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Coalition Rules of Engagement

By DREW A. BENNETT and ANNE F. MACDONALD

Coalitions must overcome many obstacles.¹ Developing rules of engagement (ROE) is one. ROE are tools that coordinate the use of force, orchestrate a campaign, synergize an effort, ensure compatibility among dissimilar partners, control escalation, and underpin political objectives. The coordinated use of force on land, at sea, and in the air can be the difference between winning and losing.² A commander must establish ROE that are neither restrictive nor permissive, that do not leave their forces either vulnerable to attack or inhibit judgment, and that do not inadvertently harm political or operational objectives. The intricacy of this issue is evident as one considers coalition members of varying capabilities, perspectives, agendas, forces, ideologies, and cultures.

How should rules be developed and by whom? Should a single commander or country draft them? Should each nation establish its own? Should an existing international organization such as the United Nations determine them? What are the guiding principles of ROE?

Coalitions can be divided into two categories: standing and ad hoc. A standing coalition is grounded in an existing agreement (such as the North Atlantic Alliance), wherein a majority of the forces involved have planned and trained together for combined operations. An ad hoc coalition is one in which the forces have not worked together, regardless of whether it is sanctioned under a U.N. mandate, hasty treaty, or other arrangement.

After the Persian Gulf War and with the downsizing of U.S. forces, coalition warfare has received greater attention. While the world is no longer bipolar, it is increasingly interdependent. Unilateral action is not the preferred or likely way of war. The desire for international legitimacy, basing rights, additional forces, increased diplomatic power, and greater economic leverage is a strong incentive to operate alongside other countries with shared interests.

Rules of engagement are "directives issued by competent military authority which delineate the circumstances and limitations under which United States forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement with other forces encountered."³ They facilitate guidance on the use of force. Generally, they address when, where, against whom, and how force can be used.⁴ Rules may be permissive as illustrated by the following cases: a unit may use whatever force it deems necessary to defend itself against a hostile act or hostile intent (*how* and *when*); military aircraft of country X operating in a specified area will be considered hostile (*when* and *against whom*); and shoot first and ask questions later (*when*). Or rules may be restrictive: do not fire unless fired upon (*when*); unattended munitions, mines, and booby traps are forbidden (*how*); do not fire until you see the whites of their eyes (*when* and *against whom*). ROE balance the objectives and concerns of those who establish them with the judgment and capabilities of those who must execute them.⁵

The sources of ROE are domestic law, national security policy, operational concerns, and international law.⁶ Domestic law affects how militaries are organized and equipped, where they may operate, and even how they are employed. Japan, for example, with the world's third largest defense budget, cannot permit its forces to conduct offensive

operations under its constitution.⁷ National security policy spells out how forces may provide security, for example, by declaring "no first use" of nuclear weapons. Operational concerns become a factor when a commander attempts to control damage to friendly forces or neutral aircraft and ships. Finally, rules should ensure that international law is not violated. They are affected by the law of armed conflict as contained in the Hague and Geneva Conventions and the right to self defense under the U.N. Charter.⁸

ROE also can be seen as a means of controlling a nation's shift along a conflict continuum. On one end is peace, followed by crisis, then limited war, and finally total war. In this model, the rules have three general purposes: political, military, and legal.⁹ The political purpose prevents military operations from expanding beyond political objectives, as affirmed by Clausewitz's dictum that war is an extension of politics by other means. Nations will use ROE to deter war, isolate conflict, and prevent escalation to total war. This is why states abide by them in peacetime. Such rules may halt the pursuit of enemy forces into a third nation to contain a conflict. Those which control weapons of mass destruction serve a political purpose. The military purpose of ROE is mission accomplishment. A commander applies the rules to guide his subordinates on using force to seize objectives. He must balance aggressive action and the right to self-defense against losing public support, provoking a more powerful enemy, or fighting at an unfavorable time or place. ROE are intended to prevent violations of domestic and international laws and must consider, for example, the concept of proportionality and the selection of criteria for targeting.

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Various factors affect ROE development, including humanitarian issues, actions by higher authorities, concern for risks, and technological capabilities.¹⁰ ROE may be influenced by issues such as limiting collateral damage or casualties. This may demand pin-point accuracy and surgical strikes. Actions by higher authority will influence the development of rules. Interaction between senior government officials and military leaders is complex. The degree of confidence, skill, and expertise involved in these relations will determine whether ROE development is micro- or macro-managed. Moreover, restrictive rules may be developed to minimize risks of personnel becoming POWs or hostages. Technology may influence ROE in various ways. A small air force and poor communications require different rules than a large air force and advanced communications. In addition, technology determines how far off a target can be detected and engaged, and thus how much time the on-scene commander has to decide.

Before specifying the exact rules of engagement for a coalition, it is helpful to consider the principles that influence their development: unity of purpose, negotiation, commonality, flexibility, adaptability, and simplicity.

The glue that holds coalitions together is unity of effort, not necessarily unity of command. Unity of effort implies that political and military objectives are harmonized and that a coalition is devoted to mission accomplishment. If coalition partners agree to a combined commander, such as in NATO, so much the better. As the Gulf War demonstrated, however, a single commander does not always lead a coalition. Moreover, a coalition may be quickly formed, given its mission, and forced to develop ROE with only limited planning. Cooperation overcame this obstacle in Provide Comfort. Under these circumstances, a commander may find that emphasizing and nurturing the coalition's commitment to the objective is especially critical.

Developing coalition ROE requires negotiation and consensus, not dictation. All members must be represented. A commander must create an atmosphere in which coalition members will set aside sovereignty issues and make concessions to benefit the final ROE.

The goal in coalition ROE development is commonality. Ideally, a single set of rules that applies to all coalition members in the theater of operations is better understood, easier to implement, and increases interoperability. A commander may find significant advantage in ROE that accommodate the lowest common denominator. But he must also realize commonality is not always achievable but may only serve as a starting point for ROE development.

If commonality cannot be achieved, flexibility is key. Accommodation and work-arounds may be needed because of irreconcilable differences in national equipment, doctrine, capabilities, or political objectives. Separating forces or tasks geographically or functionally, as in the case of Desert Storm, may resolve such issues.

ROE change with the situation. Coalitions must transition from peacetime rules designed to deter hostilities to wartime rules designed to win. A commander must have a means to constantly evaluate ROE and promulgate necessary changes quickly. In contrast to Provide Comfort, which successfully adapted ROE from those used in Desert Storm, the coalition participating in Restore Hope was plagued by a lack of adaptability.

Coalition ROE must be judged against the overriding principle of simplicity. One summary of this principle provides the following advice:

- ▼ make them clear and brief
- ▼ avoid excessively qualified language
- ▼ tailor the language to the audience
- ▼ separate them by job description
- ▼ assure they are easily understood, remembered, and applied.¹¹

Simplicity is even more important in coalitions, such as Restore

Hope, when forces are called upon to make split-second decisions. For a set of rules to be understood by troops who speak different languages and come from different cultures, they must be simple.

The principles outlined above can help coalitions develop workable ROE. While following them will not guarantee victory, ignoring them will invite failure. With these principles, a coalition commander may find it easier to develop rules given the membership, mission, and circumstances of a coalition, thereby dramatically increasing the chance of success.

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NOTES

¹ The authors are indebted to Colonel Abdulaziz N. Abaykan, Saudi Air Force, a classmate at the Armed Forces Staff College, for his insights on coalition warfare.

² Michael A. Burton, "Rules of Engagement: What is the Relationship Between Rules of Engagement and the Design of Operations?" (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, School of Advanced Military Studies, May 4, 1987), p. 27.

³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Pub 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington: Government Printing Office, March 23, 1994), p. 329.

⁴ Scott D. Sagen, "Rules of Engagement," *Security Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1991), p. 80.

⁵ W. Hayes Parks, "Righting the Rules of Engagement," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, vol. 115, no. 5 (May 1989), p. 84; Sagen, "Rules of Engagement," p. 79.

⁶ Parks, "Righting the Rules," p. 86; Ashley J. Roach, "Rules of Engagement," *Naval War College Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (January/February 1983), p. 48.

⁷ Catherine S. Mangold, "The Military Question," *Newsweek*, vol. 118, no. 22 (November 25, 1991), p. 45.

⁸ John G. Humphries, "Operations Law and the Rules of Engagement," *Airpower Journal*, vol. 6, no. 3 (Fall 1992), p. 27; Roach, "Rules of Engagement," p. 47.

⁹ Guy R. Phillips, "Rules of Engagement: A Primer," *Army Lawyer* (July 1993), pp. 7-8; Roach, "Rules of Engagement," pp. 47-48.

¹⁰ Parks, "Righting the Rules," pp. 88-93.

¹¹ Judge Advocate General's School, *U.S. Army Operational Law Handbook*, Draft, 2^d edition, 1991, p. H-87.