



# GNSI DECISION BRIEF

## Keeping Allies in the Fight: Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq

Written by:  
Tad Schnauffer II, PhD  
Yoan Hermida, MS

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UNIVERSITY of  
**SOUTH FLORIDA**  
Global and National Security Institute

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### Introduction

Winston Churchill famously quipped, “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them.”<sup>i</sup> Today, the U.S. has the largest network of alliances of any nation. America’s allies provide it with a marked advantage over its adversaries including basing rights, transit points, and a forward presence. Compared to going it alone in a conflict, allies bring legitimacy and help share the burden. Following the Cold War, U.S. allies, particularly NATO members, have deployed troops in support of operations that have lasted years — even decades. Why did they stay engaged for so long? Would they be willing to do the same in future wars, especially if they appear to be unpopular non-existential conflicts like Iraq? How can the U.S. provide political cover to allied decision-makers so that they are better able to justify participation in US-led operations to their domestic audiences? Once a conflict is underway, a perceived lack of progress along with the increasing human and material costs often erode domestic support leading to an early allied withdrawal. U.S. leaders must understand how different domestic factors influence an ally’s behavior in order to cultivate and sustain allied support for conflict participation.

Polish and Spanish participation in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq offer examples of why the U.S. needs to help allies build legitimacy and support in their own countries before entering a conflict. Once in a conflict, U.S. policymakers should set clear mission objectives and continually communicate progress toward those objectives, tailored to each ally’s unique domestic concerns. Allies value U.S. support and their own reputations as dependable partners, but they generally will not oppose their own citizens or violate international norms for long simply to build their relationship with the U.S. Blinded by its own overwhelming military capabilities, the U.S. often fails to grasp the limitations its allies face.

On June 10, 1999, UN Security Council Resolution 1244 authorized a military presence in the then-Serbian province of Kosovo. The next day, NATO established the Kosovo Force (KFOR) to promote peace and stability, deploying 50,000 soldiers from 31 countries.<sup>ii</sup> Roughly two years later in October 2001, while 40,000 allied troops remained in Kosovo, the United States launched the invasion of Afghanistan to depose the Taliban-led government, which had allowed al-Qaeda to plan the September 11th terrorist attacks from Afghan soil.<sup>iii</sup> In January 2002, backed by NATO’s Article V declaration and the UN Security Council’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) allied troops arrived.<sup>iv</sup> Even as the U.S. military hunted for Bin Laden in the mountains of

Afghanistan, the Bush administration spent much of 2002 warning that Saddam Hussein’s Iraq was the most dangerous member of an “axis of evil.”<sup>v</sup> U.S. unwillingness to continue diplomatic efforts to depose Saddam led to French and German resistance at the UN against U.S. military action. Despite international protests and lacking a UN resolution authorizing an invasion, the U.S. and several allies invaded Iraq on March 20, 2003.<sup>vi</sup> This committed the U.S. and some of its allies to deploy troops and resources to three warzones.

### Poland: The Reliable Ally

After the Cold War, Poland fundamentally tied its national security and foreign policy to the goal of gaining and maintaining the support of the U.S. In 1992, Polish Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski described the role the U.S. played in Polish security planning, “...we assume that their [U.S.] political and military involvement on the European continent is a necessary condition for maintaining peace, security and stability in Europe, including Poland...”<sup>vii</sup> Poles view the U.S. as indispensable for keeping the peace and deterring any threat from a revisionist Russia. To ensure the U.S. is committed to Polish security, the Poles have been willing to accept the high costs of troop deployments to all three of the conflicts mentioned and staying to their end.

In March of 1999, as Poland prepared to join NATO, Foreign Minister Geremek stated, “Poland in the Alliance will be a good and credible ally for good and bad weather.”<sup>viii</sup> Shortly after, in June, Polish ground forces arrived in Kosovo as part of KFOR. Polish leaders saw this deployment as strengthening Poland’s international position and promoting its image as a steadfast, reliable ally. It served to give the new NATO member a ‘seat at the table’ to influence events in their interests. For similar reasons, following the 9/11 attacks, Poland exhibited high levels of public support for the war in Afghanistan. Polish troops first arrived in country in early 2002 and deployed forces until the 2021 withdraw. Additionally, Polish support in Afghanistan also came from the perceived need to counter terrorism, and to show the strength of NATO as a balance to a rising Russian threat.

Poland had several reasons to support the U.S. in Iraq despite the pushback from other NATO allies. Polish leaders saw the Iraq War as a means to modernize and increase the proficiency of the Polish military.<sup>ix</sup> It also gained political and financial

support from the U.S. Furthermore, a stable Iraq would benefit Poland economically. Prior to the war, Iraq was one of Poland's larger trading partners and Poland wanted to preserve its access to cheap oil. This deployment would also strengthen and build Polish interoperability with other allies.<sup>x</sup>

Overall, across the three conflicts Polish leaders focused on three key reasons for their continued involvement. First, Poland wanted--and still desires--to be seen as a reliable, trustworthy, committed ally to NATO and more importantly to the U.S. Polish leaders saw these deployments as way to build Polish prestige and political capital with the U.S., and within Europe and NATO. Second, Poland wanted to maintain peace and contribute as security provider as opposed to a security consumer. Third, Poland sought to modernize and expand the capabilities of its Army.

### Spain: The Hesitant Ally

Spain has a complex relationship with its armed forces, stemming from its Civil War when the military overthrew the Republic, and ruled the country under the regime of General Francisco Franco. Due to that legacy, Spanish politicians are more comfortable deploying their military in defensive operations such as peacekeeping and genocide prevention than they are in offense-oriented, non-existential wars.

Spain's Defense Minister Serra Rexach explained three conditions for his country's participation in a hypothetical conflict in Kosovo: 1) a humanitarian catastrophe; 2) exhaustion of diplomacy; and 3) a UN resolution authorizing the use of force.<sup>xi</sup> While the UN did not explicitly authorize KFOR, debates in the Spanish Congress highlighted the legitimacy of the conflict as a peace operation designed to stop genocide, subsequently deploying 1,200 troops in support of KFOR. 49% of the Spanish public supported sending troops.<sup>xii</sup> The political situation would change in 2008. Spain did not recognize Kosovo after it unilaterally declared independence without UN approval from Serbia that year. Spain could not support Kosovar independence because of its long-standing issues with domestic independence movements in Catalonia and the Basque Country. Spain's participation in KFOR therefore was a domestic liability. In March 2009, Spain's defense minister, Carme Chacón, announced the country's withdrawal from KFOR: "Mission accomplished. It's time to go home..."<sup>xiii</sup> However, the KFOR mission continues today with roughly 5,000 troops on the ground.

At the beginning of 2002, Spain deployed 350 soldiers to Afghanistan. The Ministry of Defense justified the deployment stating, "Spain's participation in Afghanistan is crucial for international security and in solidarity with our allies."<sup>xiv</sup> 64% of the public supported the deployment. Government officials in both the governing center-right Popular Party and the opposition Socialist Party agreed on participation, and the mission enjoyed high levels of support...

in the beginning. By October 2009, the security situation in Afghanistan had deteriorated, and as casualties mounted, public support for the presence of Spanish troops in Afghanistan decreased to 51%.<sup>xv</sup> Spain withdrew the 450 troops it had in Herat Province in October 2015, leaving 20 military personnel at Resolute Support Mission (RSM) headquarters in Kabul until the withdrawal in 2021.<sup>xvi</sup> After spending 3.7 billion Euros, experiencing 155 casualties (102 fatalities), the Spanish government saw no clear progress in the conflict as costs mounted.

Despite ongoing involvement in Afghanistan, Prime Minister Aznar justified Spain's participation in Iraq by stating, "We are with the United States because it is the country that is leading the fight against international terrorism."<sup>xvii</sup> The leadership of the Spanish government supported the war, but a March 2003 poll found that 91% of the country opposed participation.<sup>xviii</sup> On March 11th, 2004, ten bombs exploded throughout Madrid's transportation network in the worst terrorist attack in Europe since the Second World War. This attack would contribute to the ruling center-right party losing a general election three days later. After a year of troop deployments with eleven soldiers killed and 260 million Euros spent, Spain decided to become the first European ally to withdraw from the Iraq war. The worldwide unpopularity of the conflict, coupled with public perceptions that sending troops to Iraq precipitated the Madrid bombings, led Spanish leaders to conduct a cost-benefit analysis: a reputational loss from an early withdrawal in Iraq could be offset by increasing contributions to the Afghan war effort.

### Allied Support in Future War

The Polish and Spanish cases illustrate the importance of an effective communication strategy before requesting allied assistance in a conflict. The United States should first establish that an ally's participation is in that ally's own national interest, ensure that the ally's political leadership and the public are supportive, set clear mission objectives and expected outcomes, and continually and effectively communicate the progress and legitimacy of the mission or war. Most importantly, U.S. policymakers need to refine their communication strategy so that each ally can tailor its messaging about the conflict in accordance with their domestic realities. Allies value having the U.S. as a partner and leader. The allies will work toward shared interests such as combatting global terrorism, preventing gross violations of human rights, and defending international law; however, they will not do so at any cost. Unpopular wars, such as Iraq, met few of these criteria. Lastly, U.S. policymakers should be aware of the dangers of overextension. Allies may be unwilling or unable to participate in several conflicts at the same time, as they were asked to do by the U.S. in Afghanistan, and Iraq, while they also had to maintain peacekeeping troops in Kosovo. When it comes to the domestic opinion on a war, the narrative will drive the level of support. For a war 'it's hard to sell once it's gone to hell.'

## Decision Points

- How can the U.S. improve the communication strategies of the Departments of State and Defense vis-à-vis allies, in preparation for allied participation in a potential conflict with China over Taiwan?
- How does the one-war standard adopted by the Department of Defense in 2018 impact America's ability to successfully integrate allies into future conflicts?
- Should the U.S. seek sources of international legitimacy like UN resolutions and NATO joint declarations before initiating a conflict in which America will need allied assistance?
- How can the United States better prepare for early allied withdrawal from military operations in which there is little progress and high costs?

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**Tad Schnauer II, PhD**

*Strategy and Research Manager  
Global and National Security Institute*

**Yoan Hermida, MS**

*Graduate Student, University of South Florida  
School of Interdisciplinary Studies*

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