states are more prone to abandoning a coalition in an attempt to free-ride) or to the role of domestic politics in coalition abandonment decisions. Weisiger tests his theory using a dataset of all coalition participants in interstate wars between 1816 and 2003.

Looking at the dataset, a couple things strike me. First, it's a real shame that Weisiger cuts off the dataset in 2003. He thus excludes all the instances of abandonment that occurred in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars (such as Spain from Iraq in 2004 but also the Philippines (Taylor 2004), Nicaragua (Pravda, 2004), Italy (The Guardian 2006) from Iraq and the Netherlands (BBC 2010), Canada (CTV News 2014), France (Reuters 2012) from Afghanistan to name just a few). This fact is especially perplexing because his dataset contains only a very small number of instances in which abandonment actually occurred – 41 observations out of 97,393 observations to be precise, which amounts to 0.04%. These observations further drop to 22 out of 50,535 observations if the World Wars are excluded (which are arguably a little bit of a different animal – as Weisiger rightly suggests) and they fall to 10 out of 35,031 if we only look at coalitions built between 1945-2003. Now, the fact that these numbers are so small is not problematic per se. That's reality after all. But it suggests two things: first, qualitative work on the precise causal factors that determine coalition abandonment is feasible (at a minimum when looking at the 1945-2003 period) and we would potentially learn a ton – especially with regard to how various abandonment rationales interact. Second, the very small number of abandonment cases raises the question of why this is such a rare phenomenon? Why do states hardly ever exit coalitions? During my own research on the Korean War coalition (forthcoming with ISQ), I came across South Africa, which threatened to exit the coalition in February 1952. The South African ambassador to the United States, G.P. Jooste, explained the decision to U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson by pointing to the U.S. government's failure to heed South African

demands for U.S. jet aircraft.[3] The South African abandonment threat terrified the State Department. It felt vulnerable and worried that a South African exit "at this time might very well start [a] chain reaction [in the] reduction [of] forces [of] other countries [in] Korea with attendant weakening of UN position and encouragement [of the] enemy." As a result, State Department officials tried everything they could to persuade the Pentagon to provide these aircraft to South Africa, and it worked. South Africa stayed in the coalition. Arguably, a somewhat similar story can be told about the Gulf War coalition. Threats by Arab allies such as Egypt, Syria and Morocco to exit the coalition led (among others) to a U.S. decision not to overthrow Saddam Hussein (see e.g., Secretary of State James Baker's memoir,1995). Both of these instances would provide a different answer to Weisiger's question of when states abandon coalition partners during war. These instances would suggest that states do so when intra-coalition negotiations over coalition objectives or coalition subsidies fail.

Finally, who exactly gets abandoned? Weisiger defines coalition abandonment the following way: "a country ceases to engage in organized military efforts against the enemy contrary to the wishes of its coalition partners." He includes the Vietnam War coalition in his dataset and codes as abandonment the United States' exit of the coalition in 1973 (alongside the exists of South Korea, Thailand and the Philippines respectively). In other words, Weisiger suggests that all these countries "abandoned" South Vietnam. Now, let's not fool ourselves. The Vietnam War coalition was entirely conceived, constructed and maintained by the United States. The U.S. government provided generous subsidies and other side-payments (Blackburn 1994) to South Korea, the Philippines and Thailand to participate in the coalition. As a result, I find it bizarre to code these cases as "abandonment" of South Vietnam in a coalition-sense of the term. Rather, the United States decided to shut down business in Vietnam and thus the intervention came to a halt.

[3] EMBASSY OF THE UNION OF SOUTH AFRICA (1952, February 11). Letter Embassy of the Union of South Africa to Dean Acheson, PPF: SMOF; Selected Records Relating to the Korean War; Department of State: Topical File Subseries; 6. Contributions to the UN effort [2 of 3: August 1950 – December 1951]; Truman Papers; Truman Library.

Defining Coalition Defection

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There are two key concepts in this paper: coalitions and abandonment. There is already a healthy debate on how to define a coalition; however, the concept of abandonment (or defection) has not received the same treatment. While a seemingly straightforward concept, abandonment can be difficult to operationalize.

When studying coalition defection, Weisiger (2016) defines coalition abandonment "as any case in which a country ceases to engage in organized military efforts against the enemy contrary to the wishes of its coalition partners." This definition combines a behavioral attribute (not fighting) on the part of one state and a policy preference (keep fighting) from another state to code abandonment. While it seems clear that ceasing to fight while some of your coalition partners are still fighting is one way to look at abandonment, it does create potential inconsistencies and false positives. The two cases that come to mind are 1) a form of coalition entrapment and 2) a state with limited objectives.

The first case is a variant of entrapment from the alliance literature; however, here a state has to keep fighting a war it has already joined or be considered a defector. Take the coalition that formed during the 1991 Gulf War. The members of the coalition joined to achieve very clear objectives outlined in various Security Council resolutions, most directly the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. However, had President George Bush decided to march on Baghdad to remove Saddam Hussein, any member that did not join the United States on the road to Baghdad would be considered as having abandoned the coalition. In this example, the coalition's objectives expanded after the war started, something that we know can happen from the war bargaining literature, and potentially not all members agreed with the new objectives and ceased operations after achieving the original goals. This does not seem like abandonment, at least not in the same way as exiting a war because you made a separate peace and leaving your once partners to fend for themselves.

For the second case, imagine a state joining a war with the expressed purpose of taking a piece of territory; say a colonial holding of one of the belligerents. Here the state joins the war with a specific and narrow objective that is isolated from the larger conflict. After taking the territory, the state may elect to withdraw from the fighting even though the rest of the coalition keeps fighting. Under the current definition of abandonment this would appear as a successful wedge strategy that split a state from the coalition when in reality the state lived up to its commitment. Again, this does not feel like abandonment since the state in question did exactly what it said it would do.

The case I am making clearly draws from a similar debate that took place inside the alliance reliability literature. Early studies relied upon a behavior, fighting with an ally, to determine if states honored their alliance commitments. The results from these studies gave the impression that states rarely honored their commitments. It was not until the creation of the Alliance Treaty Obligations and Provisions (ATOP) (Leeds et al. 2002) project, and its focus on the exact commitments made in a treaty, that we learned that states tend to take their commitments seriously. What we also learned is that states very carefully define their obligations in order to meet their objectives. Given this, it seems justified to assume that

states join coalitions to obtain certain objectives and they will tailor their commitments to the coalition to match their goals.

Following the ATOP example, in order to study the concept of coalition abandonment we need to carefully examine the commitments individual states made to their coalition partners. Then we can compare the commitments to the observed behavior in order to judge when a state abandoned a coalition. This is a large undertaking and one handicapped by the fact that coalitions do not require any sort of formal written document (although many are extensions of pre-war alliances or are covered by war time treaties). However, this seems like the natural evolution given the clear policy relevance an understanding of coalition abandonment could have on future efforts in building international military coalitions.

Response from the Author

Alex Weisiger
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I thank Marina Henke and Daniel Morey for their thoughtful comments on my article. Both scholars raised a number of important points about key concepts and about where subsequent work on this topic might go. In general, I agree with their comments, though (I suspect unsurprisingly) I am inclined to see many of their points already reflected in my article.

I argue that decisions about whether to abandon coalition partners are driven by battlefield circumstances, an important factor neglected by existing work that almost exclusively examines domestic politics. In particular, I argue that abandonment is more likely when countries are fighting independently and when battlefield results have trended downhill recently. Both Henke and Morey raise questions about the concept of abandonment and point to the potential for a closer examination of political agreements among coalition members; I thus focus on these concerns in my response.

The concept of abandonment is obviously crucial for any study of when countries abandon coalition partners. My definition focuses on the complete withdrawal of forces at a time when partners would prefer that the country continue to fight. This definition permits relatively unambiguous coding of cases for statistical analysis, but it loses a lot of the nuance of coalition politics – a qualitative study of the sort that Henke advocates would for example be able to examine partial abandonment, in which a country pulls back from its wartime commitments without withdrawing altogether.

Morey identifies two scenarios in which my stated coding rules might result in a misleading coding of abandonment. The first is coalition entrapment, in which a country pulls back while objecting to its partners' increasing war aims. This concern is legitimate, but in practice I can think of only one case that potentially fits this description, the French decision to withdraw from the Crimean War at a time when the British wanted to forge ahead after victory at Sevastopol (which I already revisit in robustness checks). Second, Morey raises the possibility that a state might join a coalition with limited aims and then leave when its agreed-upon responsibilities have been achieved. I agree that this sort of case should not be coded as abandonment (pg. 754), and for that reason do not consider the two relevant cases (Ethiopia and the Soviet Union in World War II) as abandoning their partners.

Henke by contrast objects to coding the members of the Vietnam War coalition as abandoning South Vietnam when, following the lead of the United States, they negotiated a withdrawal in January 1973. I agree that this case is unusual, especially in that it is the one case in which an entire coalition abandoned a single remaining partner, but I coded it as abandonment in part because doing so biased against my findings. The five countries that withdraw constitute over 2/3 of all cases of abandonment when fighting on a common front. Rerunning the analysis with those cases coded as non-abandonment thus unsurprisingly strengthens results for the common front variable, while leaving the other key findings basically unchanged.

On the theoretical side, Henke focuses on the role of intra-coalition bargaining, citing cases in which coalition members convinced the United States to make side payments or to limit its political demands to keep them in the coalition. Morey similarly advocates a closer examination of the specific agreements among coalition partners. I fully agree that I could have addressed intra-coalition bargaining in greater detail, and I am pleased to see that Henke's research examines these negotiations. I would argue, however, that my findings have important implications for the feasibility of intra-coalition bargains.

As I argue in the article, countries that do not fight on a common front tend to have different interests from those of their coalition partners, making them logical targets for wedge strategies by opponents. As Henke observes, in the face of such wedge strategies a country's coalition partners could promise additional concessions to keep the country on board. Doing so becomes more difficult, however, when the target of the wedge strategy has particularistic interests that are not under the control of its coalition partners. There was little that Egypt could offer its allies in October 1948, for example, to induce them to continue the war effort against Israel. Similarly, as battlefield results worsen, coalition members must expect that the pie available to divide at the end of the war will be smaller than they previously expected, and hence that there will be greater contestation over how to allocate benefits among coalition members. In this context, the enemy will be better able to outbid a wedge target's current coalition partners.

Finally, Henke expresses disappointment about my failure to include the Iraq and Afghanistan occupying coalitions, from which a number of countries withdrew forces over time. While I agree that increasing the number of observations in statistical analyses is certainly desirable, I elected not to include these cases because they differ in important respects from other coalition efforts I examine. In both cases, the coalition was engaged in counterinsurgency without a government opponent, while most countries contributed relatively small forces that in some cases did not engage in fighting (as with Norway's insistence that its forces were involved in a humanitarian mission unconnected to the war effort). That said, the accelerating number of countries withdrawing forces as conditions worsened was clearly consistent with the argument that worsening battlefield conditions induce abandonment.

Ultimately, of course, battlefield conditions are only one of the many determinants (if an important one) of coalition abandonment, and abandonment is only aspect of coalition politics. Studies in the past few years, by Henke and Morey as well as by scholars such as Sarah Kreps (2011), Scott Wolford (2015), and Patricia Weitsman (2014), among others, have significantly advanced our understanding of military coalitions. I thank Henke and Morey for pointing to useful directions for continuing this research program, and look forward to seeing how it continues to evolve.

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