NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone

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NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone by David P. Auerswald and Stephen Saideman, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014, ISBN: 9780691159386, 280 pages.

By the end of December 2014, most foreign combat troops had left Afghanistan. *NATO in Afghanistan*, David Auerswald and Stephen Saideman's bold attempt to analyze the challenges and difficulties of coalition warfare, could not be more topical. This ambitious book provides a detailed and balanced account of NATO-led combat operations in Afghanistan between 2003 and 2010. Some readers might take issue with the fact that the study does not cover the 2010–14 period and, therefore, fails to analyze NATO's pullout. But the book does not aim to document the successes and failures of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), nor does it pretend to explain decisions to engage and disengage at the alliance level. Rather, it seeks to point out and demonstrate the complexity of cooperating with others when conducting multilateral operations. The book is based on the simple but crucial observation that, in the current international environment, "fighting alongside other countries" is both challenging and necessary (p. 13). In Winston Churchill's words, "There is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies—and that is to fight without them" (p. 1). But "why is coalition warfare so hard?" (p. 2). This is what the authors of this book attempt to explain in light of the NATO experience.

Auerswald and Saideman's argument is straightforward and not necessarily counterintuitive. Coalition warfare is difficult because of the primacy of national decisions in multilateral interventions. While this simple fact contradicts NATO's efforts of creating a centralized and integrated organization, it is something most people familiar with the war in Afghanistan already know from talking to military officers or hearing and reading American officials complain about other countries' caveats. However, this book provides a sophisticated argument that explains why domestic politics prevail and why this will remain the case in the future. The authors build on principal-agent theory to make a well-documented, well-illustrated, and convincing case: The primacy of national behavior over alliance decisions is a structural problem. In their words, "NATO's structure and processes establish . . . a hybrid principal-agent relationship between the multiple entities delegating authority to deployed military units and those military units themselves," which favors the authority of the member states (p. 13). This book not only demonstrates why national control trumps alliance decisions in coalition warfare but also explicates "why there is variation in control mechanisms used by countries involved in multilateral interventions and by some countries over time" (p. 12). This is what makes this book an important one.

According to the authors, the key variable for explaining variation in national behavior is the allied country's political system. Presidential systems, single-party governments, and coalition governments all act differently when it comes to multilateral operations. One of the book's main achievements is to combine this institutional argument with political considerations and individual preferences of key decision makers to leverage a relatively simple

hypothesis and develop a sophisticated argument. Auerswald and Saideman convincingly show that the type of political system determines what tools principals use to direct their agents. This hypothesis is in turn demonstrated through rich empirical case studies (although some are analyzed more in-depth than others). In presidential systems (such as the U.S., France, and Poland), "individuals matter a great deal" (p. 113) and can use a variety of tools to control their agents (agent selection, incentives, oversight, restrictions, etc.). For the most part, single-party governments (such as the U.K. and Canada) work in similar ways, since they also empower individual decision makers who act as single principals. Most variation is observed in the behaviors of coalition governments, which the authors explain by introducing two more variables, ideological dispersion and ideological leaning.

NATO in Afghanistan is an ambitious study. As such, it should be praised for offering a multi-causal theoretical model that makes sense of a complicated issue, which is one of the book's many strengths. Some political scientists might find issue with the high number of cases and variables. Readers more comfortable with mono-causal explanations might find the multiplicity of explanatory variables a little unsettling, as it sometimes makes it difficult to understand which factors have primacy and occasionally seems to be reintroducing some of the alternative explanations that the authors had dismissed early in the book (realism, public opinion, and strategic culture). Yet, this is a minor criticism compared to the outstanding qualities of this work. Maybe one way around it could have been to discuss alternative theories more in-depth to see how they can play out in this multi-causal model. Where does national interest come into play? Can we really assume all the countries that have been involved in ISAF in the past thirteen years have shared interests? If not, how does it impact their behavior within the coalition?

NATO in Afghanistan is both timely and important. It makes a meaningful contribution to the "research on civil-military relations, and the impact of domestic politics upon foreign policy" (p. 218). It is not only essential reading for scholars of international organizations, international security, and world politics (who will find it both theoretically stimulating and empirically compelling) but also a must-read for policy makers. The implications of this work are broad, significant, and thought provoking. Since domestic politics always prevail, specialization and military cooperation will never cease to present major difficulties and pitfalls even for "the most interoperable and effective multilateral security organization in the world" to make their point (p. 31). Allies will never act the way one wants them to: "[They] do not always show up when needed or they show up but are not able to do what is needed" (p. 232). One can only hope, following Auerswald and Saideman, "that the next set of leaders to deploy troops are aware of the inevitable trade-offs when allies go to war" (p. 236).