Trust, Not Technology, Sustains Coalitions

Robert H. Scales Jr.

Recommended Citation

Scales, Robert H.. "Trust, Not Technology, Sustains Coalitions." *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 28, 4 (1998). https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol28/iss4/10

Trust, Not Technology, Sustains Coalitions

ROBERT H. SCALES, JR.

> History testifies to the ineptitude of coalitions in waging war. Allied failures have been so numerous and their inexcusable blunders so common that professional soldiers had long discounted the possibility of effective allied action unless available resources were so great as to assure victory by inundation. Even Napoleon's reputation as a brilliant military leader suffered when students . . . came to realize that he always fought against coalitions--and therefore against divided counsels and diverse political, economic, and military interests. -- Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe*[1]

As Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during World War II, General Dwight Eisenhower led one of the most successful coalitions in history. By insisting on an integrated staff and demanding an atmosphere of fairness and mutual respect, Eisenhower transcended personalities and many political challenges to his decisions. His success was in large measure attributable to the cohesive--if sometimes contentious--environment at Supreme Headquarters Allied Forces Europe.

Strategists predict that instability and conflict will characterize the 21st century, due to cultural unrest and regional wars engulfing bordering states or consuming states from within.[2] Over the past decade Western democracies and others, mindful of the need to contain the spread of violence, have demonstrated increased willingness to use military force to defuse internal or regional political conflicts or to respond to humanitarian crises.

But smaller and more expensive militaries as well as pressing social needs confront decisionmakers with the need to find ways to contain the cost of such military undertakings. For the foreseeable future the United States will remain reluctant to intervene unilaterally in most crises; as a consequence, the need for coalition partners will shape American strategy.

In all its modern wars the United States has fought as a member of a coalition.[3] Thus, it is likely that US military leaders throughout their careers will confront the challenge of organizing and leading coalitions. Any officer knows intuitively, if not from experience, that interoperability of equipment and compatibility of doctrine and operational procedures pose significant challenges in any coalition. Many also are aware of the costs of rationalizing procurement, doctrine, and training within the NATO alliance; few, however, could even speculate on how to reach NATO's levels of interoperability within a coalition.

Eisenhower's success is instructive here: the compatibility of leaders and staffs in a coalition is more important than compatibility in doctrine or materiel. This article considers technological capabilities, requirements for coalition interoperability, and the need to revive a concept with a long history--the liaison officer as "directed telescope"--to form and manage coalitions.

Communicating in Coalitions

Coalition operations need two simultaneous methods of communication. The first presumes the technical connectivity required within coalitions to perform assigned missions. The US military needs to develop sufficient compatibility in data and information to provide a reasonable level of technical interoperability with prospective coalition partners.

The second method relies on personal and professional relationships with counterparts in other nations. It recognizes the potential impediments of language, cultural differences, and national perspectives when operating in a coalition.

Compensating for such impediments requires long-term investments in training select officers to function autonomously under great stress within a multinational environment. Sensitive to national or subnational issues and skilled in building trust based on personal relationships, such officers would help regional commanders-in-chief "see" the complexities of strategic and operational environments.

Alliances and Coalitions

While there are similarities between alliances and coalitions, politically and structurally they are markedly different. Created for collective defense or to cope with a long-term threat, alliances usually rest on formal agreements among nations with mutual interests and (often) cultural ties. Sometimes referred to as "latent" war communities, alliances require a formal structure, agreed-upon rules, and protocols to manage the routine and structure the rest.

For many years Washington's Farewell Address shaped US perspectives on alliances: "'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world."[4] By the end of World War II, however, the threat of Soviet aggression proved more compelling than 150 years of tradition. The role of the United States in developing NATO as a barrier to Soviet aggression,[5] and the Organization of American States to improve relations in the Western Hemisphere, needs no review. But alliances remain viable only so long as the reason for their founding endures. The Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) dissolved long before the Soviet Union did, and in 1986 the United States suspended security obligations incurred with New Zealand under the ANZUS treaty (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States).

In contrast, coalitions are transitory, emerging in response to specific threats and dissolving once coalition goals have been met. Politically fragile in nature, they develop out of necessity, sometimes uniting nations without a history of harmonious relations. Since the end of the Cold War, "coalitions of the willing" have been an increasing factor within NATO in dealing with crises affecting the vital interests of only a part of the alliance. Italy's leading role in the 1997 intervention in Albania may be a harbinger of NATO's future in this respect.[6]

National military capabilities either increase or reduce the coalition's fighting power by their value relative to other coalition members and the capabilities of the adversary. For coalitions facing major operations, member nations with large armies are important. Coalitions formed from roughly equal militaries sharing qualitative characteristics offer versatility. And some coalitions will include members whose participation is symbolic. These states contribute little in military capability; they serve primarily to increase the number of flags at the command post and add international legitimacy.

Technology in Coalitions

Technology is a two-edged sword in coalition operations. Global communications systems enhance connectivity among coalition members; emerging military technology allows unprecedented surveillance. Moreover, information technologies have the potential to accelerate deployments and permit decisive operations.

The downside is that rapid and costly changes in technology also create barriers to effective integration of coalition forces. Thoughtful observers have already noted that in a replay of the 1990-91 Gulf War, there could be three and possibly four distinct levels of technology within the coalition. The United States could be well in advance of the second-tier militaries, such as the United Kingdom, Germany, and France, with the rest of pre-enlargement NATO forces at a third level. The fourth level could include recent NATO accessions and the armed forces of other states. Moreover, while the US military might eventually be able to preempt adversary planning, those same adversaries could limit or negate our ability to achieve surprise by accessing similar technology. Finally, until logistic capabilities improve ways and means for operating in bare-base environments, Army theater requirements and Title 10 responsibilities will pose substantial strategic and operational challenges in either multilateral or unilateral environments.

Attaining technological interoperability will be difficult for coalitions in any case. Each Gulf War participant arrived with its own level of technical sophistication. In some cases participants had advanced systems that were not compatible within the coalition. In others, military units needed substantial assistance to communicate with coalition partners. For example, it required approximately 70 soldiers, 27 tons of equipment, and 80 days of training and

coordination to create communication interoperability for an average brigade from the Middle Eastern nations.[7] The sheer number of potential coalition partners and the cost of acquiring common or interoperable equipment may make it impossible to guarantee interoperability in similarly constituted coalitions over the next five to ten years.[8]

To further complicate matters, the rate of change in communications, automation, and other technologies is such that equipment is often obsolete before military organizations can establish and maintain interoperability for coalition operations. In the meantime, availability of off-the-shelf technology may allow potential adversaries to procure the latest equipment even as potential coalition members struggle with obsolete equipment. Technology offers no panacea for conducting coalition operations, regardless of who the members are.

Liaison Officers Can Help

The practice of using liaison officers as "directed telescopes" to facilitate command and control is almost as old as war itself. Beginning in antiquity and continuing into the modern era, ground commanders have relied on carefully selected subordinates to serve as their eyes and ears. These trusted agents, often with direct access to the deliberations that produced the "commander's intent," have provided invaluable information to the commander's immediate staff and others. And during the heat of battle they assisted commanders by communicating orders and controlling units.[9]

A number of great captains developed communications and information gathering systems that resemble the directed telescope concept of the 19th and 20th centuries. Alexander the Great detailed junior officers as couriers to help control widely separated columns. Caesar's staff included aides who served as observers and couriers for high-priority missions. Napoleon relied on liaison officers to provide vital battlefield information and to clarify his intent to subordinates, while Grant used liaison officers to help form impressions of the morale and spirit of his Army.[10]

Field Marshal Montgomery was perhaps the most creative user of such liaison officers in World War II. He selected and integrated into his personal staff a small group of young combat veterans. With the Field Marshal's authority to go anywhere and see anything, these liaison officers traveled extensively, gathering and reporting information via radio. Many returned at night to Montgomery's command post to provide firsthand accounts of their insights. The responsibilities of Montgomery's officers extended beyond gathering information. They could interrupt normal signal traffic with their reports, and they routinely interacted with senior generals and politicians. Moreover, Montgomery authorized them to ask pointed questions of senior officers who appeared incapable of executing their prescribed tasks.[11] This system allowed him to keep the pulse of British, American, Canadian, and Polish formations under his command.[12] Churchill delighted in hearing the nightly reports from Montgomery's "directed telescopes"; he considered the system invaluable in the command of Montgomery's forces.[13] The question for us today is whether the average Army captain or major could perform such tasks in a coalition environment. Are we preparing such officers in our schools and training institutions?

A Geostrategic Scout

One can expect that skilled junior officers will continue to serve as liaison officers to allied tactical formations much as they have in the past. But what of the strategic level, where geopolitical issues and conflicting national interests truly complicate coalitions and alliances? Until 1990 many US Army officers had experience in NATO, as well as in the culture, economy, politics, and forces of other countries around the world. This familiarity came about largely through the Army's Foreign Area Officer (FAO) program. Prepared by study and assignment, such officers served as high-level liaison officers in good times and bad. Unfortunately, the Army has had to curtail that program during the drawdown.

Recent experience indicates a clear requirement for a cadre of officers whose skills and capabilities would transcend the norms of the Foreign Area Officer program. In an era of short-notice deployments, the Army and the other services need to examine the requirement for sophisticated liaison personnel--officers, noncommissioned officers, and civilians--in the active and reserve components. Such individuals would perform the tasks of the foreign area specialist and more. As in the FAO program, their skills would include language as well as cultural and historical understanding of one or more countries in a region. But they would set their sights much higher to include regional geostrategic and geopolitical matters; knowledge of key regional alliances; awareness of new and emerging technologies affecting the ability of the United States to lead or sustain a coalition; US capabilities in strategic communications, logistics, transportation, and sustainment; the interagency process that determines US involvement in peace support activities;

and the international humanitarian support system, including the principal private volunteer and nongovernmental organizations through which most humanitarian and developmental work occurs. This list of capabilities is representative, not inclusive; it defines only part of the challenge facing each regional commander-in-chief every day.

Personnel with the desired attributes would be available to regional commanders-in-chief and commanders of combined and national joint task forces. They would assume the role of advisor to the task force commander in matters as important as those addressed by political advisors to regional or theater commanders. The reported proliferation of political advisors in the Balkans underscores the need for such officers. Traditionally "reserved" for work at the highest headquarters, individuals charged with keeping the task force and other commanders apprised of local political, social, and economic conditions have appeared at many levels in Bosnia. This is a pragmatic solution to an unprecedented requirement. With the FAO concept as the foundation, the Army needs to draw on the Bosnia experience and identify new skills and attributes required at the headquarters of coalition partners in 2025. We can do better than ad hoc solutions during crises.

What's the Precedent?

In multinational operations, trust binds the coalition together. "Patience, tolerance, frankness, absolute honesty in all dealings, particularly with all persons of the opposite nationality, and firmness are absolutely essential," Eisenhower wrote to Lord Louis Mountbatten as the latter was preparing to assume command in South East Asia.[14] Eisenhower's perspective on coalitions, in large measure shared later by General Norman Schwarzkopf, was that the center of gravity in a coalition is often the coalition itself. There are a number of historical examples that underline this point.

. Hitler aspired to duplicate Frederick the Great's ability to wear down the great alliance formed against Prussia in the Seven Years War. So his concept for the December 1944 offensive through the Ardennes rested on the assumption that by capturing Antwerp and encircling and destroying British and American forces, the Allied coalition would splinter and result in a peace offer.

. During the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein applied similar reasoning when he attempted to draw Israel into the conflict. Israeli retaliation to the Scud attacks might have unraveled the fragile ties binding the coalition together.

Hitler's offensive met a bitter end in the snows of the Ardennes. Israel's close relationship with the United States enabled Israeli political leaders to exercise restraint, and the anti-Iraq coalition held together, to a considerable degree due to the part played by liaison teams. Trust was a key ingredient in sustaining the 1990-91 coalition.

But trust requires time and a measured appraisal of one another to emerge from personal relationships, particularly those that cross cultures.

. In 1981-83, as the Program Manager, Saudi Arabia National Guard, General John Yeosock earned the trust of the Saudi leadership. Years later, as the United States began deploying forces to the region during Desert Shield, Yeosock was granted access and host nation support by Saudi officials.

. The US Army rediscovered the value of liaison officers in the Gulf War. A group of carefully selected liaison teams established communications between Schwarzkopf and major coalition partners. The teams in turn reported to the Coalition Coordination and Communications Integration Center, which provided information and clarified orders to coalition members. Later, the center served as a directed telescope for Schwarzkopf.[15] If we intend to achieve a similar degree of success in future coalition efforts, including peace operations, the United States needs to establish programs to educate and train a cadre capable of communicating effectively with coalition partners. The time to begin is now.

Conclusion

Although emerging technology offers promise for applying precision firepower and swift maneuver through enhanced

information, it will not eliminate the fog and friction of war. New and improved technologies may enhance the 21st-century commander's ability to communicate with coalition partners, but coalition efforts may still founder on the shoals of technical incompatibilities, language difficulties, cultural asymmetries, and ignorance of key historical and geopolitical issues. The antidote to the fog and friction of coalition warfare is not technology; it lies in trusted subordinates who can deal effectively with coalition counterparts.

NOTES

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Jordan, Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, contributed to this article.

1. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1948), p. 4.

2. Earl H. Tilford, Jr., ed., *World View: The 1998 Strategic Assessment from the Strategic Studies Institute* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 26 February 1998).

3. Wayne A. Silkett, "Alliance and Coalition Warfare," *Parameters*, 23 (Summer 1993), 74-85.

4. George Washington, Farewell Address, 17 September 1796, Microsoft Bookshelf 1994.

5. See Alan Ned Sabrosky, ed., *Alliances in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1987), pp. 6-9.

6. See Thomas Cooke, "NATO CJTF Doctrine: The Naked Emperor," *Parameters*, 28 (Winter 1998-99).

7. Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., Chairman's Peace Operations Seminar, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 11 June 1998.

8. For an assessment of NATO's ongoing effort to apply the concept of a combined joint task force to 16 (soon 19) separate nations, see Cooke, "NATO CJTF Doctrine: The Naked Emperor."

9. Gary B. Griffin, *The Directed Telescope: A Traditional Element of Effective Command* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: US Army Command and General Staff College, July 1991), pp. 1-2.

10. Ibid., pp. 10-12.

11. Ibid., p. 30.

12. Nigel Hamilton, *Monty* (New York: Random House, 1981), p. 148.

13. Griffin, pp. 28-33. See also, Alan Moorhead, *Montgomery* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1947), pp. 147-49; and Bernard Law Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field-Marshal The Viscount Montgomery of Alamein* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1958), p. 476.

14. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr., ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower: The War Years III* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1970), pp. 1420-24.

15. Robert H. Scales, Jr. *Certain Victory: The US Army in the Gulf War* (Washington: US Army, Office of the Chief of Staff, 1993), pp. 122, 381.

Major General Robert H. Scales, Jr., USA, is the Commandant of the US Army War College. He previously was the Deputy Chief of Staff for Doctrine, US Army Training and Doctrine Command, Fort Monroe, Va. He also has served in a range of command and staff assignments during his career, including overseas tours in Vietnam, Germany, and South Korea. He holds a Ph.D. in history from Duke University and is a graduate of the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. He is the author of two recent books: *Certain Victory*, the Army's official history of the Gulf War, and *Firepower in Limited War*.

Reviewed 6 November 1998. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil