Elite Consensus as a Determinant of Alliance Cohesion: Why Public Opinion Hardly Matters for NATO-led Operations in Afghanistan

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Despite the increasing popularity of fighting wars through multilateral coalitions, scholars have largely been silent on the question of how public opinion in member states affects alliance cohesion. This article assesses public opinion data for states contributing to operations in Afghanistan. It finds that despite the unpopularity of the war, leaders have largely bucked public opinion and neither reduced nor withdrawn troops from NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. Theoretical expectations about international cooperation and evidence from case studies point to elite consensus as the reason why leaders are not running for the exits in Afghanistan when their publics would prefer that they do. As the article shows, operating through a formal institution such as NATO creates systemic incentives for sustained international cooperation. The result is that elite consensus inoculates leaders from electoral punishment and gives states' commitments to Afghanistan a "stickiness" that defies negative public opinion. A formal alliance such as NATO may therefore create more policy constraints than an ad hoc coalition but also increase the costs of defection and confer a degree of staying power that is unexpected given the adverse public opinion environment.

Are leaders responsive to public opinion when they make decisions about war? Does variation in public opinion within a multilateral coalition—in which the publics of some coalition members are more supportive of the war than others—affect alliance cohesion? This article addresses those questions by assessing public opinion data for NATO member states contributing to operations in Afghanistan and tracing the effect of public support on whether states withdraw deployed forces before the end of hostilities, a key measure of alliance cohesion.¹

Despite low levels of public support especially in non-American troop contributing countries, this analysis shows that leaders have actually bucked hostile public opinion and by and large neither reduced nor withdrawn their troops from Afghanistan. On the contrary, they have generally increased their troop numbers and gradually lifted restrictions on how troops can be used, which presents a puzzle: why are leaders of all political stripes and in almost all countries willing

¹ By alliance cohesion, I refer to the degree of convergence among member states' commitments to the alliance. The key indicator is whether states defect—remove or reduce troops—prior to the end of hostilities. See Weitsman (2003:85, 2004:24).
to risk electoral backlash by increasing the commitment of their countries’
troops when the vast majority of their electorates prefer the opposite?

The reason, I argue, is that elite consensus has limited the impact of public
opinion. In almost all major troop-contributing countries, the major political
parties have had little daylight among their views on whether to maintain their
country’s commitments to NATO-led operations. Elite consensus has not had a
top–down impact on public opinion, however, as prevailing views in the public
opinion literature might expect; the public remains deeply skeptical of opera-
tions in Afghanistan. But it has had the effect of inoculating the leadership from
electoral punishment. Since the opposition has a similar stand, leaders are
thereby less concerned about being outflanked or losing votes to competitors
and can therefore continue the unpopular Afghanistan deployment.

That elites are largely unified on an issue of deep unpopularity is surprising
given the strong electoral incentives for opportunism by opposition groups. As
Kenneth Schultz (1998:831) writes, “political parties value holding office and
therefore choose strategies designed to maximize their probability of election.”
Since foreign policy positions affect voter appeal and political office is generally
a zero-sum game, we might expect opposition parties to choose a public strategy
that would appeal to voters who disapprove of the government’s preference on a
major issue of foreign policy. Accordingly, opposition groups would diverge from
the government’s policy and advocate immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan, a
strategy consistent with public preferences.

This domestic-level view ignores the systemic pressures to cooperate, however.
Participating under the banner of NATO is as close to an ideal type iterated
game as there is in security cooperation. Axelrod and Keohane (1985:232) note
that to maximize the likelihood of cooperation, “actors [have] to expect that
their relationships will continue over an indefinite period of time”—that there
are long time horizons and regularized, iterated interactions. NATO’s extended
history of security benefits and credible promise of future cooperation casts a
long shadow of the future in a way that participation in ad hoc coalitions does
not. Defection is unlikely not just because of the high benefits for cooperation
but also the equally high costs of defection: earning a reputation as a defector
that precludes the actor from future cooperation benefits (Keohane 1984:94,
106). The result of these systemic factors is that elites are sensitive to the costs of
international defection and converge around a commitment to international
cooperation, which reduces the electoral and foreign policy effects of public
opinion. This argument challenges the widely held belief that governments and
opposition groups are responsive primarily to domestic preferences (Page and
Shapiro 1983) by showing that elites’ preferences are multidimensional; in addi-
tion to domestic preferences, they take into account systemic-level incentives that
can prove more persuasive.

This article proceeds as follows. It begins with a brief discussion of whether
and why public opinion is thought to matter in foreign policy generally. It
turns to the question of alliance cohesion in international conflict, putting the
Afghanistan campaign in context and drawing the theoretical connection
between the opinion of the coalition members’ domestic audiences and the
success of multilateral operations. It then examines public opinion data for
individual troop contributing countries as well as cross-national variation in
support over time to uncover the macro-level trends in support. Showing that
public opinion has not had the expected impact on troop commitments, the
article then advances an argument of systemic incentives for cooperation, elite
consensus, and alliance cohesion. Next, the paper turns to brief case studies of
major troop contributing states in Afghanistan—Germany, Canada, France,
and Italy—to trace the cause and consequence of elite consensus on alliance
commitments. It concludes by considering alternative explanations for state
cooperation and discussing implications for alliance durability and the conduct of multilateral operations.

**Public Opinion and Alliance Cohesion**

In early studies of public opinion, scholars looked askance at the public’s understanding of international events. Not only was the public largely uninformed, but it was capricious, often changing its mood based on a superficial understanding of events. As a result, according to this realist argument (Lippmann 1925; Almond 1956), policymakers often deemed it wise to dismiss public opinion altogether, instead relying on their own judgments rather than the vagaries of public opinion.

Recent public opinion research has largely consigned this early consensus to the dustbin of intellectual history. Rather, it has put considerable faith in the assertion that “the foreign policies of American presidents—and democratic leaders more generally—have been influenced by their understanding of the public’s foreign policy views” (Aldrich, Gelpi, Feaver, Reifler, and Thompson Sharp 2006:496). The logic is obvious and persuasive: leaders want to stay in office, and carrying out an unpopular war decreases their electoral longevity (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995). Thus, “an unfavorable public opinion environment ultimately constrains the range of politically acceptable policies” (Larson and Savych 2005:xvii); specifically, public support for withdrawing forces should make it politically unpalatable for leaders to maintain unpopular deployments. Plummeting public support for American operations in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia is thought to contributed heavily to decisions to withdraw from these engagements.

Having once been the subject of heated debate, the connection between public opinion and foreign policy decisions is now virtually taken for granted. Appearing to have resolved that long-time debate (Foster 1983; Holsti 1992), recent public opinion research has moved to the assessment of whether the public has a consistent set of preferences, such as whether support for military force is contingent on the nature of the intervention (principle policy objective), sensitive to casualties, realist in nature, or inclined toward multilateral interventions (Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005; Berinsky and Druckman 2007; Gelpi et al. 2005–06; Drezner 2008). Extending public opinion research in the direction of understanding public preferences may be productive if the connection between public views and democratic leaders’ decisions is indeed solid.

While the linkage between public preferences and elite foreign policy choices has appeared credible for the United States, studies to confirm that this logic holds beyond the United States have been limited.² It seems plausible that the logic would apply to all democracies in which electoral accountability gives constituents a way to register their disapproval of a particular foreign policy.³ Nonetheless, the richness of research that points to an American style of war, or a certain exceptionalism that makes American foreign policies distinctive suggests some variation in the sensitivity of different democracies to public preferences (Lipset 1997; Wilson 2007). Even if dynamics within the United States were generalizable to other democracies, this would not necessarily address possible interaction effects within multilateral coalitions or alliances that have characterized many recent military interventions. Public opinion effects within a multilateral entity—whether a coalition or an alliance—may not be additive, but rather may interact with each other either favorably or unfavorably (Walt 1997).

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² Exceptions to the US-centric studies include Lai and Reiter (2005); Arian (1995); Telhami (1993).
³ Thomas Risse-Kappen (1991) argues that “the patterns of mass public opinion in the United States, Western Europe, and Japan are more or less similar.”
That the effect of public opinion in a multilateral setting has not been studied is a notable oversight given the frequency with which interventions have been fought as multilateral coalitions or alliances in the post-Cold War. The 1990–91 Gulf War had at least 23 state contributors to the war, Kosovo had 19 NATO participants, the Iraq War coalition had 47 states, and the ongoing NATO operation in Afghanistan has contributions from 40 states. This article attempts to fill that theoretical and empirical gap by examining the most recent of those multilateral settings to understand better the connection between public opinion, foreign policy decisions, and alliance cohesion.

As the public opinion data from Afghanistan shows, the revisionist view of public opinion—that public opinion has a bottom-up effect on foreign policies—may be in need of a revision. In the United States, a majority of Americans have supported operations in Afghanistan, creating few electoral liabilities for elite support of continued operations. The United States is the exception, however. In every other troop contributing state, the popularity of operations in Afghanistan falls well below a majority, which should introduce the prospect of electoral costs for leaders who maintain their commitments to operations in Afghanistan. Despite unpopularity at home, however, states have tended to increase rather than reduce their states’ commitments to military operations. The next section assesses the data on intra-alliance support for military operations in more detail.

**Assessing Support for the Use of Force in Afghanistan**

During the peak of the Iraq War, the war in Afghanistan was referred to as “The Forgotten War” (Sennott 2006). Once American resources and the international media turned its focus to the Middle East in the autumn of 2002, there was remarkably little attention on events in Afghanistan. As an indication, a database of public opinion polls yields over 1,000 matching questions for Iraq from March 2003 to December 2008 compared to 275 for Afghanistan from September 2001 to December 2009. As casualties in Afghanistan began to rise in 2006, however, so did polling frequency. Because of the dearth of polling in the early years of the war and the shift in later years, this analysis focuses on public opinion data beginning in late 2006.

To assess the public’s view on troop commitments in Afghanistan, I accessed polls through several sources, including Angus Reid Global Monitor, the Polling Report, Polling the Nations, and a number of newspapers. From these sources, I selected polls that (i) were conducted in NATO member states that contribute ground forces involved in combat operations, and (ii) asked the public about support for continued, future, or ongoing military force.

As the empirical evidence shows, NATO members’ commitment to the war has almost uniformly increased in spite of varying—but generally declining—levels of support for the war across countries. Table 1 summarizes the cross-national public opinion data for NATO members in Afghanistan. The table shows the mean public support for the war in each country, number of troop contributions, fatalities, and number of polls generated. The final column classifies the member

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4 Not all of these states contributed troops.
5 For a summary of these debates, See Holsti (1991:23–27).
6 Polling the Nations database results when searching for “Iraq War” and “Afghanistan War” between March 2003–present and October 2001–present, respectively.
7 Including polls only for states that have contributed troops involved in offensive operations controls for the possibility that states will view the operation differently—and put a different level of pressure on elites—depending on whether they are only providing logistics support versus involved in offensive operations.
8 I excluded polls that queried whether the public thinks operations have been or will be successful or how the leader has handled the operation, for example.
state’s observed commitment to NATO-led operations in Afghanistan. It is intended to provide a macro-level view of whether, in general, states are responding to low levels of support by retrenching—either tightening regulations on how troops can be used or even withdrawing troops—or disregarding public opinion by easing rules of engagement or even increasing troop numbers in Afghanistan. These data suggest that the observed alliance contribution is not linked closely with levels of public support, as all states have increased the strength of their contributions whether they have a majority of support, as in the United States, or lower levels of support as in parts of Western Europe.

Figure 1 compares support in the United States and that in the rest of the allied countries over time and illustrates the divergence between support in the United States and that in other participating countries. These data pool non-US support into a single measure and contrasts it with US support by quarter between August 2006 and December 2009. The reason to isolate the United States and compare its numbers with the non-US support is that the United States provides over half the troop contributions in Afghanistan. Comparing US

Table 1. Major Troop Contributing States, Fatalities, Mean Public Support, Number of Polls, and Alliance Commitment from August 2006 to December 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Mean public support (%)</th>
<th>Troop contributions</th>
<th>Fatalities</th>
<th>No. polls</th>
<th>Observed alliance contribution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>45,780</td>
<td>973</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>740</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1,950</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Extended commitment; flexible 2010 withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2,830</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Extended commitment; flexible 2011 withdrawal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4,280</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Troop increase: expanded rules of engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>3,150</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>3,750</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1,065</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9,500</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1,955</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17,755</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aFrom http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/epub/pdf/placemat.pdf
*bhttp://icasualties.org/oef/ Though this paper does not explicitly test the connection between casualties and public support, these data cast doubt on that thesis. The United States, with a five-fold difference in casualties, also registers the highest mean public support for operations in Afghanistan. Canada and the UK, which also have high levels of casualties, fall toward the middle in terms of public support.
*cAlberts 2009.
*e de Vreij 2007; Woods 2009.
*fThe plan is for 2011 withdrawal but Stephen Harper has left “wiggle room” that could allow for an extension. See Koring 2009; Fitzpatrick 2009.
*gCTK News Agency 2008.
*hDeutsche Welle 2009.
*iBBC 2009.
*jSynovitz 2008.
*kAssociated Press 2009.
*lWintour and Traynor 2009.
*mUnited Press International 2009.
*nUslu 2009.

9 This and other figures are at the end of the text.
public opinion data with the aggregated data from non-US NATO forces is one way of assessing the possible implications of adverse public opinion on alliance cohesion. The coherence of alliance operations in Afghanistan would be unlikely to disintegrate without support from a country that provides a few thousand forces, but collectively would collapse without support of countries that in total supply half the contributions. The reason to compare data by quarters is that scarce data does not allow for a monthly time series, particularly from non-US ISAF contributors where polling data has been scarce.

Data on cross-national support over time is consistent with the data in Table 1 and yields large disparities between the American public’s support for operations in Afghanistan and that of many allies. Only in one quarter did aggregate support among states other than the United States exceed American support for operations in Afghanistan. Further, support for the US versus non-US contributing countries has diverged over time. While American levels of support have dropped from their highs of 2001–2002 when more than eight in every ten US respondents expressed support for the war (Bowman 2008), they are up from their relative lows of 2007 and have remained relatively steady. Conversely, non-US levels of support reached their highs in late 2006 and the middle of 2007 but have been mostly in the 30s since then, compared to American levels of support in the mid-50s (see Figure 1).

If the dominant view in public opinion is to be believed, then the growing divergence between US and non-US support for operations in Afghanistan would be alarming for the coherence of the alliance. Since the key indicator of alliance cohesion is “defection prior to the end of hostilities” (Weitsman 2003:85), alliance cohesion would suffer gravely as a result of the war’s unpopularity. Leaders in countries where publics do not support operations in Afghanistan—that is, in all non-US countries—would be inclined to reduce their troop commitments since they are faced with strong electoral preferences that favor troop withdrawal. NATO, whose operations in Afghanistan have been referred to as a
“litmus test” for the alliance’s solvency, would fail that test, casting “a cloud over the future of the alliance.”11

However, as Table 1 shows, whether states increase their commitment to NATO operations in Afghanistan has little to do with levels of public support. Despite the cross-national variations in public support for operations in Afghanistan, from a mean of 55% in the United States to 18% in Turkey, there is little variation in the member states’ commitment to multilateral operations. Leaders have not responded to the public’s foreign policy preferences by withdrawing troops. Rather, they have done just the opposite and increased support for NATO-led operations in Afghanistan by easing restrictions—or caveats—on the types of operations their militaries can conduct,12 extending their deployments, and increasing troop numbers. The UK experience is representative, as it has steadily increased troops deployments to Afghanistan as public opinion has remained low (see Figure 2). That almost all states have increased their commitments in the face of an inhospitable public environment indicates that public opinion may not be as powerful a determinant of foreign policy outcomes as the conventional wisdom on public opinion would expect.

Explaining Alliance Members’ Commitment to Operations in Afghanistan

Elite Cohesion

The reason why there is less of a connection between public support and withdrawal decisions than might be expected is because of high degrees of elite

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11 BBC 2008. See also speech by the Chairman of the NATO Military Committee Admiral Giampaolo di Paola, http://www.nato.int/ims/opinions/2009/o090216a.html

12 For more on caveats and how they have been applied in Afghanistan, See Auerswald and Saideman (2009).
consensus in the political leadership of troop contributing countries. Elite consensus eliminates the passive source of costs that a democratic leader would absorb in the presence of an opposition with divergent preferences, insulating governments from their unpopular decisions (Schultz 1998:830).

John Zaller (1994:195, 196) defines elite consensus as the lack of an articulate, mainstream opposition to the stated government policy and in which the most important opposition leaders publicly support the government’s commitment. Elite consensus is not the same as saying that there is no elite opposition or debate, which would be unusual over a costly 10-year deployment. In his study of the 1991 Persian Gulf War, Zaller notes that President Bush confronted vocal opposition from Democrats leading up to the war, “but the criticism was as notable for what it did not contain as for what it did. No important Democratic spokesman urged Bush to withdraw American forces” (Zaller 1994:196, 197). Elite consensus therefore refers to the absence of a coherent opposition to the government’s basic foreign policy, in this case, troop deployments abroad.

As the case studies show in more detail and Table 2 summarizes, the member governments of major contributors to the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan have not found themselves in a debate-free environment, but the mainstream opposition view has supported the government’s basic policy of troop deployments well beyond the public’s disenchantment with the war. To the extent that debate has arisen, the opposition has been careful in how it frames the contention. France’s Jean-Christophe Cambalelis (2009), Socialist Party national secretary for international relations, is representative. In expressing his party’s opposition, Cambalelis was clear that his party did not support “simply and immediately withdrawing our troops.” Rather, much like commanders in Afghanistan have asserted, the French opposition favored emphasizing that the long-term solution in Afghanistan is political rather than military (Gilmore 2008). Tellingly, he also framed the party’s position with explicit reference to those of senior alliance leaders,

Table 2. Summary of Government and Opposition Policies on Afghanistan in Lead NATO Contributing Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Government policy</th>
<th>Opposition position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
<td>Bipartisan support(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
<td>Support for troop increase in both major parties(^b)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Troop increase and expanded mandate</td>
<td>Support for troop increase in both major parties(^d)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
<td>Supports a civilian strategy but not withdrawal of military troops from Afghanistan(^g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Troop increase</td>
<td>Major parties have voted with governing majority(^e)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Extend troop presence to 2011; diplomatic and development effort thereafter</td>
<td>Approved by liberals and conservatives(^f)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Cooper 2009; Koring 2008.  
\(^b\)Bingham and Porter 2009.  
\(^c\)Kulish 2010.  
\(^d\)Cody 2008.  
\(^e\)Corriere della Sera 2009c.  
\(^f\)Woods and Campion-Smith, 2008.

Other scholars define elite consensus on the basis of elite surveys, for example on the European Union; however, there are no elite surveys or party manifestos having to do with Afghanistan so I investigate the stated positions of mainstream political parties. See Leonard (2003), Gabel and Scheve (2007).
wondering how “our security is still threatened by Afghanistan-based Al-Qa’idah when the NATO secretary general affirms that that country is no longer a refuge for Al-Qa’idah and the top commander of American forces declares that this terrorist group has been defeated in Afghanistan” (Cambalelis 2009).

In sum, member state governments have experienced challenges to their position but the mainstream opposition view has largely been in line with government policies that maintain troops in Afghanistan while shifting the focus to longer-term political solutions. Such convergence across parties means that the government can more easily resist public preferences. Public opinion matters when elites worry that they will lose votes; if dissatisfied constituents cannot distinguish between the parties on this issue, then the political risk of staying the course is considerably lower.

Elite consensus as a determinant of foreign policy decisions is not a novel argument. The prevailing view on elite consensus, however, suggests a top-down process, in which unified opinions among elites affects attitudes among a politically aware public. “Where attitudes are united in support of a foreign policy, politically aware Americans support that policy more strongly than any other part of the public” (Zaller 1994:187). The logic is that the public takes its cues on complex issues of policy from elites, who have access to more complete information about the wisdom of a particular operation and who can frame the intervention using simple, persuasive rhetoric (Mueller 1973; Brody and Shapiro 1989; Drury, Overby, Ang, and Li 2008). While theoretically persuasive, this view is remarkably at odds with the experience of states participating in Afghanistan operations, particularly states other than the United States, where elite consensus has done little to improve the negative public opinion environment. In these cases, elite consensus merely defuses the electoral consequences and therefore foreign policy effects of an adverse public opinion, allowing elites to fulfill alliance commitments without paying electoral costs.

From a purely political perspective, convergence of political elites would seem to be something of a puzzle. Given the low levels of public support, it would be electorally wise for opposition leaders to advance a strategy consistent with those public preferences since doing so would increase their likelihood of holding office in the future. As Ramsay observes (Ramsay 2004:463), “from the voter’s perspective, each candidate offers a basket of characteristics that matter to the voters, one of which is their foreign policy competence.” Offering a competing, more appealing position on the most salient issue of foreign policy would be one way to attract voters and maximize electoral gain. For voters that reside in troop contributing countries, where lives, resources, and national prestige are on the line, Afghanistan has come to define their leaders’ foreign policy competence. Canada, Germany, France, Italy, and the UK have more troops deployed in Afghanistan than anywhere else abroad (Cowell 2009).14 British members of Parliament have acknowledged that “Afghanistan will be an issue in the General Election, as Iraq was in the last one. Indeed, with its daily death toll, it may be even more salient than Iraq was” (Davis 2009). Germany has engaged in its largest offensive operation since World War II, prompting a leading paper Der Spiegel to label Afghanistan “the country’s most important foreign policy issue” (Medick and Winter 2009). The reason for Afghanistan’s foreign policy import is that these states’ troops are routinely killed—more per year than in Iraq (see Figure 3)—and each casualty, particularly an assault that leaves multiple soldiers killed, intensifies public pressure on political elites to withdraw troops (Le Figaro 2008; Telegraph 2009; Morris and Norton-Taylor 2009; Fitzpatrick 2008; Der Spiegel 2009).

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14 See http://www.defense.gouv.fr/defense/content/download/147267/1278402/carteopexavril.swf.
As a percentage of the member state’s military, a number of states commit resources more than the United States, and several have had more casualties relative to their populations than the United States, providing additional perspective on Afghanistan’s salience among states’ publics, governments, and militaries (see Figures 4 and 5). In short, the number of casualties and unprecedented size and duration of deployments makes Afghanistan the most salient foreign policy issue for troop contributing states and one on which the public has repeatedly registered its displeasure. Opposition groups could propose
withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, knowing that about two-thirds of their electorates would support that position, which would increase their likelihood of winning office. As these strong domestic incentives to diverge from the government make clear, relatively steady elite consensus is not the effect of collusion among political elites with an eye toward electoral immunity.

Rather, elite consensus is the result of systemic incentives associated with participation in a formal alliance. When states join formal alliances, they anticipate that the overall benefits will exceed the costs, otherwise they would sit on the sidelines. Those costs and benefits organize around two distinct decision-making nodes. The first is the decision to join the alliance. Here the calculus is relatively straightforward. Presumably states perceive a common foe and conclude that collective security is more efficient and effective than individual defense (Morgenthau 1978; Waltz 1979; Walt 1987; Morrow 1993). They trade off decision-making autonomy since the alliance requires compromise of state interest over time but ultimately favor the virtues of aggregating member states’ capabilities (Morrow 1994; Leeds 2003).

The second node is the decision to fulfill alliance commitments or renege when conflict arises. Here the calculus is more mixed but still favors cooperation. On the one hand, “governments that are answerable to popular preferences face a dilemma when confronted by unpopular alliance commitments” (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004:776). If states fulfill international expectations, they could conceivably drag an unwitting state into an unwanted, unpopular conflict (Snyder 1984), leading to incentives to renege on commitments in order to stay in office. A democratic regime “exacerbates the problem of commitment, since the actor promising action is likely to differ from the actor who must act” (Gartzke and Gleditsch 2004:780) because of electoral turnover. Public pressures mean leaders must choose between satisfying the domestic audience and international allies, a tension that some scholars have found favors the domestic audience, particularly in a democracy.

On the other hand, reneging on an international commitment to satisfy a domestic audience is not without considerable costs. One set of costs includes the international and domestic audience costs. Because of the compromises
associated with formal alliances, joining an alliance is a costly signal to allies and foes of a state’s intention to fulfill the commitment (Leeds 2003:805). It is a “signal to other nations that the allies share certain interests and so are likely to coordinate their actions in the future” (Morrow 1991:906). The result is that the alliance acts as a commitment device, tying the hands of governments by bonding the state’s reputation to its fulfillment of treaty obligations (Fearon 1997:85, 86). A state that reneges on this commitment to coordinate future actions causes international and domestic audiences to doubt a leader’s credibility and competence. Indeed, even domestic audiences are concerned with their country or leader’s international reputation (Tomz 2007a, 2007b; Leeds and Savun 2007; Leeds 2003).

Additional incentives to fulfill the commitment result because of the institutional history and design of the alliance. Formal alliances such as NATO represent a best-case scenario in terms of member states’ incentives for international cooperation. As Crawford (1996:487) writes regarding states’ cooperation with international regimes, “the odds of defection decrease when states historically have derived benefits from cooperation and have agreed to cooperate into the indefinite future.” NATO meets both of these conditions. First, it is a well-established formal institution with a long history of providing security benefits. For decades the alliance confronted the Soviet threat, assuaged concerns about a resurgent Germany, and provided a vehicle through which the United States could rehabilitate Europe (McCalla 1996:448). Second, NATO has evolved over time into a highly institutionalized alliance that proved adaptive after the Cold War, retooling to meet new security challenges and showing that the alliance was poised to deliver future gains to its member states (Wallander 2000). As Deudney and John Ikenberry (1999:183) note, the alliance is characterized by “the remarkable effort that its member states made to give their commitment a semi-permanent status—to lock themselves in so as to make it difficult to exit.” Far more so than the typical alliance or ad hoc coalition that forms to fight a war and quickly disbands, the NATO alliance resembles a repeat play game, where there is a long shadow of the future and high expectation of long-term play (Oye 1985; Axelrod and Keohane 1985). This scenario favors cooperation and “sticky” state commitments (Ikenberry 1999:16), a challenge to generalized theories of alliances that are less sanguine about wartime cohesion. States are inclined to cooperate not just because of the historical benefits and prospect of future returns but because of the punishment costs of defection. Defecting earns states a reputation of unreliability, since failing in one instance casts doubt on the reliability of future commitments. Actors that earn a reputation for defection are punished not just in the form of audience costs that derive from audiences that question their credibility by being excluded from the benefits of future cooperation (Axelrod 1984; Keohane 1984; Downs and Jones 2002; Tomz 2007a, 2007b). These reputational costs of defection are a powerful motivation for cooperation. Following an institutionalist logic of cooperation, Lisa Martin (2003) has illustrated the hazards of defection with a discussion of US unilateralism going into Iraq and a turn toward multilateralism once conditions worsened: “Reputations can be squandered quickly ... Turning to multilateral organizations only under duress and when it appears convenient demonstrates a lack of commitment.” Having poisoned the cooperation well going into the war, future cooperation on Iraq became less probable. With its reputation on cooperation besmirched, the defector would less likely be the beneficiary of NATO.

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15 NATO has lasted far longer than any alliance in Singer and Small’s quantitative study of alliances. See Singer and Small (1966).

16 For example, Weitsman’s argument that stronger states experience threats differently and that these threat perception differentials affect alliance cohesion might not apply to a highly institutionalized alliance such as NATO. See Weitsman (2003).
cooperation midway through the conflict, particularly under conditions of deteriorated security.

The converse was true in Afghanistan. Crafting a NATO-based response to operations in Afghanistan essentially tied the hands of successor governments. Domestic incentives for withdrawal became increasingly attractive over time, as casualties mounted and public aversion grew. However, bundling a state’s contributions to Afghanistan with a long-standing commitment to the multilateral alliance increased the international costs of defection. Renegotiating or reneging on a state’s contributions to operations in the formal alliance were considerably more difficult since doing so would incur audience costs, risk punishment, and rule out being a beneficiary of cooperation in the future (Fearon 1997; Moravcsik 2000; Goldstein and Gowa 2002). Successor governments consequently would have their hands tied on the question of troop commitments to the NATO-led operation, locking them into credible state participation in the ongoing war.

These institutional incentives of the NATO alliance tie the hands and limit the discretion not just of governments but also opposition groups. As Ramsay observes (2004:473), “the opposition’s preferences are multidimensional (that is, it is interested in winning the electoral competition and getting its country the largest possible share of the international prize).” Domestic victory is indeed a preference but international gain—or avoidance of cost—is also an opposition consideration. Domestic unpopularity of fulfilling an alliance commitment creates incentives to defect that may be offset by the international gains of fulfilling its state’s commitment. The opposition has no interest in its state suffering reputation costs of defection that make it difficult to receive the benefits of future cooperation, when it might be the government leader. Moreover, in some cases it was the opposition that initially offered its state’s commitment to the operation. For example, the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) committed troops to Afghanistan under Chancellor Schroeder in 2001; challenging these deployments now that it is part of the opposition would risk appearing disingenuous given the SPD’s multi-year support for the deployment when it was in power.

In light of the preceding discussion, the finding that states have overwhelmingly fulfilled their commitments to the formal alliance of NATO is not entirely surprising. The high costs of defection and the prospect of forgoing the benefits of cooperation create an institutional stickiness that offsets the domestic unpopularity of fulfilling alliance commitments. The incentives to maintain international commitments are powerful enough that they transcend political parties and thereby help guard the leading party from electoral consequences. Taken together, this argument about systemic incentives for cooperation shows why public opinion has not had a bottom–up effect on decisionmaking; elite consensus regarding institutional commitments ultimately reduces the effect of public opinion on foreign policy decisions.

Case Studies

As the data on public opinion and alliance commitment showed, adverse public opinion environments have not caused member states to reduce their commitments to operations in Afghanistan. Having shown that there is little connection between negative public opinion and these particular foreign policy outcomes, the cases examine whether or why elite consensus has formed around the member state’s commitment in Afghanistan. They focus on the largest troop contributing states—those with over 2,000 troops each—since these would have the biggest impact on alliance cohesion if they withdrew forces from Afghanistan. Of

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the six countries in this group, I exclude two cases because they do not pose a hard test for the argument. First, I exclude states where Leftist Parties are in government, since Center Right opposition parties may be expected to be ideologically more inclined to support the use of force. Thus, it excludes the UK, since it does not test the source of elite consensus if the Conservative opposition would have ideological rather than systemic incentives to support operations in Afghanistan. Second, I also exclude the United States, since a majority or plurality of the American public has supported operations in Afghanistan since 2001, making this an inadequate test of how public opinion affects decisions to withdraw a state’s commitments from the alliance. Based on these criteria, the next section looks at public opinion, elite consensus, and alliance commitments in Germany, France, Canada, and Italy.18

Germany

Of the countries that contribute troops to Afghanistan, Germany would seem to be a most likely case for responsiveness to domestic preferences. The German Bundestag votes annually on the troops’ mandate; as a result, its commitments can shift year-to-year depending on the idiosyncrasies of the electoral process and shifts in public opinion. The requirement that Germany’s participation be reevaluated by the Bundestag every year means that the sustainability of its commitment is more precarious compared to the US government, for example, where war-making authority resides predominantly in the executive and the legislature is more responsible for defense appropriations.19 Perhaps more fundamentally, Germany is a least likely case for war involvement generally due to its post-World War II history of antimilitarism. Discarding its nationalist and militarist past, Germany moved after World War II to embrace a more pacific culture of foreign policy that eschewed military force. This attitude has been reflected in both elites and among public attitudes (Berger 1997; Risse 2001). Given this culture of antimilitarism, we might expect one of the main parties to capitalize on the public’s general hostility to war or that elites themselves might share this aversion.

That there has not been a serious consideration of withdrawing Germany’s commitment to the NATO-led ISAF force is therefore unexpected. Public support has hovered below 40%, with just 29% of Germans supporting the 2010 decision to augment the deployment by 850 soldiers.20 A wise electoral strategy might be for the SPD to diverge from the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and favor a far more restrictive policy; a less expansive commitment or perhaps even withdrawal from Afghanistan would match public preferences. Despite these circumstances, all major parties except the “Die Linke” (Leftist) Party have generally supported Germany’s commitment to Afghanistan and avoided explicit calls for withdrawal of troops (Lafontaine 2009).21 As a result of convergence among

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19 Indeed, the German executive always has the majority in the Bundestag, as the Chancellor is elected by this body, not separately by the people. Thus, representation in the Bundestag would tend to reflect the coalition in government, which would probably support the government’s position. However, submitting the issue for reapproval biannually means that intervening events such as large casualties might have dramatic impacts on Bundestag members even if they are in the Chancellor’s coalition. The frequent debates and reapproval provides opportunities for reevaluation—and indeed troop withdrawal—in a way that does not happen in the US Congress, for example. I thank Marcel Heberlein for pointing this out.
major parties, the Parliament was able to minimize turning the Afghanistan mission into a 2009 election issue; in November 2008, the German Bundestag voted to expand the commitment in Afghanistan, from 3,500 to 4,500 troops and extended the mandate to December 2009, deliberately expiring after the election (Agence-France Press 2008c; Hickmann, Neukirch, and Stark 2009). In keeping with this cross-party consensus, German government’s 2010 decision to increase troops had the endorsement not just of the new governing coalition of Christian and Free Democrats but also the main opposition party, the SPD (Kulish 2010; Wiesmann 2010).

The willingness to sustain alliance commitments have come in large part because of elites’ commitment to multilateral operations, a guiding principle that characterizes post-World War II German security policy (Baumann and Hellmann 2001; Krause 2004). Speaking about Germany’s commitment to established international institutions, for example, Vice Chief of Defense of the German Bundeswehr LtGen Johann-Georg Dora characterized his country’s support for multilateral security institutions such as NATO as near-unconditional: NATO involvement is both necessary and sufficient for Germany’s participation in foreign interventions. Kosovo without NATO would not have been possible, just as Iraq without NATO meant Germany would not participate. On the other hand, NATO’s Article V Declaration after 9/11 was a sufficient condition for Germany’s involvement in defense of the US homeland and later Afghanistan.22 One advisor to the German government corroborated the effect of the formal alliance as follows: “we are stuck in a kind of war … After all, we are acting in the context of NATO, as a commitment by the alliance. We’re acting with a mandate by the UN … And to achieve this, we need to risk confrontations … To abstain from this would be dishonest” (Radio Free Europe 2009).

France

French forces have been involved in Afghanistan operations since late 2001, marking one of the earliest allied contributions, and the country has steadily increased contributions over time despite the mission being unpopular domestically. Not only has the government responded to NATO’s requests for more troops, it has gone further and rejoined the NATO military command, from which General De Gaulle withdrew in 1966. Upon rejoining NATO’s military command, Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner argued that France’s role as a future beneficiary was linked to the historical legacy of the alliance and France’s ability to make an enduring commitment: “We are founding members of the Atlantic Alliance. We have participated in all the NATO operations, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, yet we haven’t been involved in developing the plans. France can no longer go on being the only film director not invited to contribute to the screenplay!” On a number of occasions, Kouchner (2009) has voiced the principles that supported his country’s commitment in Afghanistan: “We ... are staunch multilateralists.” An operation with formal multilateral backing, with which Afghanistan operates, elicits support from French leaders who seek the benefits from the alliance.

President Sarkozy similarly links France’s unpopular commitments in Afghanistan to the longevity of the alliance and associated benefits: “France will remain engaged in Afghanistan as long as it takes, because what’s at stake in that country is the future of our values and that of the Atlantic alliance” (Saunders 2007). Troop reinforcements have offered a way to provide an unambiguous signal of interest and “open the door for France to a strong renewal of its relations with

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22 Author’s interview with LtGen Johann-Georg Dora at the German Bundeswehr, May 25, 2007. For a similar argument, see Henning Riecke interview, Radio Free Europe (2009).
NATO” (Brown 2008a, 2008b). French Defense Minister Hervé Morin also asserted that French troop commitments “must be done as part of a global reflection on the reorganization of NATO forces” (Clark 2008a, 2008b), an organization that the French leadership believes should include and benefit France over the long-term.

To the extent that the opposition has initiated debate about France’s involvement in Afghanistan, it has not challenged France’s commitment to the alliance or Afghanistan, but has focused on the degree to which the country should have decision-making voice within NATO. One reason that is unique to France is that the country has a fraught relationship not just with the NATO alliance in general but also the United States in particular. It is in this Gaullist spirit of independence and self-determination that the Socialists express consternation, but they make clear that it is not as a rejection of the alliance or mission in Afghanistan. In the August 2008 vote to send more troops to Afghanistan, the lopsided vote of 343-210 in the Lower House and 209-119 in the Senate sent a strong signal of political support for French operations in Afghanistan (Brown 2008a, 2008b; France 24 2008; International Herald Tribune 2008; National Post 2008). While some Socialists opposed the measure, they did so on the basis of a desire for more commanding decision-making role in Afghanistan, not because they endorsed withdrawing from Afghanistan altogether. On the contrary, in almost all instances of opposition, the Socialists have offered the qualification that they do not call for France to disengage from Afghanistan (Cody 2008). The opposition’s concerns operate more at the margins, trying to shape how the mission is undertaken. Drawing on a history of anti-Americanism in French foreign policy, the Socialists express concern that French interests will be subordinate to American strategy and argue that the “all military option advocated by the Americans has failed” (Moscovici 2008). Instead, the Socialist Opposition supports the comprehensive strategy that NATO and indeed American leaders have advocated.

Canada

Almost since the start of operations in Afghanistan, Canada has maintained a sizable military presence in the restive Kandahar region in the South. Despite the growing casualties and public opposition, Members of Parliament from the two major parties—Conservative and Liberal—remained united in support of the mission, believing that Canada had to “keep its word to NATO” (Hebert 2007).23 As part of that bargain, however, Canada has expected that other alliance members will contribute to the operation. The logic is that if other states do not contribute, alliance cohesion declines, casting doubt on the future benefits of the alliance, and calling into question the premise of Canada’s cooperation with the formal alliance.

A Panel led by former Liberal cabinet minister John Manley asserted the commitment to the alliance through sustained troop contributions but also spoke to these concerns about how other states’ commitments affected Canada’s confidence about the future of the alliance. Pressing the alliance to reassert its own commitment, Manley has frequently invoked Afghanistan as “NATO’s most important mission … either they mean it … or they don’t. If they don’t, then we need to look to the well-being of our young people” (CBC 2008a). Manley’s report became the guiding principle of Canada’s contribution: Canada would extend its commitment but only if had confidence in the future solvency of the alliance, which itself required affirmations of other states that they would not withdraw but rather contribute to the cohesion of the alliance. With the

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23 The Quebecois and NDP Parties opposed early on, but neither party is in a position to become the governing party.
additional commitment of troops from NATO member states, the Canadian parliament voted 198 to 77 to keep soldiers in the most dangerous part of Afghanistan and extend the mission. Most members of the Liberal Opposition voted in favor, including Michael Ignatieff who became the leader of Canada’s Liberal Party in December 2008 (Agence-France Presse 2008a; CBC 2008b). The 2008 extension resulted after earlier extensions in 2007 and in 2006. Even after the most recent extension, the government indicated that it would retain Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan beyond the 2011 end date, albeit in a training and support role (Potter 2008; Cudmore 2009; Nicholson 2009). According to the government, support for operations in Afghanistan is synonymous with Canada’s commitment to the alliance more generally: “Canada should build on its accomplishments … and ensure that progress in Afghanistan is not lost and that our international commitments and reputation are upheld” (Toronto Star 2008). Canadian support is premised on the commitment it made to NATO and the reputational loss it expects to suffer were it to withdraw its support.

While the rhetoric of the Opposition has more recently intimated displeasure with the government’s policies in Afghanistan, the Liberal and Conservative parties have essentially been united in their support for these international commitments. Those in the Liberal Party who opposed the troop extensions in 2008 were careful to indicate that their vote represented lack of information about the extension rather than opposition to the principle of the mission (Clark 2006). Then Liberal leader Stéphane Dion opposed an indefinite deployment, but was clear that his party would not consider pulling troops out, affirming that Canada had to maintain its international commitments (Freeman 2007). Michael Ignatieff also long supported Canada’s presence in Afghanistan, voting to extend the mission and voicing his “unequivocal support” for operations in Afghanistan (Curry 2008). Ignatieff’s advocacy for withdrawing combat troops, reinforcing reconstruction and humanitarian operations, and beginning to transition responsibility to Afghan forces in 2011 are all consistent with the government’s policy as well as NATO’s own goals in Afghanistan (Clark 2006; Marquant 2010).

Italy

As with the other member states that contribute sizable forces to Afghanistan, Italy’s commitment has been durable, but because of the unstable coalitions that characterize its parliamentary republic, subject to perturbations. Italy faced a test of its commitment in February 2007, when the Parliament voted on operations in Afghanistan. In defending the policy of a dominant role in Afghanistan, former Prime Minister Prodi’s Defense Minister Arturo Parisi suggested that increasing troops to NATO operations in Afghanistan was an effort “to corroborate our country’s image as a credible and reliable ally … Italy needs to send signals abroad of the clarity, continuity, and reliability of its commitments in time” (Cerretelli 2007).

Appearing to challenge this defense, two communist senators in Prodi’s coalition voted against a measure that would extend Italy’s commitment to Afghanistan. Because of Parliamentary rules enacted in 2005, Prodi’s government had a slim majority in the Senate and the defection of two Senators from Prodi’s coalition brought the collapse of the government. Prodi tendered his resignation, to which Italy’s President responded by requesting that Prodi face a confidence motion in the Parliament (BBC Feb 2007a, 2007b; Fisher 2007). The Prodi government sustained two votes of confidence, drawing broad support within Parliament, including from Silvio Berlusconi’s Opposition Party. In describing his vote to support Prodi and his policies, Berlusconi asserted that “a country must act in a serious way and have a clear policy and be loyal to its allies,” referring to NATO operations in Afghanistan (Scherer and Krause-Jackson 2007; Custodero
Following the votes of confidence, Prodi faced another test of his policy in Afghanistan, with a successful Parliamentary vote in March 2007. Members of the Communist Renewal faction (the Far Left) resisted what they viewed as the military-only policy in Afghanistan and their dissent siphoned off support from within Prodi’s narrow governing coalition. The policy in Afghanistan gained support from the Opposition, however, “enthusiastic backers of the Afghan commitment” (Popham 2007a, 2007b).

The February 2007 Parliamentary vote might seem to support the argument about public opinion affecting foreign policy outcomes, but that linkage suffers upon closer scrutiny. The measure consisted of far more than the narrow issue of whether to extend the commitment to Afghanistan. It paired the Afghanistan vote with important domestic issues such as the expansion of a US military base in Italy, a contentious issue after Italy’s controversial support for the US-led Iraq war and the report on extraordinary renditions that had been released by the European Parliament the week before. The resolution also included a measure to legally recognize unmarried couples, including same sex partners. Moreover, Prodi’s coalition consisted of nine different parties with heterogeneous preferences and a slim majority. Abandoned by two members of his own coalition for their opposition to the military base measures, Prodi was then dependent on members of the Catholic UDEUR party, which opposed the same-sex aspect of the proposal (Economist 2007; Hooper 2007; Braun 2008; Aloisi 2007). Thus, the machinations of Italian politics, with its multi-issue votes and thin majorities that produce unstable governments, led to tactical voting on specific aspects of the bill. One of the two communist members who defected, Fernando Rossi, defended his actions as motivated out of ignorance about the unintended consequences: “Perhaps if I had known my vote would be so fundamental, I would have reflected further” (Popham 2007a). Franco Turigliatto, an Trotskyite in the Communist Refoundation Party, asserted that his was not a vote of opposition but abstention. Both contested the expansion of the US military base near Vicenza but appear not to have anticipated the strategic implications of the vote. They both faced disciplinary action and expulsion from their own parties for failing to fall “in line with the [party’s] democratic will” (BBC 2007a, 2007b; Reuters 2007).

Elite consensus in Italy about the importance of the country’s commitment to NATO has been a point of continuity despite changes in leadership and opposition groups. Berlusconi came into power in 2008 expressing his continued support for operations in Afghanistan. He has since expressed even greater willingness to add troops and ease the ban on deploying troops to combat zones, “in a spirit of solidarity with its allies” (Agence-France Presse 2008b). In December 2008, Italy promised troop reinforcements in Western Afghanistan from 2,270 to 2,800 (Kington 2008). As Berlusconi argued, Afghanistan “is an international problem. It is not a problem that a country present there can take on its own. Doing so could betray the accord and trust of the other countries present” (CNN 2009). More recently, the Prime Minister expressed support for President Obama’s Afghan strategy, indicating that “[Italy will play its part in the awareness that what is at stake in the conflict in Afghanistan is not only the Afghan people’s future … but also NATO’s credibility]” (Corriere della Sera 2009c). Only when NATO calls for withdrawal, Defense Secretary La Russa promised, would Italy withdraw its troops. Foreign Minister Frattini confirmed that “Italy must finish the job started with NATO” (Momigliano 2009) and that troops would not be withdrawn. This is a position that both the government and mainstream opposition groups support. To be sure, members of the Communist Left, which has

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24 The Catholic UDEUR only voted for the measure in March 2007 after Prodi had removed the same-sex recognition aspect of the legislation.
been suspicious of the Afghan mission from the outset, and isolated members of
the Northern League, which has been denounced by the European Commission
for Racism and Intolerance for xenophobic remarks, diverge from this policy.
Former Defense Minister Parisi, however, expressed support for the govern-
ment’s ongoing support for military operations in Afghanistan, indicating that
“the PD (Democratic Party of the center-left) will continue its full and loyal sup-
port” for allied operations in Afghanistan (Corriere della Sera 2009a).

Discussion and Conclusion

Recent research on public opinion has moved away from the question of
whether politicians are responsive to public opinion, assuming that public opin-
ion is a key determinant of foreign policy decisions. This research challenges
that assumption. With the exception of the United States, the publics of all
countries contributing sizable forces to Afghanistan (>2,000) support withdraw-
ing their troops. In all of these countries, the leaders have not only maintained
troops in Afghanistan but in almost all cases reinforced those troops, leaving alli-
ance cohesion intact.

Theoretical expectations about international cooperation and evidence from
case studies point to elite consensus as the reason why leaders are not running
for the exits in Afghanistan when their publics would prefer that they do. Under-
taking the operation through an established formal institution such as NATO
brings the credible promise of future benefits for states who cooperate and audi-
dence and reputational costs for those who defect. Those systemic incentives are
powerful and in almost all cases have elicited elite consensus on keeping troops
in Afghanistan well beyond when member states’ publics have soured on the
war. Public opinion then has less influence because voters are unable to differen-
tiate among these similar positions; elites can therefore continue the status quo
of troop deployments and in some cases even increase commitment to NATO
operations in Afghanistan without the threat of electoral punishment. French
President Sarkozy resisted public pressures to withdraw from Afghanistan after
the ambush on French troops, Germany has loosened caveats and increased the
number of troops, Canada again extended its mission, and Italian leaders of the
government and main opposition parties have been united and able to forestall
challenges from smaller parties on either the right or the left (Reimann 2007).
They are safer in making these foreign policy decisions because the elec-
toral alternatives are not markedly different on the key foreign policy issue of
Afghanistan.

This is not to say that there has been no political debate on the question of
troop commitments to the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan. Governments
have faced challenges within their own parties, as President Obama did when he
deliberated on the surge of 30,000 troops in late 2009 and Gordon Brown has in
his handling of the war. Others such as in France and Canada have also faced
challenges from Opposition Parties. Notable in these cases, however, is what the
Opposition does not say. French Socialists, for example, are careful to say that
they do not support immediate withdrawal from Afghanistan. Canada’s Liberal
Opposition continuously asserts its adherence to international commitments and
its opposition to the withdrawal of troops. Instead it advocates a shift in focus to
a comprehensive strategy that emphasizes political strategy rather than one that
is military-only; this too is in line with the governing party and NATO’s senior
leadership.

Though I have advanced an argument about elite consensus, some possible
alternative explanations for discounting public opinion and for elite consensus
should be explored. One is that states’ commitments to NATO are not about the
formal alliance per se but the hegemonic influence of the United States within
that alliance. If anything, there is evidence that US influence actually dissuades other states from offering more to the alliance. Part of the political discourse in France, for example, is that the governing party should minimize subordinating its priorities to those of the United States. For example, when Sarkozy affirmed his intention to rejoin NATO’s military command, he was asked about whether the move would reduce French independence relative to US interests. The Socialist member responsible for international affairs, Pierre Moscovici, wondered why Sarkozy had attempted “rapprochement” and “global strategic alignment” with the United States by rejoining the NATO military command, requiring that Sarkozy clarify the rationale that France would actually gain more voice by being part of the formal institution (Economist 2008; Radio France 2008; Agence-France Presse 2009). Thus, American influence in NATO is seen by a number of member states as a reason to be wary of closer ties with the alliance.

Moreover, if American hegemony were a powerful and sufficient influence for eliciting troop contributions, we might have expected that influence to generate the same ally partners in Iraq that are present in Afghanistan. Yet far more states, including the formal alliance of NATO and all its members, have contributed in Afghanistan whereas a number of them—France, Germany, Canada, Norway, Belgium, Turkey, and Greece—sat on the sidelines in Iraq. Side payments in the form of foreign aid or loan guarantees may sweeten the incentives but cannot independently produce state commitments in the form of blood and treasure.

A second possible explanation for the resilience of commitments in Afghanistan is that they are motivated by basic state interest. Perhaps leaders have framed their commitments in lofty principles of alliance commitment to mask its state’s naked self-interest. Two factors cast doubt on the self-interest argument. One is that the case for self-interest in Afghanistan is increasingly dubious. When the mission began in 2001, it was clearly appropriate to see it as a war of necessity, with the goal of eliminating al Qaeda and the hostile Taliban government in Afghanistan. As Richard Haass has astutely pointed out, however, the removal of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan and friendly government in Kabul means that those original motivations are no longer apt and the current operation is a “war of choice,” which is to say that national interest is no longer directly at stake as it was in the initial phases of the war.

Another factor is that states that contribute to operations in Afghanistan are increasingly under threat as potential terrorist targets. Germany’s participation ostensibly made Oktoberfest a target in 2009. Al Qaeda had threatened Germany with attacks if the 2009 Bundestag election “result were not to give a signal for withdrawal of the Bundeswehr from Afghanistan.” The threat explicitly mentioned Oktoberfest as a target. Similarly, the UK came under threat for hosting the Afghanistan development conference in 2010, causing it to raise its terror alert to “highly likely” as a result (O’Neill 2010). Not only may participation in Afghanistan not make states more secure, it may actually increase their risk of coming under attack, which also challenges the state interest premise of remaining in Afghanistan.

The argument about systemic incentives for alliance commitments not only challenges the conventional wisdom on public opinion and foreign policy outcomes, but also has important implications for alliance durability in theory and the conduct of multilateral operations in practice. In particular, it suggests that alliances created through formal institutions will produce more cohesion in
wartime than ad hoc coalitions of the willing for two reasons. First, an informal alignment—defined as “similarity in interest without the formal mutual commitment present in an alliance”27—is a shorter-term commitment that requires less coordination of interests and loss of autonomy. Participation in a coalition is therefore a relatively costless signal for a leader. He can align with another state, accept the near-term benefits such as debt relief or foreign aid from the coalition leader, but easily withdraw from the coalition without facing the same international and domestic audience costs that confront a leader who withdraws from a formal alliance. Second, because coalitions are formed “without the implication of coordination of their actions in the future” (Morrow 1991:906), the prospect of defection brings few adverse consequences. In particular, punishment by excluding the defector from future cooperation benefits is meaningless since the coalition did not contemplate future interactions. For both of these reasons, we would expect informal coalitions or alignments to lack the systemic incentives for cooperation that characterize a formal alliance such as NATO.28 Thus, ad hoc coalitions may be more flexible particularly for the lead state, but that same flexibility means more precarious wartime cohesion.

Iraq presents a useful foil. Six years into the Iraq conflict, the 47-country “coalition of the willing” had winnowed down to one, the United States. By comparison, NATO participation in Afghanistan has grown in the 8 years of involvement, despite high casualties, unsympathetic publics, and a dubious prognosis for success. Formal alliances, long blamed for everything from buckpassing to abandonment to chainganging (Snyder 1984; Christensen and Snyder 1990) may yet have much to recommend them.

References

Agence-France Presse. (2008c) German Cabinet Extends Unpopular Afghan Mandate. Agence-France Presse, October 7.

27 An alignment is defined as “similarity in interest without the formal mutual commitment present in an alliance.” See Morrow (1991:906).
28 Motivations to contribute to an ad hoc coalition (for example, either Iraq War) would be qualitatively different than to join and follow through on a formal alliance such as NATO in wartime. For a study of ad hoc coalitions, see Bennett, Lepgold, and Unger (1994).


BBC. (2009) Italy ‘to Send 1,000 Extra Troops’ to Afghanistan. *BBC*, December 3.


