



What Trump got right about U.S. allies

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Many of Donald Trump's most disagreeable policy positions are also those that garner the most media attention. Occasionally, though, his opinions also reflect basic common sense.

Consider his recent argument that Washington's prosperous allies in Asia and Europe don't pay enough in return for U.S. defense guarantees. Defenders of the status quo contend it is in America's interest to subsidize its allies' security. The Washington Post's Jackson Diehl complained that Trump's views would "maroon" Eastern Europeans still "on their way to Western integration." Without the U.S.-Japan alliance, argued Ritsumeikan University's Kunihiko Miyake, "the United States will cease to be a Pacific power."

Really? America has the globe's largest economy, greatest military, and most dominant culture. Why would it cease to be a Pacific power by insisting that its allies do more to secure their own military defense?

As for Europe, why can't the European Union integrate former Soviet states into the West? Since the European Union has a larger collective GDP and population than America, shouldn't Europeans address European security issues?

Advocates of the status quo also argue that U.S. allies contribute to U.S. basing costs. South Korea and Japan "pay a lot," said Brad Glosserman of the Pacific Forum CSIS of Hawaii. "For many years Japan has been considered the gold standard for host nation support."

That's true, but irrelevant. The fact that countries defended by America help cover Washington's cost of stationing U.S. troops is notable only because allied free- (or cheap-) riding has been so shameless for so long. NATO always stood for North America and the Others. Even when it mattered most during the Cold War, European allies failed to fulfill their promises to spend more on the military.

For decades, meanwhile, Japan pointed to the U.S.-imposed "peace constitution" as reason not to do more on its own behalf as the Red Navy patrolled the Pacific and Maoism ravaged the People's Republic of China. South Korea long used its military as much to suppress domestic political opposition as to defend against Kim Il Sung's North Korea.

The most important cost for America is that of creating the forces deployed, wherever they are stationed. Every security commitment requires additional personnel and equipment. America's oversized military budget reflects America's many formal and possible security guarantees: 27 fellow NATO members, alliance wannabes Georgia and Ukraine, various East Asian allies and friends, several Middle Eastern and Central Asian nations.

Much of the handwringing about the prospect of reducing U.S. military commitments around the world ignores our remarkably secure position. America faces no serious existential threat. Oceans east and west, and stable neighbors south and north offer protection afforded virtually no other country. Washington's conventional military outranges that of every other state.

Only Russia possesses a comparable nuclear force. But Moscow has no interest in a war with the United States and would anyway be destroyed in response to any attack. Terrorism remains a concern, but is more a response to U.S. intervention than a justification for it. Despite all the political chatter about living in a "dangerous world," America dominates the globe more than any previous power, able to defeat any conceivable adversary or coalition of adversaries and allied with every major industrial power save China and Russia.

In addition, Washington accounts for roughly 40% of the globe's military outlays to project power on behalf of other states. Some of that is for nation-building, most recently in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although such efforts spike military outlays, the bulk of America's military spending goes for the large, permanent force structure necessary to support multiple alliances. That is, to protect Asian and European nations that today are well able to protect themselves.

Providing a defense shield for war-ravaged nations originally made sense: America feared Soviet domination of Eurasia, Japan was uniquely vulnerable after its defeat and the Republic of Korea had demonstrated its inability to stand against a heavily armed North Korea backed by the Soviet Union and China.

But those worlds have passed away.

The Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact are gone. Maoist China is gone. The threats represented by Russia and post-Mao China are far more limited: Both have much to lose in a general war; their military activities are regionally bounded; their aggressiveness has created widespread opposition from their neighbors. North Korea threatens American allies rather than America.

Europe not only has a larger economy and population than America, but a multiple of Russia's. Japan long had the world's second largest economy, and even now comes in at number three. South Korea has upwards of 40 times the North's GDP and twice the population.

In short, Washington should stop defending its prosperous, populous allies. Instead, they should pay for their own defense and confront future security threats as equals.

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