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Contemporary China-Russia-North Korea Alignment:

THE KNOWN KNOWNS OF COALITION-BUILDING

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International cooperation in the security realm can be achieved in three different ways. It can be *tacit,* because of convergent national interests and/or threat perceptions*;* it can be *imposed* using coercive means to force cooperation*;* and it can be *negotiated* in an explicit bargaining process.
Most military coalitions fall in the last category, including the vast majority of U.S.-led military coalitions such as those involved in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the Iraq War. They are the result of an explicit bargaining process and do not emerge quasi-automatically due to identical threat perceptions or other types of common interests. I define a military coalition as an ad hoc understanding between two or more states that involves the deployment of military forces to undertake a specific security-related mission. In contrast to military alliances, military coalitions are not intended to last beyond a specific mission and are not based on a treaty or formal commitment involving standing expectations such as mutual defense, consultations, or interoperability.

North Korea's involvement in Russia's war against Ukraine is best understood as a form of military coalition participation. Likewise, the wider China–Russia–DPRK alignment more closely resembles an ad hoc coalition than a fully developed alliance structure. This makes the scholarship on coalition-building particularly valuable for analyzing the evolving relationship among China, Russia, and the DPRK.

Who starts the coalition formation process?

Coalition formation never starts automatically. Instead, State A approaches State B and initiates the coalition negotiation process. In other words, there is a *demand side* asking for coalition participation and a *supply side* potentially offering coalition membership. Demanding states or "lead states" tend to be great/regional powers. At times, however, smaller states can act in an opportunistic way offering their "coalition services" pro-actively in the form of a quid pro quo. These exchanges are discretionary political actions. They represent opportunities to transmit power resources from an area of relative strength (e.g., a troop deployment) to an area of relative weakness (e.g., food security, technology transfers).

Why do lead states seek coalition partners?

Coalitions tend to be built to overcome either military-strategic, logistical or political problems. Some coalition building projects thereby aim to build the smallest coalition necessary while others strive, for political reasons, to create the largest coalition possible. For many coalitions, political motives dominate. The lead state possesses all the required military assets. By building a multilateral coalition, it tries to boost the legitimacy of the operation. At times, however, lead states *do* take strategic-military considerations into account. A select number of states is deemed critical, for example, because they possess indispensable military or intelligence capabilities or because they are strategically located.

Who holds power in coalition negotiations?

During the coalition negotiation processes two types of "power" matter. The first being material power (i.e., overall military capabilities, GDP); the second being power that states derive from having a good BATNA (or, Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement). Many potential coalition joiners—even the weakest ones—often hold considerable amounts of this second source of power: they are less interested in the coalition as are lead states. For example, in September 1951, South Africa threatened to withdraw its troops from Korea if the United States did not grant South Africa new jet aircrafts.[1] The move came as a shock to the Truman administration.[2] As a result – and despite the U.S. being objectively much power powerful than South Africa - the U.S. government agreed to the sale of such aircraft on extremely favorable terms: aircraft that usually retailed for US$58,000 was acquired by South Africa for a mere US$5,447 a piece. At South Africa's request, the United States also started to effectively protect the South African regime from international condemnation of its apartheid policies, in particular, in the United Nations.[3]

How can these power asymmetries best be overcome? Lead states need to gather information on (1) what exactly a potential participant can bring to the table? (2) how much this state wants to serve in this coalition, and (3) what the minimal "payment" required for the state to join the effort is.

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[1] See, for example, Winship to Secretary of State, June 14, 1949, no. 848A.00/0458, Central Files, U.S. State Department, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland (henceforth NARA); Military Attaché to Defense Department, July 2, 1949, no. 848A.00/0476, Central Files, U.S. State Department, NARA; Minutes of Meeting with Mr F.C. Erasmus, August 17, 1949, no. 848A.00/0507, Central Files, U.S. State Department, NARA; James Barber and John Barratt, *South Africa's Foreign Policy: The Search for Status and Security, 1948–1988* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 49; and Roger Stephen Boulter, "F.C. Erasmus and the Politics of South African Defense, 1948–1959," Ph.D. dissertation, Rhodes University, 1997, p. 189.

[2] James Webb to Embassy Cape Town, February 13, 1952, PPF: SMOF, Selected Records Relating to the Korean War, Department of State: Topical File Subseries, folder 6. Contributions to the UN Effort [3 of 3: February–September 1952]," Truman Papers, HSTPL.

[3] Curtis S. Strong, "The Dilemma for the United States Presented by the South Western Africa Question," August, 26, 1952, *FRUS 1952–1954*, Vol. 3: *United Nations Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1979), pp. 1146–1147.

Gathering information on these questions is, however, no easy feat, especially for Q2 and Q3. Any potential participant has an interest in keeping its exact preference intensity secret (or even downplay it) to increase the bargaining power it holds in coalition negotiations. Indeed, while potential participants can hide their true inclinations from the lead state, lead states reveal their preferences by openly seeking coalition contributions. One way of overcoming this dilemma is to rely on existing diplomatic and intelligence networks that can help overcome information asymmetries. Lead states often overpay states that they do not have close ties with, because they do not have enough information on their preferences.

Interestingly, lead states mostly refrain from blatantly coercing countries into a coalition. Why? Coercion leaves scars; it triggers resistance, escape, avoidance, and counter control. Coerced coalition partners most often do not constitute a good fighting force. Military morale is generally tied to mutual trust, mutual reliance, and individual identification with joint goals, together with a willingness to dedicate oneself to combat. If coalition cooperation is coerced, military morale tends to be weak and eagerness to take operational risks is minimal. Moreover, attempts at coercive coalition building risk tarnishing the legitimacy of the operation—which is often the key reason to construct a coalition in the first place.

How efficient are "constructed/negotiated" coalitions?

The tasks military coalitions are built for vary in intensity. But many coalitions have ambitious goals such as fighting wars. So, one needs to ask: Can strategic, incentive-based cooperation really achieve these tasks? Or rather, is the "artificial" construction of cooperation one of the reasons why recent coalition operations, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan and also many UN operations have often fallen short of their stated goals?

Optimists suggest that constructed coalitions operate no differently from other types of coalitions. Once deployed, states that were previously not intrinsically motivated to join a coalition adopt new values. They learn to care during their deployment and thereafter. Why? By joining a coalition, government officials are required to publicly justify their actions. Indeed, many payment packages, especially those that might trigger controversy, are never made public. Rather, recipient states often go to great lengths to publicly justify their deployment in other ways – even authoritarian regimes. During the Vietnam War, for instance, South Korean President Park Chung-hee and the members of his government would highlight how the South Korean troop commitment to Vietnam was payback for U.S. aid during the Korean War and a result of their commitment to strengthening the anti-communist

front in Asia – despite having received generous payment packages from the United States in exchange for joining the Vietnam War coalition.[4]

In this process of publicly justifying a deployment, a cognitive dissonance arises between what is publicly argued for and what is secretly or privately believed. Laboratory and experimental work suggest that human beings in these situations tend to resolve such dissonance by adapting their preferences to their behavior; that is, they internalize the justification. Furthermore, coalitions socialize participating actors. In this process, strategic, incentive-based cooperation often turns into intrinsic motivation: if your coalition partners care, you start caring too. Lastly, countries view multilateral coalitions as valuable, self-serving opportunities for exchange. They do not want to lose these opportunities and so they try to do a good job when deployed to the operational theater.[5]

Pessimists, however, suggest that coalition participants with minimal intrinsic interests restrict their coalition involvement to a minimum. They would point, for example, to NATO's operation in Afghanistan (ISAF) and argue that enduring differences in intrinsic motivations translated into different behavior on the ground. For example, states such as Germany, Italy or Japan implemented "caveats" and other operational restrictions that impacted the overall effectiveness of the operation. Alternatively, coalition participants might limit their commitment to ensure a "profit margin." In other words, they restrict their involvement to a degree that is just minimally necessary not to jeopardize the deal made with the lead state.[6] Coalition participants at times can also act opportunistically (e.g., by threatening to withdraw their forces if their demands are not met or if they are criticized). Why is such "profit-maximizing" behavior feasible? First, there are monitoring challenges. It is very hard for lead states to observe what is going on in the deployment theater at all times and places. As a result, coalition participants are tempted to look for short cuts to protect their assets: Why undertake undue risks? Why engage with difficult targets if easier activities can be undertaken? Second, lead states face punishment challenges, especially in environments in which coalition participants are scarce. Lead states then have little in their hands to discipline deviant coalition participants if they desperately rely on them.

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[4] Sung-loo Han, "South Korea's Participation in the Vietnam Conflict: An Analysis of the U.S.-Korean Alliance," *Orbis*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Winter 1978), pp. 897–898; and Princeton Lyman, "Korea's Involvement in Viet-Nam," *Orbis*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 1968), p. 563. See also Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Hearings before the Subcommittee on United States Security Agreements and Commitments Abroad*, Part 6: *Republic of Korea*, p. 1543

[5] Bellamy and Williams, *Providing Peacekeepers: The Politics, Challenges, and Future of United Nations Peacekeeping Contributions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 19; Berman and Sams, *Peacekeeping in Africa: Capabilities and Culpabilities* (Geneva: UNIDIR, 2000), 256.

[6] Indeed, throughout history "hired forces" gained the reputation of having a sense of obligation and commitment that is less developed than other types of forces. They also have a record of being discouraged by setbacks and casualties and less willing to follow through when a situation goes sour. See e.g., Singer, Corporate Warriors: *The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 159-60.

Lastly, some pessimists would even go so far as to suggest that "constructed" coalitions can create negative externalities in troop contributing countries. Financial side-payments and issue-linkage can generate jealousy and social tensions, and open the potential for corruption, favoritism and nepotism.[7] The money, material and training provided by lead states also risk increasing domestic political repression and even the probability of coups.[8]

Lessons applicable to the Russia–China–DPRK alignment

Applying these findings to the Russia–China–DPRK alignment, several analytical questions immediately arise.

The first is about the origins of the coalition-building process itself. Which actor initiated it, and for what reason? Was Russia the primary driver, seeking material support, political backing, or strategic depth in the context of its war effort and broader confrontation with the West? Or was China the key enabler, motivated by its own interest in preserving regional leverage, constraining U.S. power, and stabilizing its northeastern flank? Or did the DPRK actively offer its services, hoping to extract economic, technological, or military benefits from the larger powers? The answer matters because the state that initiates coalition formation often weakens its own bargaining position. The demander reveals need, while the supplier can afford to be selective, ambiguous, and strategically unresponsive. In such situations, the initiating state often overpays unless it possesses very precise information about the other side's red lines, reservation prices, and alternative options.

Second, to what extent is this alignment driven by intrinsic motivations, and to what extent is it sustained by transactional exchange? Put differently, is the coalition rooted in genuinely shared threat perceptions or convergent strategic interests or does it depend primarily on quid pro quos: technology transfers, energy supplies, food aid, financial transfers, military hardware, diplomatic protection, or access to sanctions evasion networks? The more the alignment rests on quid pro quos rather than on durable common purpose, the more likely it is to remain conditional, opportunistic, and vulnerable to shifts in bargaining power. Transactional coalitions can function, but they are usually shallower than cooperation frameworks built on deeper trust and mutual identification of interests.

[7] Aning, "Unintended Consequences of Peace Operations for Troop-Contributing Countries from West Africa: The Case of Ghana," in *Unintended Consequences of Peacekeeping Operations*, ed. Aoi, De Coning, and Thakur (Tokyo: United Nations Press, 2007), 141 & 45; Levin, MacKay, and Nasirzadeh, "Selectorate Theory and the Democratic Peacekeeping Hypothesis: Evidence from Fiji and Bangladesh," *International Peacekeeping* 23, no. 1 (2016); Savage and Caverley, "When Human Capital Threatens the Capitol:Foreign Aid in the Form of Military Training and Coups," J*ournal of Peace Research* 54, no. 4 (2017).
[8] Levin, MacKay, and Nasirzadeh, "Selectorate Theory and the Democratic Peacekeeping Hypothesis: Evidence from Fiji and Bangladesh"; Savage and Caverley, "When Human Capital Threatens the Capitol: Foreign Aid in the Form of Military Training and Coups."

Third, how robust is this coalition likely to be over time? Have the parties internalized the public rhetoric surrounding their alignment to such an extent that their preferences have adjusted to the discourse? In other words, have they publicly committed themselves so visibly that backing out would become politically costly? Or does a narrowly transactional logic still prevail, with each side seeking primarily to maximize national advantage while minimizing obligations? If the latter remains true, then the coalition rests on much less stable foundations. Opportunistic partners often search for shortcuts. They may comply formally while withholding high-quality performance in substance. Technology may be transferred, but only in downgraded or incomplete form. Reconstruction aid may be promised, but delivered cheaply and minimally. Military or logistical assistance may be provided, but only to the extent absolutely necessary to preserve the transaction. Such behavior does not necessarily break the coalition, but it hollows it out and reduces its strategic effectiveness.

The quality of coalition output, therefore, becomes as important as its mere existence. Analysts should not only ask whether the parties cooperate, but also how well they cooperate, how much they are willing to risk for one another, and whether they incur real costs on behalf of the alignment. Coalitions held together mainly by bargaining and side payments often suffer from low trust, weak coordination, and persistent hedging. Their members remain alert to exploitation and are reluctant to expose themselves to unnecessary risk. This makes them potentially useful for limited, short-term cooperation, but less reliable in situations requiring sacrifice, uncertainty tolerance, or sustained joint action under pressure.

Finally, it will be important to monitor the externalities produced by this cooperation, especially in the military domain. If DPRK soldiers deployed to Russia gain battlefield experience, develop unit cohesion, and acquire a stronger esprit de corps, the long-term consequences may exceed the immediate tactical utility of their deployment. Such troops could return not only battle-hardened but also socially elevated, materially rewarded, and politically significant within the North Korean system. Access to new housing, higher status, foreign exposure, and combat experience could create a cohort distinct from other units in the DPRK armed forces. Over time, this may alter internal military hierarchies, generate new expectations of reward, and enhance the regime's capacity in ways that extend beyond the original coalition bargain.