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14. ABSTRACT How do coalitions and alliances impact strategic decision-making during times of conflict? This paper takes a look at how coalition and alliance dynamics can or might impact the decision-making process of belligerents or potential belligerents in time of conflict, specifically looking at how these dynamics contributed to the beginning of World War I in 1914. Analyzed through the lens of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu's frameworks for war and, in particular, alliance contributions and political objective considerations in war, this essay posits that engagement in alliance and coalitions can both simplify and complicate strategic decision-making; requiring the States and their strategists to engage in careful consideration and analysis not only of their own objectives but of potential objectives for their strategic partners.					
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The Great War's Great Message – How Alliance and Coalition Management of 1914 Europe
Should Inform Our Partnership Approach Today

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The Great War's Great Message – How Alliance and Coalition Management of 1914 Europe Should Inform Our Partnership Approach Today

Thrust into a series of complex and intertwined actions by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo (June of 1914¹), the European geopolitical slow burn had led competing powers to a situation dangerously close to critical mass. Germany's rise to power, Austria's fragility, and years of positioning, isolating policy, and testing of alliances (sometimes here meaning solidifying them) had created conditions in which individual state actions were viewed in context of the broader European power dynamics. That the response to the crisis in Sarajevo led to the Great War provides a fascinating insight into the nature and complexities of alliance relations, as the inter-coalition actions that followed made what could have been regional incident a World War that few saw as inevitable². World War I saw a regional crisis explode into a globe-enveloping war due to alliances having **inertial effects on the collective alliance political objects**, and by demonstrating how coalitions and alliances **both complicate and simplify strategic decisions**; requiring accurate and updated net-assessments of each belligerent to fully comprehend and competently navigate a given situation.

Political Objects at Rest, Motion

The entanglements of States in coalitions (ad hoc partnerships tailored to given situations and objectives) and alliances (formally ratified broad affiliation) can create circumstances in which the unlikely can become inevitable through build up and later, maintenance, of momentum. Entente planning, and specifically the combined war planning between France and Russia, demonstrated clearly how the timelines and decisions of one ally would necessitate the

¹ Donald Kagan, *On the Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York, NY: Anchor, 1996), 187.

² Kagan p. 187

action of others in either making or breaking coalition initiatives³. Agreed upon timelines for attack and specified fronts for concentration in the days following declared mobilization meant that Russia's mobilization placed the Entente at a virtual point of no return and with only limited time to react to halt its effects once in motion. Though it was anticipated that Britain's contributions would be delayed if they occurred at all, as there was no guarantee of it⁴, the other members of the Entente joining a war against the perceived greatest challenge to British and Europe's balance of power forced Britain to decide between involvement in the conflict or a diminished role in the power balance that would result from its resolution. The force on the political object placed by Russian mobilization thus set in motion the inertia required to bring both France and Britain into the war with the alternative force available to oppose this being only that option to abandon their agreement for the sake of remaining neutral at great political expense.

Likewise, Germany found itself in a similar circumstance when support of Austria-Hungary meant supporting their war in the Balkans, which all but guaranteed Russian involvement⁵. Worse still, Germany found that localizing the actions of Austria-Hungary was difficult given that few were willing to see the dual monarchy as an independent actor⁶. The coalition's strength of political objects at rest stabilizing relations in peacetime yielded to the momentum and kinetic political energy wrought by allied players in conflict. Regardless of whether or not any of the members beyond the first to react on both sides intended on going to war in the first weeks of broiling relations, they quickly found themselves in circumstances

³ Robert A. Doughty, "Chapter 5: France," in *05-04 War Planning 1914* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 143-174, <https://usnwc.leganto.exlibrisgroup.com/leganto/readinglist/citation/749669440006746?auth=SAML>, p. 145.

⁴ Doughty p.158

⁵ Kagan p.187

⁶ Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (New York, NY: Viking Penguin, 2004).

where it would have been very difficult to prevent it based on the actions of their partners. No doubt, the pace and strength of this momentum would have challenged the decision making process for the strategists in play even in the most straightforward of circumstances; but the dynamics of alliances and coalitions would prove to complicate these calculations even more.

Complex Simplification

Knowing the partnerships being formed in the game of geopolitics does not itself mean that an analyst or strategist knows the full situation in play, as allied actions are influenceable but never guaranteed. Germany (1914) was caught in a precarious position in which failing to support Austria would have potentially ambition-ending consequences, given the threat of Austria's defection to Russia and therein the Entente, or perhaps collapse, leaving the potential for German expansion south limited at best⁷. She thus had to accept that providing this partnership-defining support would almost certainly mean risking war with Russia⁸. The "simplicity" of supporting an ally was complicated by the likely outcome of what that support would mean given Austria-Hungary's actions.

These competing effects would have been observed by members of the Entente, as well. Few internally in Britain, France, or Russia would question the perceived threats of Germany's rising power and isolating policies⁹, still, events leading up to the war such as the first Moroccan crisis tested Entente faith regarding allies' willingness to intervene in what was perceived as lesser challenges¹⁰. Mahan would have pointed to this as an excellent example of the fragility of

⁷ Kagan p.186

⁸ Kagan p.187

⁹ Kagan p.148

¹⁰ Doughty p.144

coalition unity of purpose¹¹, as interests of the Entente were aligned regarding German counterbalance in Europe but perhaps not fully defined in terms of left and right bounds for colonial interests to the dismay of the French. The geopolitical lines drawn in the sand (effects of policies, interaction between states, and the impact this had on the regional power balance) required each coalition to weigh the actions of others in the context of a challenging environment, deciding for themselves whether single-state actions could be viewed or handled as isolated decisions, and what appropriate coalition response should be in either case. They knew who their partners would (likely) be, but not necessarily the extents to which those partnerships were dependable when crisis would strike. Knowing who you can trust but not necessarily how much you can trust them makes for complicated strategic calculus.

These Great War build-ups demonstrate that the presence of alliances and coalitions both sharpens and muddles the landscape for the strategist in challenges extending beyond limited war. In decisions looking to change power dynamics and regimes completely through unlimited wars coalitions short of absolutely perfect political and national power alignment, which are virtually impossible when dealing with states that all have their own interests, are forced operate with some degree of uncertainty dependent upon coalition communications and hopes of strategic alignment. Alliances, when strong and willing, can simplify strategic decisions through deterrence and isolation of adversaries (see Germany's being distraught over the threat of being encircled by potential enemies) but can also cause conflict to reach critical mass if one or more actors are motivated to act in extremes.

¹¹ Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021), p.218.

Germany's last-ditch telegraph to urge mediation in the Balkans after receiving Britain's warning shows an example of a geopolitical situation reaching critical mass, and a great power understanding the position a lesser-ally could be placing them in given the dual monarchy's motivated response to Serbia;¹² not unlike the Spartans' contemplatively reluctant reaction to her allies calling for war with Athens in the lead-up to the Peloponnesian War.¹³ Had Austria-Hungary been willing to accept a victory of limited objective in Serbia, Germany's messaging may have proven more effective, but instead as one member of the alliance (the dual monarchy) sought unlimited ends both States found themselves committed to conflict far beyond a potentially acceptable limit. The extent that larger powers like Germany and Sparta are willing to commit their and their alliance's instruments of national power to the conflicts and concerns of lesser allies can bound extremes or enable them; with World War I providing an example of how failure to cap lesser-ally ambitions can escalate the nature of conflicts.

Sun Tzu warned about the perils of entering into alliances without understanding the plans of neighboring states,¹⁴ but while Germany understood the motivations of Austria-Hungary, they failed to include in their calculations the extent to which they should be committed to their plans or willing to assert influence on their ally to limit them – as perhaps the Great War could have been avoided with anything short of the real or perceived “blank check” of unlimited support offered. Thus, the German political object of limiting the effects of encirclement and building influence as a rising power took a back seat in initiative to those of their lesser ally in the dual monarchy wanting to settle their dispute with Serbia once and for all, at great cost both to them and to the world. In a vacuum what should be a relatively simple

¹² Strachan, p.21

¹³ Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, Intro. Victor D. Hanson (New York, NY: Simon et Schuster, 1998), 47.

¹⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.138.

decision in supporting an important ally made the German strategic situation exceptionally more complex through the challenging nature of coalition relations.

Ways to an End?

Given the context of European power dynamics of the time, it could be argued that war occurred as a natural way of determining the balance of power in Europe with alliance or coalition relations contributing to but not actually causing the war. Germany's rise had greatly disrupted the standing international system¹⁵ and the balance of power, and their threat to the standing conditions of Europe were noted and notable, perhaps necessitating contest to determine the de facto seat of power in Europe. Just as Athens' rise, in Thucydides' estimation had caused the Peloponnesian War¹⁶, perhaps Germany's made some manner of World War I inevitable, even if not necessarily along the lines drawn by the alliances. German fear of encirclement, desire for expansion, and hopes of prestige were strong motivators for the empire that would certainly have required redress sooner or later.¹⁷

For the other competitors in this build-up, Entente leaders had, for years, compared their forces against that of the Germans as a measure of relative strength required for effective operations.¹⁸ More, perhaps the most vulnerable member of the Entente due to positioning and politics, Russia found itself struggling to recover from recent defeats and resultant domestic instability that would have been increasingly agitated by German political expansion in their theater of influence (the Balkans¹⁹). Furthering, mention only little of Britain's developed

¹⁵ Kagan p.85

¹⁶ Thucydides p. 16

¹⁷ Kagan p.186

¹⁸ Doughty p.147

¹⁹ Kagan p.196

reliance on international income and foodstuffs²⁰ or France's paranoia from Germany's growth²¹, the evolving dynamics of the European situation seem to have made order-defining conflict inevitable at some point.

Power dynamics acknowledged; it would be difficult to argue that there were many (if any) unwilling participants in the War drug into the conflict by their alliance loyalties alone, as demonstrated by the fact that opportunities to deescalate came and passed for members of both sides of the conflict. The French knew that there was no guarantee of British support for their war, and in fact had no acknowledged affirmation of their involvement in the war until Britain declared war on Germany.²² There was no inevitability until word came direct from the British of their involvement. Germany, for their part, used the built-in but false excuse of Russian mobilization as meaning inevitable war to justify their actions guaranteeing it.²³ While Russia's mobilization could certainly have prepared for and fully leveraged the threat of war to gain political bargaining power, Germany's two-front preparations meant that their mobilization response would push Europe past the point of no return to peace without conflict,²⁴ from which point it was only a matter of participants mustering for their pre-determined sides. Far from being "forced" into action, both sides made conscious decisions to progress down the path toward war – in each case deciding that the value of the political object, perhaps developed over years in this build-up, was enough to justify the conflict to come. Thus, it could be argued that while alliance composition and actions contributed to the outbreak of the war, the power dynamics of the day and desire of countries to establish themselves favorably in the new

²⁰ Kagan p.90

²¹ Doughty p.144

²² Doughty p.147

²³ Kagan p.197

²⁴ Kagan p.197

European power structure were the main contributors in turning the events of Sarajevo into a world at war (in 1914).

But Perceptions Matter, Too

Still, while it is an unavoidable truth that power dynamics were contributing factors in both the alliance formations and follow-on actions that led to the first World War, to accept that the aligned players could have reasonably balked once critical mass had been reached would be to neglect that prestige²⁵ mattered then just as much as it had before (this concept is one experienced in significant wars before, as Thucydides would likely choose the term “honor”²⁶ to describe this idea instead) and will to regional and global powers in the future. The Triple Entente had come together as a counterbalance for the rising Germany²⁷, but that only further proves the fact that its members relied on this counterbalance and the maintenance of European balance of power as a whole to preserve both their position in the world and quality of living within it.²⁸ Naturally, while each partner state had the choice to withdraw and choose neutrality if the conditions of conflict did not contribute directly to their political object of choice, doing so would have required the forfeiture both of status in the European power balance and the advantages their alliance coverage offered – a palpable reduction in influence and power.

Significant as those rational benefits of alliance were, saving face by not forfeiting prestige was a great point of national pride for these countries. Evidenced by Britain’s domestic discussion during the second Moroccan crisis, the powers of Europe were wont to view challenges of the status quo that would require their “surrender of...great and beneficent

²⁵ Kagan p.182

²⁶ Thucydides p. 43

²⁷ Kagan pp.152-153

²⁸ Kagan p.91

position” as matters of “humiliation intolerable.”²⁹ While applicable to the members of the standing power, here represented by the Triple Entente, no doubt Germany, the challenger, would have felt much the same in hoping to establish herself as Europe’s new hegemon. So then, while rational factors such as the cost of the political object or sober assessment of flawed ally activity would still play a role in decision-making, the role of prestige and feared loss of face in the event of defection would have dominated allied decision-making when it came time to answer the call of allied or coalition assistance. As such, though other factors were amplifying the events leading up to and contributing directly to the outbreak of the war, alliance dynamics were the dominant factor in World War I’s eruption. Other factors might explain why the war occurred but only alliance relations can explain why it occurred when it did.

Conclusion

Shown by the outbreak of World War I, alliance relations can help cause or avoid conflicts dependent upon their maintenance. Relationships that add to but also complicate use of national power, these strategic tools require leaders to balance ends, ways, and means and resolve not only for their interests, but also those of their partners while considering those of their adversary or adversary’s partners as well. Defining and delineating bounds and inputs are critical to making alliances equitable for all involved, especially when the intentions of one, but not necessarily all, members of an alliance include unlimited ends in a conflict where multiple parties have interest. Just as Sun Tzu demands that the effective General understand the ground (for our purposes, landscape might be the more effective term) to ensure optimal employment of forces³⁰, the strategist must include in alliance formation and maintenance proper net assessments for all

²⁹ Kagan p.172

³⁰ Sun Tzu p.130

parties involved to ensure balance in both risk and objective. Coalition formation and maintenance must proceed with even greater care – as common ground towards a given imitative or enemy must not be taken as perfect alignment in all other considerations. An iterative process, effective alliance maintenance requires regular communication and evaluation of the operating landscape in times of crisis, as the simplification of a position backed by others can be overcome with complications dependent upon alliance actions. Critical in a growingly dependent and connected world, understanding effective alliance and or coalition relations and the challenges that accompany them are imperative to any great power and therefore, any strategist.

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