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Is liberal internationalism worth saving?

Ad hoc coalitions and their consequences for international security

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Slow responses and blocked decision-making of international organizations provide opportunities for ad hoc coalitions to fill functional and political gaps. Compared to UN peace operations, ad hoc coalitions avoid gridlock and high transaction costs, they are fast to set up, can be task and time specific, flexible and easily dissolved. However, they also have much lighter human rights and financial accountability frameworks, a patchy record of longer-term impact and can contribute to a more fragmented response to armed conflicts and threats to international peace and security.

Going forward, policymakers should:

- Use the right instrument at the right time, matching tools with facts on the ground and political objectives.
- Complement financial support to ad hoc coalitions with stronger demands of human rights and financial accountability.
- In transitions, consider the longer-term impacts on the effectiveness and legitimacy on the international peace and security architecture.

Contested intervention paradigms

Armed conflicts are dominating the news. Whether it is interstate wars such as Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the war between Hamas and Israel, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, military coups across the Sahel region, the war in Sudan, or gang violence in Haiti, the security of individuals, groups and even the survival of states are put in question.

While armed conflicts are nothing new, the paradigms that inform whether and how policymakers intervene in them have changed over time. After the end of the Cold War, powerful policymakers, many in the Global North, created the impression of a victory of liberal internationalism, marked by a global order based on the rule of law, protection of human rights and freedoms, and peaceful settlement of disputes. Multilateralism was the preferred mode of governance, also in international peace and security. Peace operations led by the UN or regional organizations were the dominant intervention paradigm, although they were imperfect and contested from the start (Abrahamsen, Andersen, Sending 2019; Hofmann, forthcoming).

Today, the liberal internationalist paradigm faces a perfect storm. Populist, nationalist and other extremist movements from the left and right openly challenge core tenets of liberalism. In addition, shifting geopolitics has given more voice to actors in the Global South, demanding a more just and representative global order. They contest a Western-centric and paternalistic idea of interventionism. Alternative paradigms include spheres of influence by actors such as Russia or developmental peace by China (Hofmann, forthcoming). These paradigms compete for attention in organizations such as the UN, often leading to growing distrust of the UN system, with a Security Council facing gridlock and a questioning of the goals and ideals of the UN Charter.

The result is that forging international cooperation and finding multilateral solutions to maintaining peace and security has become increasingly contested and difficult, risking fragmentation and regionalization.

Organizational paradigm shift?

Who should provide peace and security? The UN, where the liberal internationalism paradigm has been dominant, has not launched a new multidimensional peace operation since 2014 and is slowly ending its existing ones. Concurrently, state and non-state actors with shared security concerns have joined forces in coalitions on a regular basis – mostly acting outside international organizations. This shows that next to pursuing ideologically differently motivated paradigms within organizations such as the UN, actors also actively turn their attention to other organizational forms. Multilateral conflict management through liberal international organizations is increasingly being replaced with ad hoc coalitions. These small, exclusive and often short-lived coalitions fall outside the umbrella of international organizations such as the UN.

Prominent examples in Africa are the Multinational Joint Task Force fighting Boko Haram and the Group of Five Sahel in Mali and neighboring countries. Also, maritime coalitions have been launched at steady pace to combat security threats in the international waters in the Middle East, such as the US-led International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) Sentinel or Operation Prosperity Guardian, and the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH) mission (Maglia et al., 2023).

Interestingly, the organizational paradigm of adhocism is actively promoted by the main proponents of liberal internationalism. The US has a history of forging cooperation through ad hoc coalitions – or coalitions of the willing – when facing gridlock in international organizations. After 9/11, the US did not respond with NATO at first, but created a coalition of the willing to attack Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, known as Operation Enduring Freedom. When trying to address nuclear threats posed by Iran and North Korea, policymakers in the US, the EU, Russia and China created formats outside of established international organizations to address these threats. In September 2023, US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken dubbed this approach as a deliberate strategy of "variable geometry" to cope with today's difficulties in forging international cooperation: "For every problem, we're assembling a fit-for-purpose coalition" (Blinken 2023). Also, the EU increasingly values European-led ad hoc coalitions to foster crisis response. The Strategic Compass of March 2022 explicitly mentions the ambition to "strengthen mutual support between CSDP missions and operations and European-led ad hoc missions and operations" (EEAS, 2022, p. 30). Finally, in December 2023 the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2719 enabling financing of African-led operations. The resolution enables the use of UN assessed contributions (core funding) to fund coalitions under specific conditions. UN Secretary General António Guterres has been one of the strongest champions for delegating more of the responsibility for military operations from the UN to regional and ad hoc coalitions, e.g. with the recently released New Agenda for Peace (2023).

These changes represent a paradigm shift away from formal long-lasting global public solutions to flexible task-specific cooperation. Ad hoc coalitions can be set up on short notice, usually encompass a narrow mandate, and are created to "fix a problem" after which they can be dissolved, rather than being built to last. Conversely, international organizations can be slow in adapting to external changes due to path dependencies and geopolitical tensions. These factors provide opportunities for ad hoc coalitions to fill functional gaps (Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024).

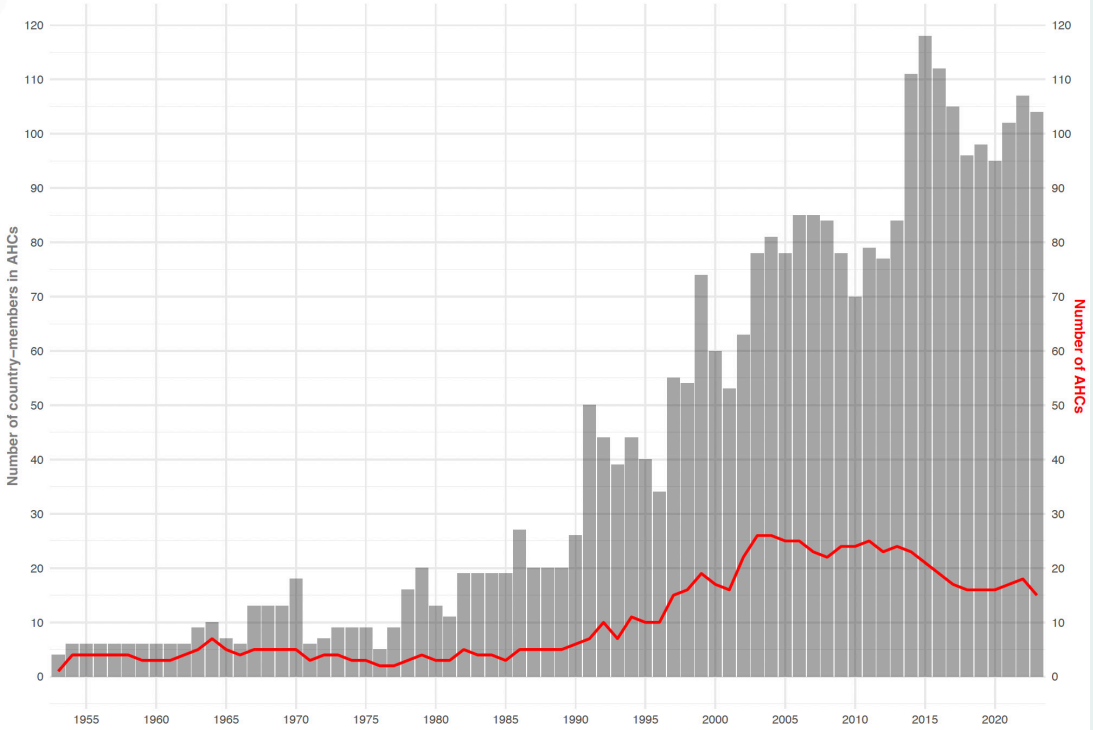

Figure 1 – Number of country-members and AHCs over time

Implications for international cooperation

Addressing conflicts and threats to peace and security through ad hoc coalitions is not without problems. Despite the benefits of effectiveness and speed, questions arise about their capacity to address root causes, their complementarity with existing intervention approaches, their inclusivity and legitimacy, as well as their accountability.

First, ad hoc coalitions often serve as stop-gap measures or 'quick fixes' for urgent threats to peace and security. They treat symptoms rather than address root causes. As countless examples from the African continent have shown, task-specific counterterrorism coalitions can achieve quick operational wins, but struggle to make lasting change on the ground, and have limited legitimacy among host populations. The speed at which ad hoc coalitions are set-up furthermore hampers longer-term strategic planning, including exit strategies, effective mission follow-up, transition plans and their embedding in a wider political-diplomatic approach. What is required is a careful rethinking of where to position ad hoc coalitions amidst the tools in the toolbox of international crisis management so that they complement other activities.

Second, ad hoc coalitions are commonly set up by like-minded actors willing to make available the necessary resources on short notice. This desire to rapidly form a fit-for-purpose coalition may trump inclusivity. Ad hoc coalitions are not preceded by a broad discussion among a diverse set of parties, which would allow for debate about mission goals and strategy and create room for potential buy-in of skeptical actors. Leadership matters here as well. When forging an international reply to tensions in the Strait of Hormuz in 2019, Europeans were reluctant to join a US-led coalition, resulting in the establishment of separate US and European maritime security coalitions (Tam and Morcos, 2021). Similarly, the response to Houthi attacks on commercial vessels in 2023/2024 has shown the unwillingness of Europeans states to put their vessels under US command. The risk of adhocism is hence not only lessened legitimacy, but also fragmentation and possible duplication.

Third, ad hoc coalitions often operate with unclear legal and political mandates, which raises concerns about their accountability (Hofmann et al., 2024). Non-binding political declarations allow for more flexibility and may help to overcome fears of entrapment, yet they also come with ambiguity about legal authority and political oversight. It is for this reason that the previously mentioned UN Security Council resolution emphasized that human rights accountability mechanisms need to be in place for UN assessed contributions to be released (UN 2023). As a result, direct funding from donors that are less concerned with human rights accountability frameworks is more interesting, such as funding from the European Peace Facility that does not carry the same requirements for reporting on human rights as e.g. UN assessed contributions (Brosig and Karlsrud, forthcoming).

What kind of liberal internationalism is worth saving?

While many scripts exist, none are "purely" liberal,

and they are not necessarily pursued by Western actors (Berger 2023). While one script equates liberal internationalism with the continued investment in multilateral organizations, others would say that the only way to avoid gridlock, high transaction costs and preserve a liberal (and perhaps Western) order is to act through smaller, more nimble and effective formats.

The relative ease by which ad hoc coalitions are launched is a big advantage when facing gridlock in multilateral organizations. Pondering over "the best solution", as if it exists in the absolute, is often a waste of time. But the tradeoff also leads to a loss of legitimacy and accountability, with actions taking place with little oversight. Ad hoc coalitions can undermine and deinstitutionalize international organizations through bypassing standard procedures for decision-making processes, whittling down established scripts, and shifting resource allocations, relegating global and regional organizations to more normative roles (Brosig and Karlsrud, 2024).

States therefore need to carefully consider which coalitions to take part in or support, and which they shall give a pass.

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