

# Coalitions and American Military Intervention\*

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**Abstract:** As the only superpower in the international system, the United States uses its force and takes military intervention abroad more often than any other state. Researchers usually argue that the United States has strong unilateral incentives to make decisions and implement military intervention—the US is prone to use or threaten to use the force frequently and obstinately, ignoring the United Nations and international law. An investigation of major US military interventions in the post-Cold War era shows that the United States has often relied on temporary coalitions rather than persistent alliances in military and stability operations, although its decisions to use force are less constrained by the international community. The United States has motivations to recruit multinational military coalitions, such as avoiding the dilemma of collective action, reducing the burden of intervention and acclaiming the legitimacy of their interventions. Military coalitions have clearly-defined missions and flexible means, which provide convenience for the United States to take a leading role in military interventions.

**Keywords:** coalitions, alliances, military intervention

## 1. Introduction

As the only superpower in the international system, the United States has more frequently resorted to the use of armed force and military interventions abroad than other countries in the post-Cold War era. According to one report from the Congressional Research Service (CRS), from 1990 to 2011, the US stationed and

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mobilized armed forces abroad in no less than 123 military operations ranging from large-scale warfare (Gulf War, Kosovo War and Iraq War) to short-term military intervention and unconventional military moves by unmanned fighter attacks.<sup>1</sup> The USA's frequent overseas interference and intervention is determined to a large extent by the unilateral polarity in today's international system. Ranking top on the power list, the US spends a lot on its military to maintain long-term overseas garrisons and large-scale warfare. Furthermore, the US has been orienting its military strategy towards the target of "winning the two wars." On the other hand, other superpowers, far behind the US in military capacity, cannot impose effective checks on American military movements. This means that by using military force, the US is able to further the peripheral interests and values that surround its core interests of survival and security, and can execute "Promoting Democracy;" military action tinted with ideological invasion.

It is generally acknowledged that the US holds a unilateral position in military intervention issues and asserts its self-will beyond the concerns of the international community. The US launches military attacks on other countries through its own will and preference, regardless of authorization from the Security Council of the United Nations. In this light, American military intervention abroad takes on the strong color of unilateralism. Some scholars even claim that US diplomacy follows a tradition of unilateralism rather than isolationism or multilateralism.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, if we take a closer look at American behavioral choices in its important military interventions, such as the Gulf and Kosovo wars in the 1990s and the Iraq, Afghanistan and Libyan wars at the beginning of 21st century, we can find that in the publicity preparatory stage, concrete action stage and the postwar peace-keeping stage, the US executes its military interventions, by neither single-handed actions nor by bilateral or multilateral military alliances. Instead, the US actively establishes coalitions and recruits multinational troops who can offer unanimous support. From this perspective, large-scale American military intervention operations in the post-Cold War period demonstrate that unilateralism is not a proper name to define the pattern of US military intervention.

In academic studies of American strategy, there are three main schools of thought on American armed attack and military intervention. These views are influential in both the academic and political domain, but differ from each other in terms of the necessity and forms of US military intervention. The first group is the realists. Embracing the faith in balance politics and concerns over perilous abuses of power, these realists tend to recognize the unavoidable rise and fall of superpowers and the change of power gaps among these nations in the milieu of power politics and confronted with the problem of avoiding abuse of its formidable power, the US is supposed to use its power in a prudent way and downside its global intervention and interference for the purpose of

1 Richard F. Grimmett, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2012*, Darby, PA: Diane Publishing, 2010.

2 Chu Shaogun, "Unilateralism is a tradition of American Diplomacy," *International Forum*, No. 1 (2008), pp. 73-78 (储昭根:《单边主义是美国外交的一种传统》,载《国际论坛》,2008年第1期,第73-78页)。

erasing other countries' dissatisfaction and checks.<sup>3</sup> The views that these realist scholars hold on military intervention often encounter misunderstandings: they are branded as advocates of power politics and national self-interest, but are in fact protesters of global US intervention. During the Vietnam War, the realists Hans Morgenthau and Reinhold Niebuhr were active anti-war fighters, and famous contemporary realists Kenneth N. Waltz, Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer fiercely condemn US military intervention (especially the Iraq War) in the post-Cold War era. From their perspectives, each country should be prudent in employing armed forces with national security interest as their primary concern. Only when a country's military security is under threat can armed forces be used. Frequent military invasion and attack will incur boycotts and checks from other countries. The realists also hold that the overuse of armed forces can drag a superpower into the mesh of over-expansion. Excessive military intervention will exhaust the American economy, which might eventually fail to pay the huge price brought by warfare. Besides, with a contending force coming into being, the US might be lured into the old track of many declined superpowers.

The second group is called Liberal Internationalists. They maintain that the US should uphold its hegemony by way of international institutes and multilateralism. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the US forged a system of international institutions which not only serves its own interests but also props up liberal and democratic order. Therefore the US is regarded as a merciful hegemon by nature. Even if the US begins to decline, it can still, by the help of international institutions as well as its democratic allies, sustain this international order which is beneficial to American interests and values.<sup>4</sup> According to these Liberal Internationalists, the US can use military intervention to defend fundamental values such as democracy, liberty and human rights. However, the US should use suitable forms and means of intervention—relying on multilateral international institutions and the assistance of allies instead of taking action single-handedly. The New Liberal Institutionalism (NLI) in the international relations theory provides major theoretical support to this notion. Observed from the perspective of NLI, the legitimacy and justification of national behavior relies to a large extent on recognition and acceptance from other countries, which offer institutional assurance within the multilateral framework. Scholars representative of NLI such as G. J. Ikenberry argue that the US can properly use armed forces to promote the American value system as well as the fundamental principles and norms of defending the international order, but the use of force must be restricted within the multilateral framework. Of course, it is a controversial issue

3 For a clear and clarified explanation, please refer to Kenneth Waltz, *Realism and International Politics*, translated by Zhang Ruizhuang and Liu Feng, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2011, pp. 345-349 (〔美〕肯尼思·沃尔兹:《现实主义与国际政治》,张睿壮、刘丰译,北京:北京大学出版社2011年版,第345-349页)。

4 John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order after Major War*, translated by Men Honghua, Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2008 (〔美〕约翰·伊肯伯里:《大战胜利之后——制度、战略约束与秩序重建》,门洪华译,北京:北京大学出版社2008年版)。

whether US military intervention demands the UK's authorization in this block.<sup>5</sup> The *Princeton National Security Project Report* (2006) drafted by liberalist scholars including Ikenberry suggests that the US should set up a "Concert of Democracies" in order to step up security cooperation among liberal democratic countries. It reads, "If the United Nations cannot be reformed, the Concert would provide an alternative forum for liberal democracies to authorize collective action, including the use of force, by a supermajority vote"<sup>6</sup>

The third group is the New Conservatives. In their eyes, the US has remained a unipolar superpower in the past two decades; and the view of American decline is nothing but a show of concern as opposed to a statement of fact. Even after the global economic crisis (2008-2009), US' advantageous status in the global system has never been fundamentally shaken. As a founder and leader of the liberal order, the US is supposed to make full use of its own superpower and endeavor as much as possible to promote its values such as liberty or democracy by using armed forces or relying on unilateral means if necessary. Obviously, New Conservatives stand on the side of unilateralism. In their view, the US should rely on its own forces for military intervention and is entitled to take the initiative in exporting liberal democratic values to the so-called "undeveloped countries" or "loser countries" for the purpose of forging liberal order, promoting democracy and protecting human rights.<sup>7</sup> In Bush Jr.'s administration, New Conservatism brought tremendous influence on American foreign policy and swayed the policy decision on the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. According to the New Conservatives, the US can and should employ all the available means to defend the international order it has forged. The core of this international order is the liberal and open national economic order, liberal democratic value system and political institutions.

As all the above-mentioned opinions indicate, Realists reject the necessity and legitimacy of American military intervention abroad through the "over-Expansion" theory; the other two groups, on the premise of recognizing the necessity of military actions, discuss more how to enhance the efficiency of the decision-making and implementation process of these military interventions, and how to promote American interests and expand its value system. All these are the contentions and differences of the strategists and theoreticians on American use of armed forces abroad. Their views influence and reflect US governmental choice of employing military forces in various periods. If we return to reality and study American practice on military intervention in the post-Cold War period, we will find that these military interventions cannot be easily labeled as unilateral or as multilateral.

In the past two decades, several US-led large-scale military intervention operations

5 To see the discussion on the authorization issues of military intervention within the liberalism block, you can refer to David Armstrong and Theo Farrell, "Force and Legitimacy in World Politics: Introduction," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 31, No. S1 (December 2005), pp. 3-13.

6 G. John Ikenberry and Anne-Marie Slaughter, "Forging A World of Liberty Under Law: U.S. National Security in 21<sup>st</sup> Century," p. 7, <http://www.princeton.edu/~ppns/report/FinalReport.pdf>.

7 Robert Kagan, *The World America Made*, translated by Liu Ruonan, Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2013 (〔美〕罗伯特·卡根:《美国缔造的世界》,刘若楠译,北京:社会科学文献出版社2013年版).

have recruited other countries as allies. For instance, it involved 34 countries in Gulf War (1991), 24 countries in the Polynesian War (1995), 19 countries in the Kosovo War (1999), 48 countries in the Afghanistan War (2001), 49 countries in the Iraq War (2003) and 15 countries in the Libyan War (2011).<sup>8</sup> It's worth noting that, in the Afghanistan War (2001) and the Iraq War (2003), 48 countries and 40 countries respectively participated in the initial military strike or offered intelligence and economic support. At that point, American military intervention encountered rather intense skepticism and protest, with some of America's old allies even standing against them. In these cases, the US still drew a number of supporters. A conclusion can be drawn from these military intervention moves that during the execution of military intervention, post-war reconstruction and peacekeeping processes, the US tends to form coalitions instead of relying on its old allies or on its own force. These cases also show that US military intervention operations are characterized by unilateralism in deciding the necessity, the target and the proper timing of armed attacks. These decisions can be made by the US itself which doesn't deem it necessary to gain the authorization of the Security Council of the United Nations or agreement from its old allies. But once the decision is made, the US will usually execute military actions with the assistance of the multilateral framework—international regulations, American allies and security partners as well as countries in the involved areas. In short, the US tends to practice unilateralism in its decision-making process, but multilateralism in executing these collective military intervention operations. All these above-mentioned phenomena raise two questions: Why does the US organize huge coalitions in key military intervention operations? Why do all the countries in these coalitions support US-led military intervention operations?

## 2. Causes of Constructing a Coalition for Military Intervention

Coalitions are a kind of security cooperation that differ from alliances.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to the plentiful research on alliances, there is precious little academic discussion on coalitions. However, there are innumerable examples of coalitions if viewed from the angle of history and reality of international relations. For example, the Greek coalitions in the Trojan War in Ancient Greece, Anti-French Coalitions in the Napoleonic Wars and the “Coalition National Army” in the Korean War were all coalitions organized because of war. In the post-Cold War international security paradigm, coalitions

8 The statistics record the occasions with the largest numbers of countries involved. See Josh Rogin, “Why Obama's Libya War Coalition is the Smallest in Decades,” [http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/25/why\\_obama\\_s\\_libya\\_war\\_coalition\\_is\\_the\\_smallest\\_in\\_decades](http://thecable.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/25/why_obama_s_libya_war_coalition_is_the_smallest_in_decades), 2011)

9 William T. Tow, “Alliances and Coalitions,” in Marianne Hanson and William T. Tow. eds., *International Relations in the New Century*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001; Thomas S. Wilkins, “‘Alignment’, Not ‘Alliance’—the Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 53-76; Liu Feng, “Coalitions in International Politics,” *Foreign Affairs Review*, No.5 (2012), pp. 56-67 (刘丰:《国际政治中的联合阵线》,载《外交评论》,2012年第5期,第56-67页)。

play a larger role than alliances in some ways. The prevalence of this form of security cooperation is attributed to the frequency of American organization of many multilateral military actions, which become the major form of American military action abroad.

Here we can briefly distinguish two easily-confused concepts—"coalition" and "alliance" in order to gain an insight of the fundamental condition and functions of coalitions. Generally speaking, alliance refers to a security cooperation arrangement which sovereign countries make through formal treaty and informal agreement, holding military security defense as its core obligation; while coalition is a partnership into which countries, international organizations or individuals enter when they reach a consensus on concrete issues, which are not restricted within the realm of security. Coalition in the global security realm usually refers to informal cooperation called upon on concrete occasions such as international negotiations and conferences on global conflicts, crises and security cooperation. Coalitions are ended with the fulfillment of the specified task and agenda. "Alliance" and "coalition" can also be distinguished in terms of their functions in the military security realm: most alliances endeavor to strengthen the defense capacity of their member countries and prevent warfare by way of restricting their use of armed forces to the conditions specified in their agreement. Alliances thereby play a larger role in deterrence than military action. By contrast, coalition in the security realm is formed after war breaks out, scraping up all the available forces to cope with war.<sup>10</sup> The members in an alliance sign agreements in peacetime with all possible threats defined and will react to these threats according to the whole mechanism specified in the agreement. However, coalitions function in the event of warfare and conflict; the countries sharing similar stances will join hands temporarily to fight together against common threats.

Military intervention coalitions are temporary forms of cooperation called up with the aim of executing the specific task of overseas military intervention. The countries in the coalition are expected to assume the responsibility for fighting, intelligence collection and logistics services. Because the military intervention might be aggressive, going beyond the obligatory scope specified by the alliance agreement, most member countries in the alliance are not likely to join the coalition, but some outsiders of the alliance might be recruited into the coalition. Hereby, we need to ask the question: in the post-Cold War era, why does US military intervention tend to favor coalition, the temporary arrangement, rather than relying on its old military allies? One main reason might be that coalition is more flexible and focused than alliance, which facilitates common action and American leadership in military operations.

1. Coalitions are seldom trapped in the dilemma of collective action in the decision-making process; this is especially so when executing extra tasks beyond the alliance's normal obligations. As with military alliances such as NATO, alliances in wartime are also swayed by the dilemma of collective action: diversification of interests, complication

10 A. S. M. Ali Ashraf, "The Politics of Coalition Burden-Sharing: The Case of the War in Afghanistan," Ph.D. Dissertation, P.A. University. Cf. Pittsburgh, 2011, p. 33.



of decision-making processes and differences of opinion about the legitimacy of action can all sap the strength of alliances. All these disadvantages stand in contrast to the relatively high efficiency of coalition action. In comparison, alliances, requiring more to take collective action, find it very difficult to reach consensus on the necessity of doing so. There are 28 member countries in NATO and their relations with the countries involved in interventions are influenced by many factors, making it rather difficult to reach consensus on military intervention. American military interventions always go beyond the obligations specified by NATO treaties. Though since the 1990s, NATO has reshuffled its strategic policies; designating peace-keeping, humanitarian rescue and anti-terrorist actions as the key functions of NATO, still some member countries, out of various political considerations, are reluctant to participate and support the specific intervention operations. Within NATO, there are wide divergences of opinion on the issues of military intervention, as seen in the build up to the Iraq War in 2003. France and Germany, two of America's old allies, together with Russia threatened to veto the American proposal against Iraq in the UN Security Council. This intimidation forced the Bush administration to retreat from striving for the Security Council's authorization. In the UN Security Council, only the UK and Spain are staunch supporters of American moves. In January 2003, the "European Eight" (UK, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Italy, Netherlands, Hungary and Czech Republic) published open letters to support American intervention in Iraq, and on their heels, the "Vilnius Group" (Albania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia) also announced their support for American action by claiming that, "the trans-Atlantic community must stand together to face the threat posed by the nexus of terrorism and dictators with weapons of mass destruction."<sup>11</sup> Within NATO, the legitimacy of warfare is a controversial issue. The then British Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon said in 2003 on the subject of sending troops to Iraq that, "We do not require the specific agreement of the security council."<sup>12</sup> France, Germany and Canada on the other hand, maintained that military intervention cannot be justified if it is not authorized by the United Nations. Due to this difference, the USA finds difficulties in prodding its allies into taking unanimous action, and instead can only fall on more flexible and controllable coalitions.

2. Coalitions can more easily reach consensus on the cost apportionment of military intervention. Unwilling to assume more security responsibilities, NATO has been relying on American military shelter for a long time. Compared with alliances, coalitions are characterized by temporality; some nations answer the call of the US and take action with them by sending troops, offering financial support or merely lending verbal support. It is comparatively easy for coalitions to coordinate participators, forms of participation and allocation of obligations. In fact, coalitions have shared the costs of American military intervention operations. Military actions consume tremendous

11 "Ten Eastern European States to Join in War," <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/4185705/Ten-eastern-European-states-to-join-in-war.html> (last visit: July 4, 2013)

12 "Britain Could Act without UN Ruling, Says Hoon," <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/dec/18/foreignpolicy.iraq> (last visit: July 4, 2013)

human power and material resources, and human casualties are especially likely to incur intense anti-war protest in mainland America. This can significantly influence political events such as elections, making it therefore undoubtedly the best choice for America to hold low-key leaderships in coalitions by offering capital and weapons. For example, the Gulf War (1990-1991) cost \$61.1 billion, of which the USA paid no more than \$10 billion; Middle-East countries and other American allies together paying \$53.7 billion. Gulf countries offered most assistance, including \$16 billion cash and \$50 million worth of supplies from Kuwait, \$12.8 billion cash and \$4 billion worth of supplies from Saudi Arabia, and \$3.8 billion cash and \$200 million worth of supplies from the United Arab Emirates. It was understandable that these countries rushed to offer both money and manpower for they had been under direct or indirect military threat from Iraq. Japan, Germany and Korea also provided a large number of supports, including \$9.5 billion cash and \$500 million worth of supplies from Japan, \$5.8 billion cash and \$700 million worth of supplies from Germany, and \$150 million cash and \$100 million worth of supplies from Korea.<sup>13</sup> It can be seen from these cases that some countries join this US-led military intervention coalition out of diversified considerations: apart from the material benefits of driving away security threats and gaining economic returns, these countries might offer support to gain the intangible benefits of higher international status or stronger alliances with the USA.

3. For American military intervention, coalitions provides the legal support, an alternative to UN Security Council authorization. The issue of using armed force is hotly debated in the American domestic political arena. Military action demands legal justification to win civil support, while authorization from the UN Security Council usually contributes to the justification for the use of armed forces. Nevertheless, before some of its post-Cold War military interventions, the USA failed to obtain definite authorization from the UN Security Council. Even if the US eventually succeeded in securing that authorization, it was obtained through an arduous process. For example, during the Gulf War in 1991, the US, in seeking for a resolution supporting the invasion of Iraq, played hardball with the major Security Council members. At that time, the US even claimed that it would launch a war against Iraq regardless of obtaining Security Council authorization or not. Before the Iraq War in 2003, the US found it hard to get Security Council authorization. Unable to secure the legal support of the UN for launching a war, the US needs to justify its actions by way of the coalitions that it endeavors to form. By summoning many countries into its military operations and asserting the extensive coverage of coalitions in population, territory, religion and race, the USA can convince its people that its actions have garnered generous international support. The American scenario is that the more supporters the coalition wins, the

13 To review the support from relevant countries in the Gulf War, please see U.S. General Accountability Office, *Report to Congress: Financial Management: Fiscal Year 1992 Audit of the Defense Cooperation Account*, GAO-NSIAD-93-185, August 13, 1993, <http://www.gao.gov/products/NSIAD-93-185>.



more legitimacy its military actions will possess.<sup>14</sup> For instance, according to a White House news script in March 27, 2003, the Iraq War won the support of 49 countries. At the bottom of the 49-country list, the USA underscored the following statistics: “the population of Coalition countries is approximately 1.23 billion people; coalition countries have a combined GDP of approximately \$22 trillion; every major race, religion, ethnicity in the world is represented; the Coalition includes nations from every continent on the globe.”<sup>15</sup>

The establishment and operation of a coalition is a two-way choice between the leading and participating countries. As the summoner and leader of the coalition, the US desires more of the participating countries in its military intervention to share the costs of war. As was shown in the case of the Gulf War, some countries, confronted with no direct military threat and guaranteed no remarkable material benefits after the war, are still quite willing to join the US-led military intervention coalitions. We can therefore ask what motivates them into joining these coalitions?

Some scholars have published research on the behavior of countries that enter into coalitions. Bradley F. Podliska maintains that countries, in deciding whether or not to join in a military intervention coalition, take into account six aspects: legitimacy, national interest, national power, domestic political ambience, international responsibility and public opinion.<sup>16</sup> These six aspects by and large embody the basic influential factors upon the decision-making process of the involved countries, without pinpointing which is the most significant. Some other scholars highlighted the function of one single factor. For example, Japanese scholar Atsushi Tago argues that member countries in coalition consider the legitimacy of military intervention as the top priority;<sup>17</sup> whereas according to Srdjan Vucetic, cultural identification plays a decisive role in leading English-speaking countries such as the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand into the US-led military intervention coalitions.<sup>18</sup>

After the end of the Cold War, the US has carried out 6 large-scale military intervention operations: “Operation Desert Storm” and “Operation Desert Shield” (1990-1991), “Joint Endeavor Operation” in Bosnia (1995-1996), “Joint Force Operation” in Kosovo (1999), “Operation Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan (2001), “Free Iraq Operation” (2003-2009) and “Operation Odyssey Dawn” in Libya (2011). In these large-scale intervention operations, America’s “sworn allies” are not limited to English-speaking countries: eight countries including Britain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Czech Republic and Slovakia, participated in all the military actions, and six countries including Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy

14 Jason W. Davidson, *America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq*, New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 6.

15 “Who are the Current Coalition Members?” <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/iraq/news/20030327-10.html>.

16 Bradley F. Podliska, *Acting Alone: A Scientific Study of American Hegemony and Unilateral Use-of-Force Decision Making*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010.

17 Atsushi Tago, “Why Do States Join US-led Military Coalitions? The Compulsion of the Coalition’s Missions and Legitimacy,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 7, No. 2 (May 2007), pp. 179-202.

18 Srdjan Vucetic, “Bound to follow? The Anglosphere and US-led coalitions of the willing, 1950-2001,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 1 (March 2011), pp. 27-49.

and Poland joined five of these operations. Although the above-mentioned nations are America's military allies in Europe, they joined the coalition not for the purpose of sharing the military obligations of the coalition or of maintaining an alliance with the US, because these military operations have gone beyond the scope of alliance obligations. On the other hand, those American allies who have no intention of joining the coalition do not pay the price of losing America's safeguard.

This paper argues that many countries are willing to join the US-led military intervention coalitions mainly for the current global stratum and US-dominated hierarchal system.<sup>19</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, with formidable political and cultural influences in the global political arena, America has become a unipolar nation, unparalleled by any other countries or groups in terms of material power. In the unipolar system, most countries tend to follow the hegemonic country, who is likely to establish a self-centered hierarchal system. According to Yuen Foong Khong's study, in the US-led hierarchal system, the hegemon offers its followers two kinds of rewards (security guarantees and economic benefits) for their support or affinity.<sup>20</sup> Khong puts American followers into several categories according to their relationship with the USA. By way of comparison, it can be found that those countries who frequently support American military intervention are America's most intimate followers. They participate in US-led military intervention to demonstrate their support of America's leading role, thereby gaining long-term security and economic returns. Therefore, some countries tend to side with America and provide it with political, military and economic support no matter whether US military intervention secures legal authorization, no matter how intense the opposition that mainland America will face, and no matter if they have any prior involvement in the invaded countries or areas.

### 3. The Advantages and Disadvantages of Military Intervention Coalitions

The frequent formation of coalitions in US-led military intervention testifies for the fact that this form of security cooperation holds particular advantages over alliances and is more suitable for the execution of certain missions. As a comparatively short-term cooperation, coalitions are constructed to deal with emergencies and are soon dissolved after the targeted problems are resolved. For example, in the Gulf War, the US-led multinational troops were rallied five months after Iraq had invaded Kuwait and dissembled at the end of the war.<sup>21</sup> Some scholars argue that coalitions are designed

19 More and more research findings emphasize the hierarchal features in the unipolar system dominated by US, see David Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*, translated by Gao Wann, Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press, 2013 ([美]戴维·莱克:《国际关系中的等级制》,高婉妮译,上海:上海人民出版社2013年版).

20 Yuen Foong Khong, "The American Tributary System," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring 2013), pp. 1-47.

21 George Sprowls, "States and War Coalitions: A Case Study of the Gulf War," Ph.D. Dissertation, Morgantown, W.V.: West Virginia University, p. 6.

for specific wars, making them better than alliances in terms of enhancing fighting efficiency.<sup>22</sup>

Compared with alliances, coalitions, with loose internal structures, usually lack formal institutional arrangements. Therefore, coalitions are characterized by weaker cohesive force, shorter cooperative time and more focus on short-term interest distribution. Nevertheless, coalitions are formed according to common interests on specific issues and it is this very feature that contributes to their flexibility and highly targeted performance. For America, this feature is helpful for its control in military intervention operations in that the form and responsibility the individual country takes in joining the coalition directly determines the post-war interest distribution. At the beginning of the Iraq War in 2003, Germany and France were quite unwilling to join the US-led block, so America publicly pronounced their exclusion from post-war reconstruction contracts. America adjusts by way of postwar interest distribution to force some countries into changing their original policies. Of course, the US didn't punish these countries by discharging their alliance duties (their refusal to join the coalition did not signify their betrayal of alliance duties). Coalitions are a good way for America to maintain its absolutely dominant position. America chooses coalitions for their adaptability in manipulation and control of all the operations, but at the same time it has to assume a comparatively important share of responsibilities. All in all, the coalition demonstrates its advantages in the following aspects: multinational involvement in coalitions can increase the legitimacy of the operations; the adaptability and controllability of the coalition as a form will intensify America's dominant position; and in comparison to an individual battle against the belligerent countries, in coalition, America is likely to use less manpower, material and financial resources.

Nevertheless, in military intervention, the coalition is confronted with some prominent problems. Take the US-led coalition of military operations in Afghanistan as an example: the coalition had gained military victory in the preliminary stages, but its member countries failed to reach a consensus on the issues of maintaining security and stability of postwar Afghanistan, which brought tremendous difficulties to the operations.

Firstly, there is inadequate strategic unity and consistency in coalitions. In the Afghanistan War, the coalition in unified operation was targeted at the elimination of Al Qaida, the defeat of the Taliban and assistance for Afghanistan to become a stable and democratic country. But the coalition failed to formulate a comprehensive strategy in accordance with this political target, only providing some scattered and temporary solutions. For instance, America as the decision-maker was unwilling to transfer commanding authority to NATO. Even if NATO has been offering support to the Afghanistan operation from the very beginning, America could not allow its decision-making process to be hindered by the necessity of negotiating with NATO. However, America finally accepted NATO's assistance to avoid sending out US troops alone in

22 Patricia A. Weitsman, "Wartime Alliances versus Coalition Warfare: How Institutional Structure Matters in the Multilateral Prosecution of Wars," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Summer 2010), pp. 113-136.

a single-handed mission of stabilizing and reconstructing Afghanistan. The European countries viewed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as an organization not built upon a solid agreement because they had not reached a consensus on whether to assist America in dispatching troops to Afghanistan. For example, the UK and Germany hope to enhance the trans-Atlantic security framework, while France deemed European participation in the organization as an experiment to reinforce European security power. From a concrete perspective, European countries disagree with each other on the specific roles that they are expected to play in Afghanistan as well as the functions to assume in stabilization and reconstruction issues. For another example, to make up for these flaws, America endeavored to establish the Afghanistan Security Department in coalition in 2002 to mobilize the Afghanistan administration into self-reliant reconstruction. This department was founded on the common efforts of all the member countries of the coalition: the US was responsible for the assembling of the Afghan National Army, Germany for the establishment of policy departments, Italy for the reconstruction of the legal system, Britain for the anti-drug campaign, Japan for the disarmament, demilitarization of the former government and the prevention of its reorganization. Within this framework, each individual country in the coalition assumes specific responsibilities and obligations. But this framework can produce different effects if these five countries merely take care of their individual interests; these five tasks might overlap with each other, so the inefficiency of any single country among these five may gravely hinder the movement of the other four countries. In this view, all the missions need an overall powerful command.

Secondly, the legal framework that any individual country holds plays an influential role for ISAF in formulating a long-term anti-insurrection operation. Due to the different understanding of the legitimacy of the operation as well as the military staff involved, the consistency and coherency of the policy became quite unpredictable, bringing grave challenges to the increasingly fragile internal unification of the coalition. Take the views on the legal status of Al Qaida and Taliban fighters as an example. The US government pronounced in Feb. 7, 2002 that Taliban and Al Qaida members should be regarded as war criminals, but that American armed forces will humanely treat them as prisoners of war. Meanwhile, the European countries that joined the Afghanistan War hold different ideas that *The Geneva Convention* endows the members in Taliban and Al Qaida with legal status; ISAF orders that their operation in Afghanistan should be under the restrictions indicated by the international human rights standards in No.1386 Resolution of Security Council of the United Nations (passed in Dec. 2001). The different legal opinions in treating prisoners of war leads to unforeseeable consequences; European policy-makers and military experts condemn America for its violation of *The Geneva Convention* and international human rights standard. So the member countries in the coalition formulate new policies for prisoners of war. Besides, U.S. and European countries understand the law of armed conflicts differently. These differences rigorously challenge the consistency of the coalition in a rigorous rate, which might bring destruction to the target of reconstructing Afghanistan's legal

system.

Thirdly, national politics and policy-making play a key role in coalitions and their influence lies in strategic supplies and personnel support. In terms of strategy, the Afghanistan War highlighted the value of combative forces during wartime and the reconstruction period. The coalition exposed its inadequacy of capacity in some aspects, especially in terms of handling short-term resources. This inadequacy is closely associated with the various opinions that these different countries hold towards ISAF's expansion operation in the southern part of Afghanistan. In 2006, ISAF of NATO started to replace American troops stationed in south Afghanistan, which denoted ISAF's increasing involvement in combative actions. This expansion of geographical scope leads to further differences within the coalition, whose member countries embrace various objectives. Most of the member countries restrict the actions of the coalition within the scope of anti-insurgency, anti-terrorism, recovery of stability and reconstruction. But this deployment has gone beyond the original scope of operation, which sets a higher demand on ISAF. The directors of the coalition have to be responsible not only for the maintenance of stability and reconstruction, but also for the battles and drug campaign. All these tasks are complicated with a large consumption of materials. Britain sent out more troops to south Afghanistan to support the forces dispatched by Australia, Canada, US and the Netherlands. On the contrary, other ISAF member countries can only provide very limited support. Their domestic restrictions on the legislative, political and disposable materials damage ISAF's adaptability. Take Germany for example; German political leaders firmly reject Germany's involvement in ground battles. Even the participation in "Operation Enduring Freedom" and ISAF operations has become a controversial issue. Under rigid political restrictions from the German Federal Parliament, the German administration even makes a promise that the intelligence data collected by German fighter Tornado, is forbidden to be offered to "Operation Enduring Freedom." This highlights German politics' persistent and rigid restrictions on the involvement of German troops on the ground.

Fourthly, cost sharing is still the focus of the game between the US and other member countries in the coalition even if they evade the collective action dilemma in the decision-making process. American public opinions usually hold skeptical and critical views against their allies' minor contributions to US-led military actions and their reluctance to assume obligations. However, American cobelligerents have offered America fairly generous assistance in capital and human resources during the various military operations. In American domestic politics, there are heated debates over the issues concerning the Kosovo war, the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War.<sup>23</sup> For instance, in the Iraq War, as the major attacking force in the battlefield, the US shouldered all of the expense of the armies of the cobelligerent countries and offered them about \$1.5 billion in assistance,<sup>24</sup> which tremendously increased American military input

23 Jason W.D. Davidson, *America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. p. 5.

24 United States Government Accountability Office, GAO-07-827T, "Stabilizing and Rebuilding Iraq-Coalition Support and International Donor Commitments," p. 12.

and financial expenditure and further dragged the superpower into the mire and heavy burden of war.<sup>25</sup>

In conclusion, the military commanding power, domestic politics, diversification of the interest targets and cost sharing can play a key role in the consistency of coalitions. At the same time, coalitions, these loosely-connected security cooperations, can still fall into certain collective operation dilemmas. In fact, if multilateral military actions are taken, the dilemma of collective operation will definitely exist in some sense. Regardless, in an institutionalized alliance, this dilemma usually emerges in the decision-making process and leads to difficulty in uniform actions of the allied countries; while in a temporary coalition, this dilemma usually results in the decline of efficiency in the execution process. The fundamental differences between alliances and coalitions do not lie in the time span of their formation, institutionalized degree, or the effects of collective operation, but in the obligations and tasks which the two kinds of organizations need to fulfill.

#### 4. Conclusion

It is generally accepted that the American use of armed forces is unilateral behavior. This paper finds that American overseas military intervention operations are characterized by both unilateralism and multilateralism. After the end of the Cold War, the recruitment of multinational forces to form coalitions and take united military actions have become a key part of American military intervention operations. Motivated by diversified reasons, America is willing to enlist many countries into military action: America desires its partners to shoulder the burden of military action, to locate legitimacy for its action and to reduce the domestic personnel input and cost. But to guard the secrecy of the arms system, military commanding system and battling plan, America is disinclined to allow the member countries in its coalitions to become more immersed in battles. “The Voluntary Unity” during the Iraq War is more like an instrument of justification for American military operations without the authorization of the Security Council, and its political functions outweigh its military function. Under these circumstances, the US, during the Iraq War, not only sent out major attack forces, but also paid for all the expenditure of the troops from the member countries, with a heavy military cross to bear. During the Libya War in 2011, the US, who had drawn a good lesson from the Iraq War, zealously lobbied for the establishment of an anti-Gaddafi-administration coalition called “Friends of Libya” on occasions like international conferences. However, to stay away from shouldering high costs, the US, shortly after the start of the war, retreated to take a back seat, with France and the UK offering an air strike in assistance to the Libya opposition for a ground strike. In some senses, the Libyan War denotes a new model for American overseas military

25 Daniel F. Baltrusaitis, *Coalition Politics and the Iraq War: Determinants of Choice*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2010.



intervention; America won the support of its major allies, friendly countries and regional international organizations that provided appliances, personnel and capital. Opposition of the armed belligerent country offered as much battle support as they could for the purpose of toppling the targeted regime. Because this intervention pattern has guarded America's leading role, and at the same time, reduced its intervention costs, it is predictable that America will definitely adopt this pattern in future military intervention operations.

All in all, since the end of the Cold War, America in executing the overseas military intervention operations has reclaimed its dependence on its old allies and cast more favors to its coalitions, which exemplifies the coalition's functions in the international security area. Although post-Cold War American military intervention operations are to some degree stained with the color of unilateralism, in some cases America even imposes its own will beyond that of the United Nations and international law. Nevertheless, whether in the publicity preparation or the execution stage, America relies neither totally on itself nor on its old allies. Instead it actively establishes coalitions and recruits multinational troops to win generous support, which appears to be a very notable feature of American foreign relations. The American establishment of military intervention coalitions offers new perspectives and ideas for research on post-Cold War international security cooperation for coalitions, a security cooperation choice different from alliances. The adaptability and pertinence of the coalition provide the relevant countries with a platform for cooperation. Coalitions can obtain international support for countries in the case of non-alliances and thereby solve the security problems they confront...

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