

**Kreps, Sarah E. 2011. *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Military Interventions after the Cold War*. New York: Oxford University Press. 240 pages. ISBN: 9780199753802.**

Patrick A. Mello, Berlin Graduate School of Social Sciences

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have been the subject of countless books in recent years. Most work, however, focuses on providing historical narratives for either of these conflicts, without comparing them to other cases or proposing arguments that resonate with theoretical approaches in International Relations (IR). Against this backdrop Sarah E. Kreps' *Coalitions of Convenience* is a welcome addition as it provides a comparative analysis of four cases from the post-Cold War period and contrasts these with prevalent IR perspectives on cooperation strategies.

The book departs from the structural realist premise that militarily powerful states could effectively sidestep multilateral institutions if it were their choosing. Hence realists would not expect the United States to engage in complex and time-consuming coalition building through organizations as the United Nations or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Kreps' research puzzle then is to explain why, at times, multilateralism is *nevertheless* chosen over unilateral solutions and which institutional frameworks are decided upon for specific military interventions. She suggests that both structural realism and norm-based explanations cannot account for the observed variance in U.S. foreign policy. While the former has trouble explaining continued cooperation, the latter is challenged by repeated violations against multilateral norms.

Kreps' rationalist explanation seeks to stake out a middle ground between structural and normative perspectives, but remains firmly rooted in the realist tradition. Her argument evolves around a

state's "time horizon" – a function of threat perception, and its "operational commitment," which relates to the resource-intensity of an intervention. In combination, these factors are argued to yield four different cooperation strategies, from pure unilateralism to full multilateralism (p.35).

In terms of alternative explanations Kreps sketches three contending arguments. First, according to a normative perspective states are expected to act on the basis of multilateral "norms of appropriateness," rather than rationalist cost-benefit calculation. Second, regarding domestic politics it is presumed that the presence of specific legislative and electoral incentives makes leaders pursue multilateral solutions. Finally, the third alternative expects that the absence of major powers in a region can serve as "a permissive environment for unilateralism," as in some parts of Latin America (p.40). In practice, however, some of these explanations result in similar predictions and can thus be fairly difficult to distinguish, as Kreps acknowledges (p.44).

The theoretical argument is tested in four detailed case studies. The Gulf War of 1990-1991 is taken as a case of "full multilateralism". In response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait the U.S. deployed large numbers of troops to Saudi Arabia. But despite this initial "bilateral, offensive posture" the U.S. government subsequently sought UN authorization and a broad coalition of states before advancing the military intervention (p.71). In stark contrast, the Iraq War of 2003 did not receive the UN's blessing and, as Kreps argues, the coalition

amounted to little more than a “rhetorical charade” to conceal that the U.S. carried an overwhelming part of the costs of this “most unilateral intervention in the post-Cold War period” (pp.45-48). In turn, the 1994 intervention in Haiti is understood as a “least likely case for multilateralism” where this strategy was nevertheless chosen. Due to long time horizons and low operational commitment a strategy of “formal multilateralism” was selected. The instrumental approach to multilateralism helped the U.S. to avoid a “protracted nation-building exercise” by turning responsibility over to the UN (p.90).

Finally, the intervention in Afghanistan, ongoing since 2001, is particularly complex due to overlapping campaigns and divergent organizational frameworks. Kreps argues that the strategy of the U.S. was “largely unilateral” during combat operations, but characterized by multilateralism in the reconstruction and stabilization phases. This is taken as an indication of a logic of consequences and evidence against a normative argument (p.111-113). Not surprisingly Kreps finds the rationalist explanation most salient across cases. However, explanations based on domestic politics and regional power dynamics are found to provide plausible accounts for some of the cases, while norm-based explanations are taken to be less persuasive (p.150).

Overall, the book makes a valuable contribution, providing new insights and a concise theoretical framework to understand U.S. military cooperation strategies. The analysis and historical account benefit from recently declassified government documents and a number of interviews. However, the book is not without limitations. While parsimony can be an asset, it results in ambiguous theoretical implications for the case studies. For instance, based on Kreps’ framework “full multilateralism” would have been expected in Iraq (2003), since the war was preceded by a long planning process and had to be anticipated as resource-intensive. Clearly, this was not the case. Kreps seeks to explain this anomaly on the grounds of “erroneous views” within the Bush Administration that had resulted in “worst-case threat assessments” and a “best-case scenario” regarding operational commitment (p.147). While this resonates with well-known accounts of the Bush years, it questions the value of Kreps’ theory, especially when applied to lesser-known historical cases. In addition, for a work on cooperation strategies it seems odd that the role of allied countries and institutional fora is not discussed in any depth. This critique, however, applies to the wider literature, since most scholars in this area seem to focus on either the United States or some subset of (Western) democracies.

\*\*\*

Citation:

Mello, Patrick A. 2011. Review of *Coalitions of Convenience: United States Military Interventions after the Cold War* by Sarah E. Kreps. *Berlin Reviews in Social Sciences*, Review No.2.

---

The views expressed in the Berlin Reviews in Social Sciences are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the BGSS or of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The copyright stays with the author(s).