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Introduction

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SYMPOSIUM

Introduction – Coalition Politics and Foreign Policy

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Abstract

Multiparty coalitions are an increasingly common type of government across political regime types and world regions. Since they are the locus of national foreign policy making, the dynamics of coalition government have significant implications for international relations. Despite this growing significance, the foreign policy making of coalition governments is only partly understood. This symposium advances the study of coalition foreign policy in three closely related ways. First, it brings together in one place the state of the art in research on coalition foreign policy. Second, the symposium pushes the boundaries of our knowledge on four dimensions that are key to a comprehensive research agenda on coalition foreign policy: the foreign policy outputs of multiparty coalitions; the process of foreign policy making in different types of coalitions; coalition foreign policy in the ‘Global South’; and coalition dynamics in non-democratic settings. Finally, the symposium puts forward promising avenues for further research by emphasising, for instance, the value of theory-guided comparative research that employs multi-method strategies and transcends the space of Western European parliamentary democracies.

Keywords

coalitions; decision making; foreign policy analysis; comparative politics; methods

Coalition government is pervasive in modern parliamentary democracies. While 33 percent of all democratic governments worldwide were multiparty coalitions between 1975 and 1990, the share increased to 59 percent between 1990 and 2007 (Bejar *et al*, 2011). In Europe, no less than 70 percent of all governments since the Second World War have been coalitions (Gallagher *et al*, 2006). This reflects the rise of proportional parliamentary systems that typically have multiple parties represented in parliament and in most cases require different parties to come together in a coalition to form governments. The first UK coalition government in 70 years between 2010 and 2015 suggests that broader trends towards voter de-alignment and party system fragmentation make coalitions more likely even under majoritarian electoral systems which historically have produced single-party government.

Outside Europe, multiparty coalitions are common, for example, in Israel and, at times, Japan, and they are frequent in countries across the Global South, including India and Brazil. Moreover, coalition government extends beyond established liberal democracies and can be found in different forms of ‘hybrid’ political regimes (Diamond, 2001; Wigell, 2008) which combine formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices, such as Pakistan and Indonesia. Coalitions are also a preferred form of government in post-conflict democratic political systems, as they are seen to assuage complex political divisions and reduce incentives toward internal violence. Examples include both Iraq and Afghanistan, which were charged with forming broad coalition governments after recent wars.

Multiparty coalitions are thus an increasingly common type of government across political regime types and world regions. Since they are also the locus of national foreign policy making, and since foreign policy is often a key policy area for coalitions, the dynamics of coalition government have significant implications for international relations (Kaarbo, 2012). In particular, coalition cabinets are multi-player collective authorities which often experience disagreements over foreign policy. This is because coalition parties have distinct ideological backgrounds, face potentially contradictory political incentives to cooperate with their coalition partners, and seek to foster identities as separate political groups. Coalitions therefore operate different systems of checks and balances in order to manage internal disputes. How coalition partners deal with such disagreements over foreign policy, in turn, is critical for the way they respond to their international and domestic political environments. This is also key to normative concerns with the quality of coalition foreign policy. While multiparty coalitions are sometimes being associated with low accountability, inefficiency and ‘deadlock’ in foreign policy making, they have also been commended for the greater inclusiveness, representativeness and legitimacy of their foreign policies (see Hagan, 1993; Blondel and Müller-Rommel, 1993; Kisangani and Pickering, 2011). What is more, coalition dynamics are not only a central issue for the foreign policies of coalition governments themselves, but they also matter to other state and non-state actors who interact with them internationally. Such ‘reverse effects’ of coalition governments include both the challenges of dealing with governments, which are on average less stable than single-party governments as well as potential opportunities to exploit divisions between coalition partners.

Despite its growing significance in contemporary international relations, the foreign policy making of coalition governments is only partly understood. While scholarship in Comparative Politics on how coalitions are formed and terminated is well-established,

research on coalition governance and policy-making is much more limited. In *Foreign Policy Analysis*, some research suggests that the foreign policies of coalitions differ systematically from their single-party counterparts, but only a small strand of scholarship has investigated the causal mechanisms involved (Hagan *et al*, 2001; Kaarbo, 1996; Beasley and Kaarbo, 2014). Gaps in research also exist with regard to the foreign policy effects of different types of coalitions and the process of coalition foreign policy decision-making (Oppermann and Brummer, 2014). Research in *Comparative Politics* suggests that different types of coalitions (e.g. minimal winning vs. oversized, two-party vs. multiparty) and the size of the coalition may have consequences for decision-making processes and the efficiency of coalition governance (Strøm *et al*, 2008). We would expect certain types of coalitions to amplify coalition dynamics in foreign policy. Junior partners that are critical for the government's survival may be more influential (Kaarbo, 1996), coalitions with more parties may engage in diffusion of responsibility (Beasley and Kaarbo, 2014), and ideologically fragmented coalitions may be more prone to deadlock (Clare, 2010; Oktay 2014). While foreign policy researchers have begun to look at these questions, there remains much more to be explored on this topic.

Finally, while a few studies have already looked at coalition foreign policy in countries of the 'Global South' (Kaarbo, 2012; Ozkececi-Taner, 2005), research in the field is clearly dominated by analyses of coalition politics in the 'Global North', in particular Western Europe. The extent to which the findings and concepts from existing scholarship can be applied to the coalition experience in the 'Global South' and how this experience might challenge our understanding of coalition foreign policy is yet to be fully explored. Given the predominant focus of previous research on Western Europe, no systematic work has so far

been done on coalition dynamics in the foreign policies of different sub-types of autocratic regimes.

Moreover, progress in addressing the blind spots in our understanding of coalition foreign policy is hindered by multiple divides in scholarship on this topic. In particular, there is a lack of sustained dialogue and exchange across subfields (e.g., International Relations, Foreign Policy Analysis and Comparative Politics). A more cumulative research agenda is also hindered by the bifurcation of existing research between quantitative and qualitative approaches, with few multi-method analyses. Within the subfield of Foreign Policy Analysis, there is little cross-fertilisation between country experts and comparative work on coalition politics and insufficient acknowledgement of the interplay between coalition government and other domestic sources of foreign policy, such as party ideology or regime type.

Against this background, the overall ambition of the symposium is to invigorate a cutting-edge research agenda in coalition foreign policy, which would promise to reduce the existing mismatch between the increasing importance of coalition dynamics in foreign policy and our only limited understanding of such dynamics. Specifically, this objective will be pursued through four individual contributions.

First, the article by *Kai Oppermann, Klaus Brummer and Niels van Willigen* examines coalition governance in foreign affairs, thus putting the process of coalition foreign policy making front and centre. The article contends that processes of coalition governance in foreign policy are shaped by two interrelated dimensions of coalition set-ups: the allocation of the foreign ministry to the senior or to a junior coalition party and the degree of policy discretion ascribed to the foreign ministry. Bringing the two dimensions together yields four

types of coalition arrangements for the making of foreign policy, with predictable implications for coalition foreign policy making (e.g., regarding the likelihood of “hijacking” or “deadlock”) and ultimately for the foreign policy outputs of coalition governments (e.g., concerning the adoption of more “extreme” policies).

Next, the article by *Sibel Oktay* and *Ryan Beasley* shows how the quantitative study of coalition foreign policy refines and tests expectations on the content and behavioural characteristics of coalition foreign policy. The article shows how quantitative studies broadened the analytical perspective away from questions of conflict involvement toward a diverse set of foreign policy activities in which coalition governments are typically, and much more frequently, engaged. Moreover, previous research improved our understanding of the relationship between coalition politics and international behaviour by focusing on both the content of government structure (i.e., ideology and coalition type) and the processes (e.g., logrolling or diffusion of accountability) through which governments generate foreign policy behaviours. The authors conclude with a plea for complementing aggregate-level analyses with nuanced and more targeted case study designs and for further investigations into the quality of foreign policy making, which would contribute to linking Foreign Policy Analysis to International Relations and Comparative Politics.

The article by *Nicolas Blarel* and *Niels van Willigen* addresses the particularities of coalition foreign policy making in countries from the Global South, exploring whether there is a Western European bias in the coalition foreign policy literature. One of the insights to be gained from such a perspective is that greater emphasis should be placed on the role of coalition formateur parties. In many countries from the Global South, which only recently transitioned from authoritarian to democratic rule and therefore lack experience in coalition

foreign policy making, formateur parties are particularly well-placed to use more informal and fluid institutional arrangements to their advantage. Similarly, focusing on the Global South, and the Indian case in particular, highlights the importance of both small parties representing sub-state interests in coalitions and the interplay between federal systems and coalition politics with its multi-layered coalition formation processes (local, regional, national level).

Finally, the article by *Joe D. Hagan* extends the coalition foreign policy literature to non-democratic regimes. The article examines coalition foreign policy making in “anocracies,” such as Russian or Iran, which are characterised by a mix of democratic and authoritarian elements, including a dispersion of executive authority across autonomous actors. Arguing from a decision units approach, which conceives coalition foreign policy making as a fragmented process that results from the absence of any single actor or group wielding the authority to make binding foreign policy decisions for a state, the article’s core contention is that while anocratic regimes are likely to have coalitions similar to democratic multiparty cabinets, the composition of that coalition is quite different by comprising, for instance, members of the country’s foreign policy executive or factions operating in a cabinet or court setting, rather than political parties. To illustrate its claims, the article examines decision-making processes by a number of great powers in pre-war settings (e.g., by Austria-Hungary and Germany prior to World War I).

With these contributions, this symposium advances the study of coalition foreign policy in three closely related ways. First, it brings together in one place the state of the art in research on coalition foreign policy. The contributions have been written by leading experts in the field and reflect insights from scholarship in different subfields. In terms of methods, the

symposium espouses a pluralist perspective and discusses findings from quantitative and qualitative research. Second, the symposium pushes the boundaries of our knowledge on four dimensions that are key to a comprehensive research agenda on coalition foreign policy. These dimensions are the foreign policy outputs of multiparty coalitions; the process of foreign policy making in different types of coalitions; coalition foreign policy in the ‘Global South’; and coalition dynamics in non-democratic settings. Third, the symposium puts forward promising avenues for further research. In particular, it emphasises the value of theory-guided comparative research that employs multi-method strategies and transcends the space of Western European parliamentary democracies.

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