



Allies Unnerved by Coalitions of the Willing

by Brad Glosserman

SAN FRANCISCO – Although the United States didn't go to the United Nations for explicit authorization of an attack against Iraq, the Bush administration never abandoned attempts to craft a multilateral coalition in support of those efforts. But this government's view of "multilateralism" differs from those of its predecessors. Rather than working through existing institutions, the U.S. now believes in "à la carte multilateralism," picking and choosing its allies and mechanisms as circumstances dictate. While this strategy reflects a changing national security environment, this approach could have negative effects over the long-term. It threatens to undermine the relationships that create the menu from which the U.S. can select in times of need.

As the world counted down the final hours to war, Washington highlighted the backing it received as it attempted to force the government in Baghdad to disarm. According to the U.S. State Department, 33 governments have lined up behind the U.S. campaign against Iraq. Reportedly another 15 have agreed to support the coalition but do not want to be named publicly at this time. Presumably, many of these are Arab states who fear a public backlash if their support was made known.

Attention has focused on the governments that have failed to join the U.S. effort. The most notable absences are France, Germany, and Turkey – all U.S. allies – although the Berlin government has provided support at home, effectively freeing up U.S. personnel for duty elsewhere and Turkey – belatedly – granting much needed over flight rights.

The Bush administration is untroubled by the prospect of fighting without them. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has said that this coalition is larger than that which fought the first Gulf War. White House Spokesman Ari Fleischer notes that the governments supporting the U.S. represent some 1.18 billion people and have a combined GDP of \$21.7 trillion, more than half the world total.

President George W. Bush isn't concerned either. He vowed to do what it takes to protect U.S. national security regardless of what the UN might say or do. His administration already articulated its preference for "coalitions of the willing" when confronting international challenges. According to this doctrine, the U.S. would not rely on formal alliance structures in times of danger, but would construct ad hoc groups as circumstances dictated. The mission would determine the coalition, rather than have the coalition determine the mission.

The strategy makes some sense. Existing alliances were set up to tackle different threats in different circumstances. An ad hoc approach puts a premium on flexibility at a time of new and nonconventional dangers. After Sept. 11, NATO invoked

Article 5 for the first time in the alliance's history – officially recognizing the threat to an alliance member – but the U.S. waged war in Afghanistan independent of the alliance's decision making structures. Washington had no desire to put up with the inevitable delays created by the need to forge a consensus in Brussels, nor to let those governments shape the political objectives of the war. Given the U.S. military's overwhelming superiority, Washington has no desire – or need – to share views on how to conduct warfare. Three governments – the U.S, the UK, and Australia – have declared that they contributed fighting forces to the coalition; another 10 have offered small numbers of noncombatant forces. (Polish special forces have been involved in the fighting but the government has only recently confirmed their participation.)

At a conference of U.S. and Japanese security specialists last week, experts questioned the long-term impact of the U.S. strategy. While U.S. military superiority is beyond doubt, continually pointing to the gap between the U.S. and its allies and devaluing their potential contribution undermines support for the alliance in those countries. Secretary Rumsfeld's offhand comment that the U.S. could fight Iraq without British support in the weeks before the war did not strengthen British Minister Tony Blair's position at home. It made the U.S. appear callous and indifferent to the sacrifice that an ally was ready to make.

Worse, some governments see "coalitions of the willing" as a way to loosen the ties that bind Washington to its allies. They worry that the U.S. desire to enjoy flexibility could extend to ends as well as means. Fears of abandonment, always present in some countries, could be intensified as a result. To American ears, the complaint is utterly unfounded, but it isn't irrational. New military capabilities and new threats create new military needs and priorities. Ironically, U.S. readiness to finally reduce its military footprint in Asia looks like preparation to draw back from "entangling alliances." Today Koreans fear that Washington's willingness to finally move forces out of Seoul – as they have long demanded – will actually increase the risk of war. (The logic works like this: U.S. soldiers in Seoul are "hostages" in the case of a North Korean attack. Move them out and Washington will not be restrained from provoking Pyongyang.)

Abandonment has been a concern in Asia since President Richard Nixon announced the Nixon doctrine – according to which Asians will be responsible for bearing the main burden of their own security – which was followed by the decision to pull out of Vietnam. Fear of abandonment appears to be driving Japan's support for the U.S. war against Iraq.

Japanese decision makers and analysts frame the decision to stand behind Washington in the Persian Gulf in terms of the crisis on the Korean Peninsula. Off the record, they worry that

anything less than full support for the Iraqi war effort will reduce Japan's influence on any eventual policy toward North Korea – or even the U.S. commitment to defend Japan. Pyongyang's readiness to march up the escalation ladder has impressed upon many Japanese their reliance upon the U.S. for security at a time of rising tension. Defense Agency head Ishiba Shigeru stated before the Diet that in the event of a North Korean missile attack on Japan, all the country could do would be to clean up after the damage was done. Self-Defense Forces action would, Ishiba explained, "be limited to keeping damage to a minimum," conducting what are essentially disaster relief operations.

This vulnerability has yielded anxiety and insecurity, despite U.S. assurances of its commitment to the defense of Japan. A poll this week shows 92 percent of Japanese are "very" or "slightly" anxious about North Korean missile launches. These polls follow Secretary Rumsfeld's warning to North Korea that the U.S. could successfully fight two wars at once. Lt. Gen. Thomas Waskow, commander of U.S. Forces Japan, followed up, noting that the U.S. "commitment to Japan is absolutely a matter of record and the absolute commitment that we see is the extreme bedrock for security in the region."

Yet uncertainty and unease persist in Japan. Washington's handling of North Korea will be crucial to Japanese perceptions of their alliance with the U.S. Not only must the U.S. commitment to the defense of Japan be beyond question, but the U.S. government must make every effort to work with Tokyo – and Seoul – to ensure that the situation does not deteriorate to that point where that becomes an issue. The immobility of U.S. diplomacy at this point has made coordination between Tokyo and Washington much easier. The challenge begins when discussions with Pyongyang begin in earnest. Close coordination with allies on the diplomatic front will quiet the concerns in allied capitals about U.S. intentions, strengthen the U.S. hand in negotiations, and broaden the consensus that ultimately defines a "coalition of the willing." Fear of abandonment is a strange definition of "willing" and a less than firm foundation for long-term planning and stability.

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