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More allies, weaker missions? How junior partners contribute to multinational military operations

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing consensus that multinational military operations are often less effective than the theoretical sum of their constitutive parts. Multiple chains of command, restriction on intelligence sharing, and capability aggregation problems can reduce fighting power. However, partners may be necessary to provide legitimacy to an intervention. As such, most studies assume that the state leading a coalition (usually the United States) has to accept a degree of operational ineffectiveness in order to gain political benefits from the participation of junior partners to a multinational military operation. However, such analysis puts all junior partners under the same category, without taking into account the differentiated contributions of those junior partners based on their relative military power and international status. This article explores variation between the junior partners' contributions and their impact on coalition political and military dynamics. It teases out the implications of adopting a fine-grained analysis of junior partners.

KEYWORDS Coalitions; alliances; military interventions; contemporary warfare

In the fall of 2001, upon receiving the British offer to contribute to Operation Enduring Freedom in reaction to the 9/11 attacks, U.S. president George W. Bush told his defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld to “give them a role” (Woodward, 2002, p. 63). Although NATO activated Article 5 in support of the United States, U.S. policy-makers had enough confidence in their military superiority to accept contributions from a limited number of allies only, and mostly for symbolic purposes: The memories of NATO’s 1999 intervention in Kosovo were still fresh, and the United States did not want to be subjected to another “war by committee” that would impose limitations and constraints on their military power.

Ten years later, NATO was commanding the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operation in Afghanistan, where 90.000 U.S. soldiers were fighting alongside 35.000–40.000 troops provided by NATO countries: clearly more than a symbolic contribution. When looking at the details, however,

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those contributions from “junior partners” were very diverse, in both quantity and quality. While some allies were willing and able to fight, others had technological shortfalls or political constraints that prevented ISAF planners to fully use the capabilities theoretically at their disposal. The causes and consequences of such difficulties are explored in other articles for this forum (Mello & Saideman, 2019). In this article, I therefore adopt a different lens. Building on the theoretical framework established in my book *Allies that Count* (Schmitt, 2018), I explore the theoretical and policy consequences of adopting a fine-grained understanding of how “junior partners” contribute to multinational military operations.

The first section of this article shows that previous work of coalition warfare has failed to take into account variations in the junior partners’ contributions, and summarizes the key finding from my own work. The second section discusses potential policy implications in more details.

The challenges of coalition warfare

The puzzle

The literature on alliances and coalitions in International Relations (IR) scholarship is well developed (Masala & Scheffler Corvaja, 2016; Rynning & Schmitt, 2018; Sprecher & Krause, 2006). However, when it comes to warfighting, the literature tends to identify a trade-off between the political benefits for the United States of operating with allies and the military constraints these allies impose on the conduct of operations. The most powerful state leading a coalition (in this case the United States) has to accept a degree of military constraints in order to gain political benefits from the participation of junior partners to a multinational military operation (Bensahel, 2007; Weitsman, 2013). Yet, we are left without knowing how the trade-off actually works in practice. How are political benefits and military effectiveness related? What level of political benefits compensates for potential or actual military ineffectiveness? Is the “trade-off” even always present (could junior partners not bring both political benefits *and* military effectiveness)? In short, what is the utility of a junior partner’s contribution to coalition warfare?

I define the utility of the contribution as: the capacity for a junior state to positively contribute to the achievement of the desired end state, as expressed by political-strategic documents and declarations of policy-makers before the campaign begins, or as they are revised during the campaign. For example, during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, the desired end state was the removal of Saddam Hussein: Junior partners contributed differently to this outcome. After Saddam Hussein was removed from power, the strategic objective became the stabilization of Iraq, to which junior partners also contributed differently.

I distinguish between utility and usefulness. In economics terms, utility refers to the ability of a commodity to satisfy needs or wants, while usefulness refers to an improvement of quality. A commodity can have utility (satisfying a desire) but no usefulness (and can even be harmful such as a cigarette). If we extend the distinction to the subject matter, the assessment of utility is not an evaluation of the strategy adopted in specific interventions. Clearly, the strategy adopted in Iraq was deeply flawed, and the Afghanistan strategy questionable. But I leave to others the overall assessment of such military campaigns. I focus here on how junior partners contributed to the logic of those strategies. For example, France's opposition to the 2003 Iraq war had no utility, but could have been very useful (had it succeeded) in avoiding a great strategic mistake. In comparison, the British support to the United States had a high utility, but no usefulness. For better or worse, strategy is left to the United States in contemporary coalition warfare, and I explore here how junior partners contributed to strategies they did not design (and only marginally influenced), hence focusing on utility.

The argument

This section summarizes the theoretical framework and findings developed in my book (Schmitt, 2018), to serve as the foundation for the discussion in the second part of this article (detailed conceptual and methodological discussions can be found in the book and are only summarized here due to space constraints). In order to understand variations, I break down a junior partner's utility to a multinational military operation into six components: standing, respect for International Humanitarian Law (IHL), integration, responsiveness, skills, and quality. Standing and respect for IHL relate to the political dimension of utility, while integration, responsiveness, skills and quality relate to the military dimension.

I rely on a crisp-set qualitative comparative analysis (csQCA) in order to identify which combinations of variables lead to utility, complemented by 12 detailed case studies of junior partners in coalition warfare in the post-Cold War era. Based on this analysis, the main argument is that two mechanisms lead to utility: the first is standing and the second is the combination of integration and quality. In other words, the actual utility of a junior partner's contribution depends on whether this junior partner has a high degree of standing in the international system, or if its military contribution is both integrated (sufficiently large number of troops deployed and the willingness to use them) and of a technological quality sufficient to be deployed alongside American forces.

Standing can be defined as "the position an actor occupies in a hierarchy" (Lebow, 2008, p. 66), and is an important feature of the international system. It is important to understand that standing is both structural and contextual.

Structurally, standing is a combination of material and normative attributes: being a member of the Permanent Five of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the case of France and the United Kingdom, being considered a “pariah” or “rogue” state in the case of North Korea and Iran, etcetera. In that sense, standing is partly composed of international reputation, but is not limited to it: the position of each actor in the hierarchy is the result of material power, institutional privileges, and prestige. In assessing the standing of a state, one must then take into consideration material capabilities, international legal status and reputation. But in addition to these structural factors, standing is also contextual and depends on the international politics of an intervention. Some states will have a higher standing than others in a specific context, and enjoy a position that structural factors could not have granted them. For example, Saudi Arabia during the Gulf War enjoyed a far greater standing than its structural resources allow for, because the context favored this Muslim state, keeper of the holy sites of Sunni Islam and sharing a border with Iraq.

The standing of a specific country can bring very concrete political advantages. For example, a member of the UNSC such as France or the United Kingdom is able to draft a resolution in both French and English, and can use its political position to support the U.S. preferences. Moreover, some states enjoy privileged relations with other states, and can use these special relationships for the benefits of the multinational intervention: France’s relations with Morocco were instrumental in convincing the kingdom to participate in the Gulf War. These concrete political advantages derive from the standing of a junior partner, and contribute to the legitimacy of the intervention. Indicators to assess standing would then encompass a given state’s political position within the international system (member of important “clubs” such as the UNSC, etc.), its geostrategic position in the context of a given crisis, and its diplomatic networks and experience which can be mobilized in support of a leading state’s initiative (McConaughy, Musgrave, & Nexon, 2018).

Integration is the first, and probably the most obvious, problem in the case of coalition warfare. The integration of junior partners can be reduced because of a lack of commitment. First, the size of the military contingent a junior partner furnishes can be nothing more than a “token” contribution, creating more military problems than benefits. A RAND study differentiates between “core” partners and others, and argues that

the US army is increasingly required to provide forces to joint commanders conducting multinational operations with a ... diverse group of coalition partners, ranging from highly capable allies to marginally capable partner armies with little history of cooperation with the US army. (Moroney, Grissom, & Marquis, 2007, p. 6)

According to the ISAF placemat (as of June 2013), Austria had three soldiers in Afghanistan, El Salvador 24, Greece three, Iceland three, Ireland seven, Malaysia two, New Zealand 13, and Ukraine 26. These small contingents, although explicable by the political benefits they bring to the contributing states (Togo, 2006), make no military sense and can actually reduce the force integration by being unable to conduct any meaningful military action. In addition to the token contribution, even larger contingents can be submitted to constraining rules, known as “caveats,” which limit the operational room of maneuver for the force commander. The nature of the caveats signals the capacity for a junior partner to meaningfully contribute to the strategic plans of a coalition (Haesebrouck, Reykers, & Fonck, 2019; von Hlatky & Massie, 2019). Finally, integration can also be reduced because sovereign states are usually reluctant to relinquish control over their armed forces, which can lead to the establishment of parallel (and sometimes conflicting) command and control structures, thus violating the principle of unity of command (Bensahel, 2007). Clausewitz (2004 [1832]) already recognized this problem as a fundamental feature of coalition warfare:

The thing would have a consistency, and it would be less embarrassing to the theory of War if this promised contingent of ten, twenty, or thirty thousand men was handed over entirely to the State engaged in War, so that it could be used as required; it might then be regarded as subsidized force. But the usual practice is widely different. Generally, the auxiliary force has its own Commander, who depends only on his own Government, and to whom it prescribes an objective such as best suits the shilly-shally measures it has in view. (p. 696)

Integration is then both military and political in nature: the size of the contingent deployed and the caveats are political decisions, which have direct military effects.

Quality is also an important aspect for two reasons. First, a country lacking in at least some recent technologies will face interoperability problems with other countries in a gradually integrated battlefield. Second, weapons condition what a military contingent can or cannot do. For example, the French tanks during the Gulf War were too lightly armored, which forced General Schwartzkopf to assign the “Daguet” division to a protection mission on the left flank of the main effort. To a large extent, the measure of technological proficiency during the past two decades has been the ability for military organizations to successfully integrate in their arsenals technologies associated with the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” later known as “Transformation.” These technologies included sharp ameliorations of data acquisition and sharing capabilities (enhancing battlefield awareness), the increased precision and range of strike capabilities (Farrell, Rynning, & Terriff, 2013).

While in practice the two mechanisms identified may be found simultaneously in a junior partner's contribution, it is important to remember that they are two different, albeit mutually reinforcing, processes. A high standing leads to utility, and the combination of integration and quality also leads to utility. Finding both mechanisms in a junior partner's contribution is certainly advisable, but only one of them is sufficient to explain utility. I must here mention that I use the term "mechanism" in order to differentiate the analysis from a neo-positivist approach which would look at the net effect of independent variables on the dependent variable, then claiming that the presence (or absence) of a specific set of independent variables "causes" the dependent variable. Instead, I am interested in describing mechanisms, defined as "a sequence of events, conditions and processes leading from the explanans to the explanandum" (Little, 1990, p. 15).

This argument run counters the logic of coalition formation that has dominated the post-Cold War era. While it was generally assumed that the legitimacy of an operation would increase commensurately to the number of states participating in it, my research shows that different mechanisms are at play: In coalition warfare, the more is not necessarily the merrier.

At first glance, the two mechanisms identified could reinforce the idea of a "trade-off" between political and military factors, in particular when it comes to standing as a mechanism leading to utility. It could be argued that a low military utility is the price to get a country with a high standing on board. In practice, cases of countries with high standing but no integration and quality are rare and limited to very peculiar geostrategic contexts such as the Syrian participation to the Gulf War. Most of the time, countries with a high standing have also a relatively high degree of integration and quality. This is easily explained, as in the current international system, countries with a high standing and willing to participate in a U.S.-led operation are already strong U.S. allies (United Kingdom, France, etc.). The most frequent cases are those of junior partners being both militarily and politically effective, or cases of junior partners being militarily effective, but politically ineffective.

This argument has implications for coalition-building strategies, as it identifies clear criteria for assessing a junior partner's contribution: instead of explaining the utility of military power in a multinational framework by looking at the institutional design, it focuses on the marginal utility of the states contributing to the intervention, specifically their political and military utility. In particular, although this research does not explore the aggregated effect of junior partners in details, it seems to indicate that the institutional design is less important than the specifics of the commitment and military capabilities of each individual junior partner. When junior partners are both willing and able, they rank military effectiveness higher than other political concerns, and find institutional arrangements that allow them to achieve

this goal. It is mostly when junior partners want to participate in an intervention in order to increase their political benefits at a minimum cost that they will try to use the institutional design in their favor, thus harming the overall effectiveness of the multinational effort.

This argument does not claim universal validity in all times and places. Like every human phenomenon, warfare evolves over time. As such, my analytical claim is contextual and limited to a specific configuration of the international system, specifically the configuration that emerged in the post-Cold War era, marked by a combination of three factors:

- an American supremacy in terms of power distribution
- a normative context valuing formal/de jure equality among states and the respect for International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights Law
- a specific development in the conduct of contemporary warfare emphasizing the use of highly evolved technological capabilities.

This international system is not bound to last forever: power distribution will shift, the current international liberal norms can be pushed back, and military technologies and doctrines evolve over time. However, this argument, elaborated through the study of a 20-year period, can reasonably claim some validity for the next two decades, as forecasts do not anticipate a dramatic change in the international system in this timeframe (Beckley, 2018; Monteiro, 2014).

Rethinking the role of junior partners

Theoretical implications

The two mechanisms identified certainly limit the utility of a contribution to a few junior partners in the world, and run counters the logic of coalition-building that has prevailed in the post-Cold War era.

This observation might appear as an emphasis on the allies' military capabilities or standing, at the expense of the legitimacy that would be granted by having an important number of allies participating in an intervention. On the opposite, I am sympathetic to observations that power and legitimacy are in constant interaction in the conduct of foreign policy. The establishment of a mechanism leading to utility which emphasizes military factors is by no means a denial of the role of legitimacy. It is rather an observation that the source of legitimacy, instead of lying in the sheer number of states participating in a multinational military operation, is based on the respect of international legal and tacit norms (such as an international organization authorizing a military operation) as well as clearly establishing and defending state's interests, as Aoi (2011) suggested.

To summarize, the sources of legitimacy for an intervention are not those policy-makers usually suspect or take for granted. Numbers do not have an impact on legitimacy. Instead, a country which made the clear and conscious political choice to be heavily integrated with the leading state is making a political statement which has a much more important impact on the legitimacy of the operation than any token contribution, as numerous as they may be. The related and somehow surprising finding that respect for IHL does not seem to have an impact on the mechanism to utility also forces to re-think the relationships between the laws of war, the importance of the media and the conduct of a military campaign. Overall, these findings open an interesting research program on the sources of legitimacy in a multinational context, and can renew the debates about the respective values of multilateralism and unilateralism.

Moreover, this conceptual framework permits to go beyond the way “burden-sharing” is dominantly conceptualized in the IR literature, in terms of (un)even distribution of risks and financial commitments to the alliance (Olson & Zeckhauser, 1966; Oneal, 1990; Sandler & Shimizu, 2014). It is possible to offer a subtler conceptualization of burden-sharing, taking into account standing and integration. For example, states with a higher standing invest more capabilities and reputational resources in the alliance, an aspect usually overlooked in the literature. This also relates to recent research emphasizing that burden-sharing should be conceptualized more broadly than through simple material contributions (for example, going beyond the 2% of GDP “fetish” currently fashionable within NATO), as was the case at NATO’s creation (Kunertova, 2017).

Finally, this argument connects two strands of scholarship on coalitions and alliances. The first strand looks at the institutional design of a multinational military operation and assesses the influence of institutions on military effectiveness. Weitsman’s *Waging War* (2013) best exemplifies this domain of research. In this book, Weitsman distinguishes between wartime alliances and ad hoc coalitions and shows how specific institutional arrangements constrain the way states effectively use their military power. The second strand of literature examines the motivations for states to join a multinational military operation. We know much about coalition formation and the incentives for junior partners to join a U.S.-led intervention and their subsequent degrees of commitment (Davidson, 2011; Doerer & Eidenfalk, 2018; Mattox & Grenier, 2015; Mello, 2014; Saideman, 2016; Tago, 2006; von Hlatky, 2013) or for the United States to operate within a multilateral framework (Kreps, 2011; Recchia, 2015; Tierney, 2011). These explanations can come from systemic arguments (such as the balance of power), neo-classical realism or constructivist arguments drawing on the notion of strategic culture, conceptualized as an enabler or a constraint on the use of military force. Recent developments in this area include the analysis of principal-agent relations in explaining both

participation and commitment to a multinational military operation (Auerwald & Saideman, 2014; Frost-Nielsen, 2017).

This argument is the bridge between these two literatures. Instead of explaining the utility of military power in a multinational framework by looking at the institutional design, it focuses on the marginal utility of the states contributing to the intervention, specifically their political and military utility. Explaining when and how states are useful or not can then be considered a building block for a future general theory of the military effectiveness of coalition warfare combining institutional design and state's policies. This research also connects with the second strand of literature, which explains the commitment to a multinational military operation. In fact, it constitutes the next step after commitment has been explained: It analyses whether this commitment is useful or not. As such, this argument is the missing link between a literature looking at the determinants for state participation to a multinational military operation and a literature analyzing the institutional design of those multinational military operations: It takes from the former the explanations for commitment and applies them to the issue addressed by the latter, which is the utility of force in a multinational context.

Policy implications

When it comes to advices for policy-making, caution must be exerted. As Freedman (2017) explains:

Any rules of thumb for international policy are likely to be context dependent. Superficial similarities with previous cases – “economic sanctions did the trick”, “we managed the crisis by allowing the opponent a chance to save face”, or “this is what happened when you show weakness” – can be seriously misleading. The need to interpret and forecast the attitudes and behaviour of foreign governments, allies as well as adversaries, is central to good policy. There is therefore an unavoidably speculative character to much policy debate. These foreign governments may at critical moments turn out to be outliers and exceptions, or just act with more nuance than a researcher could possibly anticipate. (p. 267)

With this caveat in mind, one can turn to some policy advices.

The first policy finding directly applicable to any state leading an intervention is straightforward. Two criteria can guide the search for partners: standing and the combination of integration and quality. This finding is obviously applicable to the United States, but also to any other state decided to launch a multinational military operation and looking for partners. Of course, those two criteria will never be the only guides for building a coalition, as political factors always come into play. But they are useful indicators to keep in mind as general principles.

These findings also have consequences for strategy-making in institutions such as NATO and the European Union. First, the line between permanent

alliances and coalitions of the willing is increasingly blurred. This fact was most recently demonstrated by the conduct of the 2011 intervention in Libya, during which not all NATO states contributed, but NATO assets were used and non-NATO members integrated with regular NATO nations. The same was true in Afghanistan, where NATO controlled a coalition of more than fifty states, or in Iraq/Syria where NATO assets (AWACS planes) contributed to a coalition operation. The mechanisms identified here could serve in establishing a benchmark when NATO members discuss whether or not a non-NATO state will participate in a NATO-led operation: It could be required for a non-NATO state to make a firm commitment on a minimum level of troops and on command and control arrangements, while the state of its armed forces would also be assessed in order to evaluate their quality.

In the same spirit, and depending on the intervention, cultivating the participation of an important regional actor can be fruitful, but its standing cannot be the only criteria for participation in a multinational action. In addition to establishing a clear benchmark for non-NATO countries to participate, these results could also be useful for NATO itself if it were to launch a military operation to which only a few of its member states would like to participate: the criteria of utility could be used towards NATO member states as well, which would help the defense planning process within the organization. The same logic could be applied should the European Union decide to launch a military operation with non-EU partners. While this proposal may be politically difficult to implement, the 2011 intervention in Libya highlights how differentiated engagements could be managed. There was a clear hierarchy playing out in the NATO decision-making mechanisms between the “strickers,” other states participating in the intervention in support roles, and non-participating NATO members (Schmitt, 2015). This is an example of how to manage differentiated contributions in a politically acceptable manner.

Finally, establishing this causal path could also be useful for junior partners themselves, in guiding the transformation of their armed forces. The simple contribution to a multinational military operation should not be considered sufficient to signal political commitment to the lead intervening state any longer. Junior partners will need to make credible commitment in terms of promising integration with the lead partner (which implies keeping at least a brigade-level size deployment capability), as well as investing in technologically able forces. In recent years, the size of European armed forces has shrunk, under the assumption that gains in technology and tactical advantages would compensate the lower number of deployable units. This tendency is observable for all services: armies, navies, and air forces. For example, after the last *White Book* published in 2013, the French armed forces set as a goal to deploy a maximum of 15,000 troops in a major, high-intensity operation, and

7,000 troops in other contingencies. In short, after 20 years of continuous reform, the French armed forces set as a goal what they had deployed during the Gulf War, and which was seen as a humiliation at the time. It is true that the quality of the French forces is incomparably better, but the size reduction means lesser capability to intervene, thus lesser integration. This reduction of the size of the deployable contingents already showed its limitations in Iraq and Afghanistan, where private contractors had to compensate for the lack of manpower available to the US and British armed forces (Avant, 2013).

Goya (2010) establishes as a rule of thumb that the military power (MP) of an organization is the product of three factors: command (C), size (S) and quality (Q) in the following formula: $MP = Q \times S^2 \times C^3$. This empirical observation illustrates the importance of the sheer size of a military contribution in generating military power. It is also noticeable that the factors empirically identified by Goya match the causal paths determining the utility of a junior partner's contribution, the main difference being that command is not that important for junior partners, because the strategic direction of the campaign is usually determined by the leading intervening state. But the continuous reduction of European armed forces means a continuous diminution of their potential level of integration, thus a direct diminution of their utility. In other words, reducing the size of the armed forces, as is currently the case in Europe, is literally risking gradual irrelevance, especially in the context of the third US "offset strategy" (Simón, 2016). Force planning and defense investments must find alternative ways to better balance the investment in quality materials while keeping sufficiently large forces.

Pledges made at the 2014 NATO summit indicate a gradual augmentation of defense budgets in Europe. This is a welcome move, although probably insufficient to alleviate the concerns about a new NATO Military-Technological Gap between the US and its allies (Fiott, 2017). In particular, technologies such as automation and artificial intelligence, which have major potential battlefield implications (Scharre, 2018), are also cost-intensive and will require significant adjustments in doctrine and military practices (one cannot "buy" Artificial Intelligence the way one buys airplanes) which could be out of reach for many allies. Interoperability is always a challenge in coalition warfare, even in an alliance as integrated as NATO (with the United States often being a prime offender by not respecting NATO standards). However, the development of new battlefield technologies could dramatically increase the military gap, with many allies falling short of the "quality" required for effective integration.

Nevertheless, the combined effect of the changing character of war and technological evolutions could also offer new ways for smaller allies to meaningfully contribute to multinational military operations. For example, information operations and cyber warfare have gained a fundamental

importance in the current operating environment, and do not require large troops deployments or profound doctrinal transformations. Although the practicalities of how “coalition information and cyberwarfare” could work have to be refined, these are areas in which smaller allies can still meaningfully contribute.

The long campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan have trivialized the idea that increasing the size of the coalition was good in itself, regardless of the military constraints, because of the extra legitimacy this was supposed to add. My research illustrates that it is not the case, but for the important policy implications that stem from these results to fully emerge, the idea that “the more, the merrier” should be abandoned.

Conclusion

Thinking about the utility of junior partners shed new lights on the dynamics of coalition warfare. It connects the concerns about their integration (and the issues of caveats, interoperability or political objectives) with discussions of military effectiveness and institutional design of coalitions. While my research is heavily Western-centric, future studies could analyze the issue of utility in non-Western dominated coalitions (the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen could be an interesting example).

Future research could also expand on the impact of technologies in fostering cohesiveness during multinational military operations, and/or challenging collective decision-making. NATO is an interesting empirical example in that regard, since the organization is simultaneously developing a “Framework Mission Network” designed to facilitate inter-operability on the battlefield (a consequence of the intervention in Afghanistan), while exploring the political consequences of the acceleration of the tempo of warfare permitted by cyber-operations and high-velocity weapons: Should the alliance authorize a degree of automated measures in case of attacks too fast and disruptive for the North Atlantic Council to meet, thus reducing political control? Are all allies ready to react in the same way, and with the same capabilities?

Because of their importance in contemporary and future warfare, multinational military operations are likely to remain a major topic of investigation: A better understanding of their hierarchical dynamics, and the practicalities of military integration in a changing technological environment is therefore required.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Olivier Schmitt is an associate professor in the Department of Political Science and Public Administration and a member of the Center for War Studies, both at the University of Southern Denmark. He is the author of *Allies that Count, Junior Partners in Coalition Warfare* (Georgetown University Press, 2018) and the editor of *Raymond Aron and International Relations* (Routledge, 2018). His work focuses on transatlantic security, multinational security cooperation, and military change.

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