

RESEARCH ARTICLE / ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

Why Canada Goes to War: Explaining Combat Participation in US-led Coalitions

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Abstract

Canada has taken part in six wars since 1945, all of which have been conducted under US leadership. Despite such military interventionism, there have been no systematic comparative analyses of Canada's decisions to take part in US-led wars. The objective of this article is to develop and test a theoretical framework about why Canada goes to war. More specifically, it seeks to account for variations in Canada's provision of combat forces to multinational interventions led by the United States. It assesses leading theoretical explanations by examining five post-Cold War cases: the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya; the war against ISIS; and the refusal to take part in the invasion of Iraq. The article concludes that Canada's willingness to go to war is shaped primarily by a desire to maintain transatlantic alliance unity and enhance Canada's alliance credibility. Threats to national security, the legitimacy of the intervention, government ideology and public opinion are not found to consistently or meaningfully shape Canadian decisions to take part in US-led wars.

Résumé

Le Canada a participé à six guerres, depuis 1945, au sein de coalitions multinationales dirigées par les États-Unis. Malgré cet interventionnisme militaire, peu d'études ont cherché à cerner les motivations qui amènent le Canada à faire la guerre. L'objectif de cet article est d'offrir un cadre analytique capable d'expliquer pourquoi le Canada fait la guerre. Il propose une comparaison structurée et ciblée de six décisions de prendre part, ou non, à des opérations de combat au sein d'une coalition militaire dirigée par les États-Unis, au Kosovo, en Irak, en Afghanistan, en Libye et contre le groupe État islamique. L'article démontre que le Canada semble faire la guerre principalement pour deux raisons complémentaires : afin d'assurer l'unité de l'Alliance transatlantique ainsi que son statut d'allié fiable. En contrepartie, les menaces contre la sécurité nationale, la légitimité de l'intervention militaire, l'idéologie du gouvernement et l'opinion publique n'ont pas influé de manière systématique ou significative sur la décision de faire la guerre.

Keywords: Canada; war; Kosovo; Afghanistan; Libya; Islamic State; Iraq; alliance

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Introduction

Canada has taken part in six wars since 1945: in Korea, the Persian Gulf, Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya and against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ The United States was the coalition leader in each of these multinational wars, which were sometimes but not always undertaken under North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) command or with a United Nations (UN) mandate. Yet despite such military interventionism, there have been no systematic comparative analyses of Canada's decisions to take part in US-led wars. There have been several studies of individual interventions, but very few have sought to disentangle patterns vis-à-vis multiple US-led multinational coalitions, resulting in mostly *sui generis* explanations of Canadian decisions to go to war. It thus remains unclear the extent to which accounts of these interventions are instances of broader tendencies or deviant cases.

Moreover, scholarship on Canadian military interventions has for the most part refrained from developing explicit theoretical frameworks, thereby limiting theory development. For instance, leading accounts of Canada's war in Afghanistan (Stein and Lang, 2007; Saideman, 2016; Boucher and Nossal, 2017) have emphasized the importance of domestic politics in Canadian decision making but have refrained from developing an explicit theoretical framework explaining Canada's sizable and costly contributions to the war. Similarly, while the importance of alliance politics has long been highlighted in Canadian scholarship (for example, Sokolsky, 1989), it remains unclear how these actually come to shape Canadian decisions to go to war. Notwithstanding notable exceptions (von Hlatky, 2013; Zyla, 2015), extant scholarship on Canadian military interventions lacks comparative and theoretically grounded analyses of the causal mechanisms linking domestic and international factors.

Yet cross-national scholarship on international military interventions has developed multicausal frameworks of democratic involvement in US-led military operations. Most of these studies have, however, not included Canada as a case study (for example, Rathbun, 2004; Baltrusaitis, 2010; Davidson, 2011; Schmitt, 2018). In the studies that do include Canada, the theoretical framework developed yields mixed results (for example, Tago, 2007; Auerswald and Saideman, 2014; Mello, 2014; Haesebrouck, 2017, 2018a). It thus remains unclear what best explains Canada's decisions to take part in US-led coalition operations. This is troubling given the regularity with which Canada has been involved in coalition warfare, as well as the level of military support it has engaged in overseas.

The objective of this article is to develop and test a theoretical framework about why Canada goes to war. More specifically, it seeks to account for variations in Canada's provision of combat forces to multinational interventions led by the United States. It assesses leading theoretical explanations by examining five post-Cold War cases: the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya; the war against ISIS; and the refusal to take part in the invasion of Iraq. The article concludes that Canada's willingness to go to war is shaped primarily by a desire to maintain transatlantic alliance unity and enhance Canada's alliance credibility. Threats to national security, the legitimacy of the intervention, government ideology and public opinion are not found to consistently or meaningfully shape Canadian decisions to take part in US-led wars.

Democratic Participation in US-Led Coalition Operations

The literature on international military interventions is extensive, and scholarship looking more closely at democratic participation in US-led coalition operations is burgeoning. The limited space available here, however, permits focus only on the most prominent variables identified in the literature (Tago, 2007; Oma, 2012; Mello, 2014; Haesebrouck, 2018b).² Collective action theory provides a starting point. It expects second-tier powers such as Canada to contribute meaningfully to collective war efforts only if it derives a private benefit outweighing the costs of its intervention (Hardin, 1982: 17; Cooper and Nossal, 1997: 276–77; Mello, 2014: 201; Haesebrouck, 2017: 2245). Otherwise, Canada's default position should be to ride free on the backs of its more powerful allies.

Threats to national security interests

There are three prominent private incentives to take part in multinational coalition operations. The first is to counter threats to national security. Studies of coalition operations expect a state's military contribution to correlate with the extent to which the target of the operation poses a threat to its national interests (Bennett et al., 1994: 42–44). According to Davidson (2011: 16), national interests involve “the state's territorial integrity or its citizens, the state's economy (including significant economic interests abroad), or a natural resource of economic or security significance.” We therefore expect that Canada will commit combat forces to US-led coalition operations that target threats to its national security interests—that is, its territory, citizens or economy.

To measure threats, studies emphasize geographic proximity to the source of threat (Bennett et al., 1994: 43). For the cases under study, this means potential exposure to the spread of regional instability, to the flow of refugees or to an attack by adversary forces (Auerswald, 2004: 639; Baltrusaitis, 2010: 19; Haesebrouck, 2017: 2240). Others point to the extent to which a state has been subject to attacks by the source of threat. In wars against terrorism, the number of Islamic terrorist attacks and foreign fighters has been used as a proxy to ascertain the level of threat posed by jihadists (Saideman, 2016: 295–97; Haesebrouck, 2018a: 256). We therefore consider the Canadian government's perception of both types of threat to Canada's national security.

Multilateral legitimacy

A second incentive to join a coalition rests in the legitimacy of the multinational operation. Multinational coalitions may or may not be formed with the formal authorization of international institutions. Some may enjoy the support of regional institutions such as NATO, while others may be sanctioned by the most authoritative and legitimate multilateral body with regard to peace and security, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). With the exception of self-defence, the use of force is indeed considered illegitimate under international law without a mandate from the UNSC. Several countries have gone as far as adopting constitutional dispositions requiring a UN mandate to take part in a military operation abroad. It is thus unsurprising that the collective legitimacy provided by the UNSC to a coalition

operation has been found to increase the likelihood of potential contributors to commit forces to the mission (Tago, 2007).

The Canadian National Defence Act stipulates that the Canadian Armed Forces may be deployed for non-defence purposes in missions under the UN Charter, NATO, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) or similar organizations (National Defence Act, 1985). Scholarship on Canadian military interventions assigns greater importance to the legitimacy afforded by the UNSC and NATO (MacKay and McCoy, 2010; Becker-Jakob, 2013). This is because human rights violations tend to trigger the attention of the international community and lead to action by multilateral institutions (Roussel and Robichaud, 2004). In other words, Canada's perceived moral obligation to use military force is closely associated with multilateral legitimacy. We therefore expect Canada to commit combat forces to US-led coalition operations conducted with the approval of the UNSC or NATO.

Alliance value

States may further join a US-led coalition operation because they specifically value their alliance relationship with the United States (Davidson, 2011: 15). In contrast with multilateral legitimacy, alliance value entails a concern with the preservation and enhancement of the valued alliance relationship, including the ally's reputation for reliability (von Hlatky, 2013: 44; Massie, 2016: 89; Haesebrouck, 2018a: 257). It entails actively seeking to strengthen the viability, credibility and cohesion of the alliance through military commitment, rather than seeking the approval of a multilateral body such as NATO before taking part in a US-led coalition (Auerswald, 2004: 638). In contrast with alliance dependence toward the United States, alliance value does not entail forced cooperation. It suggests voluntary support to US-led coalition operations rather than cooperation out of fear of being abandoned by its powerful ally vis-à-vis external threats (Cooper et al., 1991: 396). This unforced willingness to support US military interventions is otherwise known as self-entrapment, whereby states absorb the alliance's interests and are willing to intervene militarily to ensure the alliance's sustainability (Ashford, 2017: 221).

States that value their multilateral alliance with the United States are commonly referred to as "Atlanticists" (Haesebrouck, 2017: 2246). Canada, along with Denmark, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, is considered a prominent Atlanticist ally. It values the multilateral character of the transatlantic alliance because it binds the United States into an institutional setting alongside Canada's other two traditional allies, the United Kingdom and France, and bolsters Canada's international status (Massie, 2013). Atlanticist states are expected to take part in US-led coalitions when their valued allies are in position to withhold the benefits provided by the collective action, namely the alliance's viability and the ally's credibility (Ringsmose, 2010: 330–31). Allies will thus join US-led coalitions and make a meaningful commitment to a multinational operation in order to strengthen unity among their most valued allies or to avoid being marginalized. This means sharing the risks and costs associated with the provision of combat troops to coalition operations (Cimbala and Forster, 2010: 24). We therefore expect Canada to commit combat forces to US-led coalition operations to strengthen unity among its most valued transatlantic allies and bolster its credibility as a reliable ally.

Government ideology

Domestic politics also affect participation in multinational military operations. Scholarship on democratic military involvement expects states' willingness to take part in combat operations to vary according to governing parties' ideological orientations. Indeed, right and left parties hold different values with regard to the use of force and differ on the issue of war involvement. Right parties hold more "pro-military" beliefs, including support for increasing defence expenditures and for military interventions overseas; left parties hold more "pro-peace" beliefs, including support for reductions in the size and scope of militaries and the favouring of diplomacy over force (Klingemann et al., 1994; Budge and Klingemann, 2001). Right parties have thus been found more likely than left parties to initiate and be involved in armed conflicts (Palmer et al., 2004; Arena and Palmer, 2009). This tendency is the result of parties seeking to adopt foreign policies consistent with the preferences of their supporters (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson, 1995). Right-oriented voters have indeed been found more inclined toward defence spending and more prone to adopt a militant attitude in security matters, whereas left-leaning voters tend to be less disposed to military expenditures and hold more cooperative attitudes toward international affairs (Eichenberg, 1989).³ We therefore expect Canadian left-oriented governments to oppose taking part in US-led combat operations and expect Canadian right-oriented governments to support the provision of combat forces.

To measure government ideology, we draw on the extensive research of the Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP) used by scholarship on democratic military involvement (Mello, 2014; Haesebrouck, 2017, 2018a).⁴ The CMP records political parties' election programs based on the salience of policy categories and classifies them on a right-left score (RILE). Categories are associated with positions traditionally emphasized by left parties (for example, welfare state, antimilitarism) and right parties (for example, free enterprise, militarism). The RILE scale is constructed by subtracting the percentage of the total statements of an election program that are grouped in the right categories from the percentage grouped in the left category. The variable ranges from -100 (extreme left-wing party) to 100 (extreme right-wing party), with centre parties taking values closer to zero. Based on the CMP data, Chrétien's Liberal governments were first (1997–2000) right-oriented (RILE score of 6.3), then (2000–2004) left-oriented (RILE score of -12.2); Martin's Liberal government (2004–2006) was left-oriented (RILE score of -12.2); and Harper's Conservative governments (2006–2015) were right-oriented (RILE scores of 16.2, 9.1 and 26.3).⁵

Mobilized public opposition

Scholarship on democratic peace theory highlights two sets of domestic factors shaping the level of government autonomy. First are institutional constraints. The greater authority that governments have regarding the use of force, the more likely they are to implement their preferred policy choices. Presidential and majoritarian single-party parliamentary governments are found to use force less restrictively than coalition governments, in part because they enjoy greater

decision-making leeway (Auerswald, 2000). Minority governments are also found to be less likely than majority governments to initiate international conflicts (Ireland and Gartner, 2001). Government autonomy may furthermore be restricted by national legislatures having constitutionally defined veto powers pertaining to the use of force (Mello, 2014: 32–34).

These institutional factors are useful for cross-national comparisons but prove of lesser value for within-case analysis. Indeed, there have been no changes to Canada's Constitution or parliamentary war powers that can explain variations in its intervention choices. The Canadian governments investigated were all composed of single-party cabinets holding the exclusive authority to use military force abroad (Lagassé, 2016). In terms of democratic institutional setting, the Martin (2004–2006) and Harper (2006–2011) minority governments could have been expected to use force more restrictively, but Auerswald and Saideman (2014) found no supporting evidence to that effect with regard to the wars in Afghanistan and Libya.

A second set of constraints consists in the fear of electoral punishment. In “winner takes all” systems such as Canada's Westminster regime, the main parties are incentivized toward vote-seeking strategies since gaining the most seats is key to holding office and controlling policy (Lagassé and Saideman, 2017: 124). A government's capacity to implement its preferred foreign policy choices may thus be impeded by the need to win votes in the next election. Securing the support of a party's core constituency and pivotal voters thus represents an important policy concern (Binzer Hobolt and Klemmensen, 2008: 330). Elections, in turn, represent an opportunity for opposition leaders to propose alternative foreign policies and to mobilize public dissent over the government's policy choices (Dieterich et al., 2015: 99). As a result, Canadian governments' willingness to commit combat troops to US-led coalition operations may be constrained by a politically mobilized public opposition (Massie and Zyla, 2018: 327). The latter involves rival parties opposing the governing party's decision to commit combat forces because a majority of the public opposes the use of military force. In this case, the fear of electoral punishment is expected to outweigh the benefits of taking part in US-led coalition operations. We therefore expect Canadian governments to decline committing combat forces if rival parties mobilize public dissent against participation in a US-led coalition operation.

Multicausal framework

The pattern of Canadian participation in US-led combat operations is expected to result from a multicausal interplay of international and domestic conditions. Four causal pathways may—individually or in combination—lead to war participation: 1) a threat to national security interests, 2) approval by the UNSC or NATO, 3) valuing Canada's multilateral alliance, and 4) a right-leaning government. Conversely, irrespective of these conditions, a mobilized public opposition is expected to be sufficient for non-combat participation in US-led coalitions.

This framework is tested with a structured and focused comparison (George and Bennett, 2005: 67–72) of Canadian decisions to take part in US-led wars in Kosovo, Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya and against ISIS. These cases were selected because they represent the most recent multinational wars led by the United States. Space

permitting, additional cases could have been examined, such as the wars in Korea, Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. While not exhaustive, the five wars under examination are nevertheless sufficient to allow for cross-cases comparison but not too numerous to imperil detailed analysis of specific cases.

The focus on the decision to provide combat forces restricts the analysis to expeditionary warfare involving significant risks and costs for coalition contributors (Haesebrouck, 2017: 2244). For lack of space, the article focuses on instances of war initiation, as opposed to mission extension or termination. This leads to six decisions under scrutiny: the Chrétien government's decisions to take part in airstrikes in Kosovo in 1999, to deploy combat troops to Kandahar in 2002 and to not take part in the invasion of Iraq in 2003; the Martin government's decision to deploy combat troops to Kandahar in 2005; and the Harper government's decisions to take part in airstrikes in Libya in 2011, as well as against ISIS in Iraq in 2014 and Syria in 2015. [Table 1](#) summarizes the comparison's main findings.

The War in Kosovo

The Chrétien government committed eighteen CF-18 fighter-bombers to NATO's Operation Allied Force against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), after Serbian president Slobodan Milošević refused to comply with NATO's request to stop the repression of the Albanian population in Kosovo. Canada was one of nine NATO allies to take part in combat operations against the FRY. It deployed the sixth largest air contingent, flew 10 per cent of all strike sorties, and carried 4 per cent of the coalition airstrikes against Yugoslav targets (Haglund and Sens, 2000: 195; Mello, 2014: 77; Massie and Brizic, 2014: 24).

According to Prime Minister Chrétien, three motivations led his government to take part in the war: "our values as Canadians, our national interest in a stable and secure Europe and our obligations as a founding member of NATO" (Canada, 1999: 13,574). However, scholars contend that humanitarian motives proved more important than security interests (Nossal and Roussel, 2000: 185). True, preventing regional insecurity in Europe was part of the government's official justifications, and the UNSC determined the humanitarian situation in Kosovo to be a threat to regional peace and security. But the conflict did not pose a direct threat to Canada's national security. Canadian territory, its citizens and its economy were neither exposed to the regional instability created by ethnic cleansing in Kosovo nor directly affected by the flow of refugees. Security considerations were marginal compared to the perceived moral imperative to intervene to safeguard the human rights of Kosovar Albanians threatened by Serbian forces, especially after the massacre at Račak (Manulak, 2011: 104). As Paul Heinbecker (1999: 21) put it, "The war against Serbia was a war of values."

The legitimacy of the war was indeed an important factor shaping the government's decision to take part in combat operations. According to Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, "The decision to act was not motivated by a military threat to Alliance territory, but by an affront to Alliance values and a belief ... that human security matters" (quoted in Nossal and Roussel, 2000: 193). Canadian officials attempted several diplomatic initiatives aimed at securing a UNSC resolution explicitly authorizing NATO to use force against the Milošević regime but were

Table 1 Summary of Findings

Government	War	Threat (1)	Multilateral legitimacy (2)	Alliance value (3)	Government ideology (4)	Mobilized public opposition (5)	Combat participation	Causal paths
Chrétien	Kosovo	No	Yes	Yes	Right	No	Yes	2-3-4
Chrétien	Iraq	No	No	No	Left	No	No	2-3-4
Chrétien	Afghanistan	Yes	Yes	Yes	Left	No	Yes	1-2-3
Martin	Afghanistan	No	Yes	Yes	Left	No	Yes	2-3
Harper	Libya	No	Yes	Yes	Right	No	Yes	2-3-4
Harper	ISIS	Yes	No	Yes	Right	No	Yes	1-3-4

Note: The most potent conditions for war (non-)participation are in bold.

frustrated by Russian intransigence (Heinbecker, 1999: 21). While the Chrétien government would have preferred a UN mandate, it was willing to consider military action without it. Ottawa decided to circumvent the UNSC because it feared that a formal Russian veto might encourage the defection of hesitant allies like Italy and Greece and jeopardize NATO unity (Heinbecker, 1999: 21; von Riekhoff, 2002: 92). The dominant interpretation was that the humanitarian crisis, combined with the fact that the FRY was in clear violation of several UNSC resolutions, provided sufficient justification for military action even without explicit UN approval (Heinbecker and McRae, 2001: 123–24). In short, the use of force was deemed illegal but not illegitimate (von Riekhoff, 2002: 93).

Alliance value also motivated Canada to go to war. Far from being forced into the conflict, the Canadian government was enthusiastic about taking part in NATO's airstrike campaign. It did not merely follow allies; it helped forge consensus on the necessity to use force and involved itself in the war with alacrity (Manulak, 2009: 571, 573). The Chrétien government willingly delegated its decision making regarding the use of force to NATO's North Atlantic Council (Nossal and Roussel, 2000: 189). As early as May 1998, Ottawa agreed to NATO's war plans; it deployed its first fighter-bombers to Italy in June 1998 and Canada's national defence minister then declared that Canada would take part in coalition airstrikes should NATO decide to use military force. The Canadian government confirmed its stance during a parliamentary debate five months prior to the launching of the airstrikes and placed its CF-18s under NATO's operational control (Massie and Brizic, 2014: 22). Canada's combat participation in the war was perceived as necessary to preserve alliance solidarity, ensure the viability of NATO as a security organization and enhance Canada's reputation as a reliable ally (Nossal and Roussel, 2000: 187). Indeed, following the collapse of the diplomatic efforts, the Canadian cabinet formally decided on a "heavy" contribution to the war, which exceeded NATO's force requirements, in order to gain diplomatic leverage and buttress the alliance's resolve (Manulak, 2011: 63). As one former senior military official contended, Canada's contribution represented "a political statement that Canada was a key player in the NATO context of the Kosovo campaign... . It put us in the top 3–5 in terms of allied aircraft in theatre" (quoted in Manulak, 2011: 63). Furthermore, Canada was one of the few allies to openly contemplate a ground offensive against the Milošević regime (Heinbecker and McRae, 2001: 128, 130).

Domestic politics do not seem to have played an important role in Chrétien's right-oriented government's decision to take part in the US-led coalition operation. The right-wing Reform party, the separatist Bloc Québécois (BQ), the centre-right Progressive Conservative party (PCP) and the left-wing New Democratic party (NDP) all supported Canada's participation in combat operations. Only the last changed its position three weeks into the war, calling for the end of the bombing and a return to negotiations (Rathbun, 2004: 197). This broad partisan consensus was reflected in the polls, with a strong majority of Canadians supporting the bombing campaign throughout the conflict (Nossal and Roussel, 2000: 191). Thus, while alliance value and humanitarian considerations motivated the Chrétien government to take part in the war in Kosovo, the domestic political environment offered a permissive opportunity for military action.

The Invasion of Iraq

On March 17, 2003, for the first time in history and to the bewilderment of many, Canada turned down American and British requests for military assistance for the invasion of Iraq. The Chrétien government, which had initially planned to offer a battle group in the fall of 2002, compensated for its non-participation by offering up to 2,000 ground troops to Kabul, which freed up US military resources for the war in Iraq. Furthermore, Canada maintained its naval leadership contribution to the international flotilla patrolling the Persian Gulf as part of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), as well as close to 200 troops on exchange programs with US, Australian and British units (Jockel and Massie, 2017: 167, 177). Canada also offered up to 30 instructors to the NATO training mission of the Iraqi military in Jordan following the fall of Saddam Hussein.

While Ottawa supported the disarmament of the Iraqi regime from weapons of mass destruction, Prime Minister Chrétien (2008: 309) did not perceive Iraq as a threat to Canada's national security. He felt the evidence of weapons of mass destruction to be "very shaky." Nonetheless, and despite having no seat at the UNSC, Canadian officials were very active in New York trying to delay the invasion until UN weapons inspector Hans Blix finished his work. Canada's UN ambassador was instructed to find a compromise acceptable to UNSC members. Considerable diplomatic capital was expended on trying to reach common ground between the pro-war and pro-diplomacy camps, notably by setting benchmarks and deadlines for Iraqi compliance to UN resolution 1441, but to no avail. Clearly, the Chrétien government valued the multilateral legitimacy of having a formal UNSC resolution explicitly authorizing the use of force to disarm the Iraqi regime. As Chrétien (2008: 309) reputedly put it to President Bush: "If you get a resolution, George, don't be worried, I'll be with you."

Nevertheless, alliance value seems to have overridden multilateral legitimacy. As then foreign minister Bill Graham (2016: 274) explained: "The government left the door slightly ajar to the possibility of Canada going into Iraq, even without another UN resolution. The key would be nearly unanimous support at the Security Council—including the support of our traditional allies—but also, and critically, a clear threat from Iraq." Indeed, the Chrétien government contemplated the idea of taking part in the war in the case of a "capricious" veto by one or two "outliers," such as Russia during the Kosovo crisis (Graham, 2016: 274, 277). Ottawa's rationale was to "avoid a fracture within NATO" like the one that had erupted during the Suez crisis between Canada's traditional allies: the United States, the United Kingdom and France (Graham, 2016: 278). The idea of Canada taking part in an "Anglo-Saxon" coalition of the willing "was a political non-starter," according to Graham (2016: 289). But had France abstained on a UN resolution authorizing the use of force, "that would tip the scale in favour of Canada's participation" (Graham, 2016: 291). As such, Canada tried to play a mediating role between France and the United States in order to preserve transatlantic unity, but failure to reach common ground resulted in Canada's decision to not take part in the invasion of Iraq.

The domestic political environment was relatively permissive for the left-leaning Chrétien government. On the one hand, its right-wing rival, the Canadian Alliance

led by Stephen Harper, supported Canada's participation to the invasion of Iraq and intended to make it a salient issue in the upcoming election. On the other, public opinion was on Chrétien's side. In the lead-up to the war, an average of only 30 per cent of Canadians expressed support for Canadian military participation in the Anglo-American war against Iraq, with a peak of 40 per cent in September 2002 (Massie, 2008: 37). While support for Canadian military participation surged to 51 per cent immediately following the invasion, approval of Chrétien's decision rose as the war lingered on. Indeed, Harper's Conservatives lost the 2004 election to the Liberals in part because of their pro-war stance on Iraq (Gidengil et al., 2012: 90). Public opposition to Chrétien's stance was thus politically mobilized but not to the extent of representing an electoral liability for the left-oriented Liberal government, especially given the overwhelming anti-war sentiment in Quebec. As Chrétien quipped, US criticisms of Canada's decision were "giving oxygen to the [Canadian] Alliance, and this is a good thing. We need to keep them alive" (quoted in Graham, 2016: 313).

The War in Afghanistan

Canada contributed combat forces to two phases of the war in Afghanistan: the US-led OEF in 2001–2002 and NATO's expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to Kandahar from 2005 to 2011.⁶ Canada's contribution to OEF was the third largest military contingent, trailing only American and British contributions, with the provision of ground troops, special forces and support aircraft, for a total of 1,100 troops (Mello, 2014: 116). Canada's contribution to ISAF's expansion in Kandahar was also among the largest military contingent deployed (Zyla, 2012: 111), with the provision of a battle group, special forces, a Provincial Reconstruction Team and a brigade headquarters.

In addition to the 24 Canadians that died in the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban regime posed a threat to Canada's national security interests by jeopardizing the free flow of trade and people across the border with the United States. Indeed, Canada's economic vulnerability was severely exposed by increased security restrictions at the US-Canadian border following 9/11, resulting in a loss of billions of dollars' worth of trade (von Hlatky, 2013: 94). The Canadian government's primary objectives were therefore to keep its southern border open for trade and commerce, prevent any further delays at the border, and dispel doubts in the United States that Canada was not resolutely committed to fighting terrorism (Stein and Lang, 2007: 7; Zyla, 2012: 106, 113). National security concerns quickly evolved toward the larger goal of maintaining peace and security in Afghanistan after the fall of the Taliban regime and after new border agreements between Canada and the United States in December 2001.

In contrast with ISAF, OEF was not explicitly authorized by the UNSC. However, NATO invoked its Article 5—which states that an attack on one member is an attack on all—for the first time in its history on September 12, 2001, thereby lending legitimacy to the war on the grounds of self-defence. This satisfied Prime Minister Chrétien: "Not only was this a multilateral undertaking in keeping with our commitment to NATO, but it made sense because the fundamentalist

Taliban government was undoubtedly in league with Osama bin Laden and his terrorist training camps” (2008: 304).

While the deployment of about 40 members of the Canadian special forces in October 2001 contributed to the elimination of the threat posed by Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the decision to commit regular ground combat troops to Kandahar in 2002 was made “largely for Washington’s eyes” (Stein and Lang, 2007: 3). Indeed, alliance value outweighed any other motivation in Canada’s decision to take part in combat operations in Kandahar. A handful of special forces and a naval deployment were considered “not enough to show the Americans that we were with them in their moment of crisis” (Stein and Lang, 2007: 14). Ottawa deemed that the provision of ground combat troops would have the required “political cachet” to impress Washington (Lerhe, 2012: 160). As expected, the left-oriented Chrétien government would have preferred to deploy these troops to the UN-mandated ISAF operation, which focused on a non-combat stabilization and humanitarian role in Kabul. But the Europeans that were leading the mission did not welcome Canada’s offer of a battalion (Stein and Lang, 2007: 16–17). Ottawa turned to the only remaining option: OEF, under US command. The Cabinet quickly approved the deployment of a battle group and transport aircraft to Kandahar, with the hope of improving Canada’s stature in Washington (Stein and Lang, 2007: 18).

Alliance value also motivated the Martin government’s decision to redeploy Canadian combat troops to Kandahar. The war in Afghanistan was not Martin’s foreign policy priority; he would have preferred a leading role for Canada in a peace operation in Sudan, Haiti or in the Middle East (Martin, 2009: 392). But Martin was concerned with Canada’s alliance credibility (Stein and Lang, 2007: 192). “As members of NATO,” he reasoned, “we had a moral if not a legal duty to support them” (2009: 391). The Martin government decided in December 2004 to commit to a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Kandahar because it was the only available location where Canadians could partner with reliable allies such as the British and the Dutch (Willis, 2011: 60; Graham, 2016: 380). The decision to commit combat troops came months later, in May 2005. The newly appointed chief of defence staff, General Rick Hillier, persuaded Martin of the value of a robust one-year military commitment to Kandahar (Stein and Lang, 2007: 191; Martin, 2009: 394). In the then national defence minister’s words, it “would have the benefit of raising Canada’s standing with the Americans and in NATO, as well as meeting [Afghan President] Karzai’s goal to supplement the American flag in the south with a NATO one” (Graham, 2016: 382). Indeed, there was a perceived need that Canada had “to do something significant for Washington—something that the Pentagon really valued—to compensate for the refusal to participate in Ballistic Missile Defence” (Stein and Lang, 2007: 181).

The Chrétien and Martin governments faced very permissive domestic environments. Both received the backing of all opposition parties but the left-wing NDP in their decision to commit combat troops to Kandahar. This was reflective of public opinion, which overwhelmingly supported Canada’s war effort between 2001 and 2005 (Boucher and Nossal, 2017: 155). The war was thus not an important issue during the federal elections held in 2004 and 2006 (Gidengil et al., 2012: 88–91). This may be attributable to the limited commitment of Canadian combat troops,

which were deployed for six months in 2002 and for a one-year assignment in 2006, as well as to the relatively few casualties suffered by Canadian troops at the time when the initial deployment decisions were made (Boucher and Nossal, 2017: 183). Furthermore, both left-oriented Liberal governments would have preferred to commit troops to a UN peace operation in order to avoid being seen as too close to the Americans (Stein and Lang, 2007: 16, 189) but were drawn into a US-led operation due to the lack of alternatives.

The War in Libya

Canada was one of eight NATO allies to take part in airstrike missions against Gaddafi's Libyan security forces in March 2011, following the military repression of the popular uprising against its regime. Canada provided the fifth largest military contingent, committing seven fighter-bombers, a frigate, two air-refuelling tankers and two reconnaissance aircrafts. Canadian aircrafts flew close to 6 per cent of the total sorties and 9.8 per cent of the airstrikes with only 5.5 per cent of the aircrafts deployed by the coalition (Paquin et al., 2017: 198).

Canada's sizable commitment was not because of threats to national security. Only proximate countries such as Italy feared a large refugee influx (Haesebrouck, 2017: 2251). Echoing its key allies' message, the Harper government justified Canada's military intervention as a moral obligation to end the atrocities being committed by the Gaddafi regime against its own people (Nossal, 2013). Indeed, alliance value and multilateral legitimacy significantly shaped Canada's decision making. On the level of diplomacy, the Harper government followed its allies in requesting a cease-fire, the removal of Gaddafi from power and an international investigation into war crimes (Paquin et al., 2017: 192). Ottawa was among the first to endorse regime change but did so only after the military intervention had begun. Before then, the Harper government remained coy as to Canadian intentions. Unexpectedly from a right-leaning government, the Harper Conservatives refused to state whether military action was necessary while Paris and London were publicly contemplating airstrikes. Ottawa instead argued for the necessity of securing a UN resolution mandating military action, which meant obtaining US support (Blanchfield, 2011). President Obama came around to the idea of combat operations on March 15 and two days later secured a UN resolution authorizing the use of force. On March 18, Prime Minister Harper agreed to deploy fighter-bombers to enforce a no-fly zone in Libya, and they flew their first mission on March 21. The prime minister emphasized not only the transatlantic consensus on the necessity for military action but also Canada's diplomatic work toward securing a UN resolution and the moral obligation to act swiftly (Harper, 2011).

The right-wing Conservatives' unexpected reluctance to support war until the adoption of a UN resolution may have owed to the fear of electoral punishment. The Conservatives lost the confidence of the House of Commons a few days after the beginning of the war and an election was held in May 2011, which returned the Conservatives with a majority government. Opposition parties unanimously supported Canada's participation in the war, emphasizing the Responsibility to Protect norm and UN Resolution 1973 to support their stance

(Nossal, 2013: 120). Only during the third debate on the Libyan campaign, held in September 2011, did the left-wing NDP call for the withdrawal of Canadian combat forces (Canada, 2011). But while public opposition to the war was relatively low (30%) at the beginning of the war, it grew as the war went on, especially among Liberal and NDP supporters (Ipsos, 2011; Abacus, 2011). Thus, the right-wing Conservatives may have adopted an initially cautious stance on the war in order to prevent an electoral backlash, but the Liberals' support and the approval of the UNSC averted any electoral costs.

The War against ISIS

Canada was one of nine countries to take part in airstrikes against ISIS in Iraq and was the first Western state other than the United States to conduct strikes in Syria in April 2015. Ottawa first deployed 69 special forces soldiers in September 2014 to train and assist Kurdish peshmergas to fight ISIS and, a month later, deployed a refuelling and two surveillance aircraft as well as six CF-18 fighter-bombers. Canada's military contribution was relatively smaller in scale, providing the twelfth largest contingent of ground troops but the fourth largest in terms of aircrafts (McInnis, 2015). Canada carried less than 2 per cent of the airstrikes in Iraq, which amounted to the eighth largest combat contribution of the coalition.⁷ While Canada's contingent was relatively small, it deployed valuable aircraft and special forces operating close to the frontlines of the war.

Canada was expressly targeted by the Islamic State. There were about 130 Canadian foreign fighters involved in ISIS, but Canada's military contribution came before ISIS-inspired attacks were committed in the country (Saideman, 2016: 296-97). Prime Minister Harper insisted that the Islamic State was posing a threat to Canada but acknowledged a significant caveat: "While the mission is evidently necessary, we do not have to be the ones doing it because others will" (Canada, 2014: 8226). Rather, Harper emphasized alliance solidarity to explain his government's military proactiveness: "The position the government of Canada has generally taken in those kinds of situations is where there is a common threat to ourselves and our allies, and where particularly our major allies—the United States and also the United Kingdom, France—are willing to act, the general position of the government of Canada is that we're also willing to act and prepared to play our full part" (Clark and Chase, 2014).

Immediately after President Obama's decision to order targeted airstrikes in Iraq, Canada's foreign affairs minister declared his government's support and offered assistance (Wingrove, 2014). At a NATO summit in September 2014, Canada was one of 10 Western allies to support the creation of an anti-ISIS coalition of the willing and the first country to formally commit troops alongside US forces. After having signalled its willingness to provide additional military assistance, Ottawa received a formal US request for combat forces in late September (von Hlatky and Massie, 2019: 109). A few days later, Harper announced that Canada would take part in air combat operations against ISIS in Iraq. He explained his government's decision by emphasizing threats to both national security and alliance solidarity: "ISIS presents a very real threat. It is serious and explicitly directed against our country, among others... . When our allies recognize and respond to a

threat that would also harm us, we Canadians do not stand on the sidelines. We do our part” (Canada, 2014: 8228).

The anti-ISIS coalition was not mandated by the UNSC, and NATO only became party to the conflict in 2017. However, the Iraqi regime formally requested defence assistance to the United Nations in September 2014. On that ground, the Harper government initially restricted its airstrike contribution to Iraq after notifying the UN that it was acting in Iraq’s defence (Chase, 2015). Consistent with his party’s right-wing ideology, Harper extended Canada’s airstrike operations to eastern Syria in March 2015, following a US request for military assistance, with the objective of targeting ISIS’s “power base” in Syria (Canada, 2015: 12208). NDP’s Thomas Mulcair criticized the absence of a UNSC resolution authorizing combat operations in both Iraq and Syria, while Justin Trudeau emphasized that strikes in Syria would help consolidate its brutal regime (Canada, 2015: 12210–12).

Both the Harper Conservatives’ support for combat operations and the opposition parties’ disapproval were carved out with an eye to voters. The Liberals and the NDP hoped that a war-weary electorate would reward them in the upcoming election, while the Conservatives wished to present themselves as the leading party on national security issues (Pelletier and Massie, 2019). There was, however, little public opposition to mobilize against the government’s position. Polls show that public support for Canadian combat operations surged from 51 per cent prior to Harper’s decision to 66 per cent afterward and that it extended beyond the Conservatives’ base. Approval grew among Conservative (from 64% to 88%), Liberal (54% to 61%), NDP (45% to 54%), Green (39% to 58%) and BQ (38% to 56%) voters (Anderson and Coletto, 2014; Forum Poll, 2014). Thus, the Harper government was not constrained by a politically mobilized public opinion; it rather attempted to use the war against Islamic terrorism to bolster its electoral fortunes (Clark, 2015).

Conclusion

Building on extant scholarship, this article assessed four causal pathways for Canadian war participation: 1) a threat to national security interests, 2) approval by the UNSC or NATO, 3) valuing Canada’s multilateral alliance, and 4) a right-leaning government. In addition, a mobilized public opposition was expected to lead to non-combat participation. The focused and structured comparison of six decisions to commit Canadian combat troops to US-led coalition operations yields support to several causal pathways (see Table 1). However, the most consistent and potent explanation of Canadian war participation consists in alliance value. The desire to strengthen solidarity among its valued transatlantic allies, as well as the need to buttress Canada’s military credibility, significantly shaped the decisions to go to war in Kosovo, Afghanistan, Libya and against ISIS, as well as the refusal to take part in the invasion of Iraq. Future research would do well to further examine the causal mechanisms underlying alliance value and to test its potency across additional case studies.

Threats to national security interests were perceived in the initial phase of the Afghan war, as well as from ISIS, but they were not found to be a necessary condition for Canadian war participation. The threats posed by Al-Qaeda and ISIS were not believed to justify the commitment of Canadian combat troops since

the threat could have been eliminated without Canada's help. In contrast, multilateral legitimacy mattered significantly during the wars in Kosovo, Iraq and Libya. In the first two cases, Canadian officials spent considerable diplomatic capital to secure the authorization to use force by the UNSC. But only during the war in Libya was a UN mandate deemed necessary to commit Canadian combat troops overseas. Yet it remains unclear how Canada would have reacted had the Obama administration supported military action against the Gadhafi regime without the explicit authorization of the UNSC.

In terms of domestic politics, government ideology yields inconsistent results. As expected, the left-leaning Chrétien government consolidated its electoral base by declining to join the Anglo-American coalition against Saddam Hussein, while the Harper Conservatives hoped to be rewarded in the polls for being the only party willing to take on the Islamic State. Unexpectedly, however, two left-oriented governments deployed combat troops to Kandahar, and the right-wing Harper government was prudent toward the use of force in Libya. Furthermore, the cross-partisan consensus witnessed during the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Libya defies theoretical expectations. Future research would do well to investigate what accounts for these unexpected positions taken by Canada's political parties on the use of military force. In any case, the expectation that a mobilized public opposition to a war would prevent a government to commit combat troops garnered no empirical support. In most cases, Canadians were found favourable to the deployment of Canadian combat troops abroad. This, as well, warrants additional research.

Notes

- 1 Wars are defined as armed conflicts where there are at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in one calendar year. See Uppsala Conflict Data Program, "Definitions," <http://pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/definitions/>.
- 2 Due to space limitation, we do not investigate the impact of historical lessons or path dependency (see Baltrusaitis, 2010: 16–18; Saideman, 2016: 293–94).
- 3 Rathbun (2004, 2007) proposes an alternative understanding of the ideology hypothesis, which takes into consideration the qualitative characteristics of military operations. He contends that right parties hold more "hierarchy" values, which make them prone to support the use of force for security considerations. In turn, left parties hold more "community" values, which make them prone to support humanitarian military interventions, rather than to forgo military interventions altogether. However, Mello's (2014) study of European and North American participation in the wars in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq found mixed support for this revised partisan hypothesis. This article thus assesses the conventional ideology hypothesis.
- 4 Stéfanie von Hlatky and Justin Massie (2019) argue for qualitative assessments of government ideology, but for lack of space, we rely here instead on a widely used method to compare political party ideology.
- 5 While some may object to the very idea that Canadian political parties hold distinct ideologies, Cochrane's (2010, 2015) work makes clear that Canada's left-right ideological divide is both wide and persisting.
- 6 Canada also contributed to the UN-endorsed ISAF peace support operation initially limited to the Kabul area in 2003 and 2004 and to NATO's training mission from 2011 to 2014 in a non-combat capacity.
- 7 Based on the data from <http://airwars.org/data/> (accessed June 28, 2018).

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