

INTRODUCTION TO FORMING COALITIONS OF THE SELF-INTERESTED

In this context, “coalitions of the self-interested” refer to groups of political actors in which the interests of the group are formed prior to the formation of the coalitions. That is, at least some interests within the groups are common but are not fully internalised in the sense that they were not developed through a binding creed or doctrine. This contrasts, for example, with self interests that emerged from imperialism in the 18th through to the middle of the 20th century, since such interests were either latent or non-existent until sufficient central control, including (and perhaps especially) military force, was made manifest by specific nation-states. As noted in the article by Akira Iriye (the first article cited in this sub-section), imperialism succeeded in containing tensions that developed within large multiethnic populations until World War II, during which the “empires committed collective suicide”. Akira also notes that the emergence of anti-imperialism was a major force in twentieth-century world affairs.

The principal characteristic of a successful coalition is in its formation as an entity that grows organically from the centre rather than as an appendage to an external agent (or agents) that may have ancillary agenda items. This implies that the managerial structure of the desired coalition is set to achieve a desired amount of common objectives rather than a maximum amount of ancillary objectives. Many analysts would suggest that such a structure is difficult to specify at the outset so success will depend to a large extent on “trial and error”.

Each member of a coalition trades a certain amount of autonomy for the utility derived through joint action or bargaining. Generally coalitions with a greater amount of common objectives will be more stable than those with only a few such objectives. Additionally, the possibility of achieving binding agreements among members, at least eventually, will normally strengthen a coalition. Beyond that, however, the structure of coalitions cannot be well defined. This problem has been examined at length with game theory¹ without, as yet, a successful resolution. We must therefore continue to rely on case-study examples.

¹ This literature is extensive and has become highly specialised. A possible place to start, for those who are interested, is a set of slides made available on the internet by the University of Calgary by Kate Mason at <http://www.cpsc.ucalgary.ca/~denzinge/courses/609-winter2011/slides/11-coalitions-handout.pdf>.