



# The Obama Administration's Member-less Coalition Against The Islamic State: What Good Are Allies Anyway?

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President Barack Obama launched a war which he won't call a war. He is fighting the Islamic State with a coalition without members. What, one wonders, are allies for?

Washington collects allies like most people collect Facebook friends. The more the merrier. It doesn't matter if the new "friends" enhance America's security. It doesn't even matter if they increase the risk of conflict for the U.S. Washington wants more allies.

The strongest fans of "more is better" believe the U.S. can never do enough for its helpless dependents around the globe. Earlier this year former Sen. Joseph Lieberman complained that the U.S. hadn't "supported our natural allies," had "sent a message of uncertainty" making some of them "more anxious" and "infuriating" others. Indeed, these nations "no longer have confidence that we will protect them." Uh, so what? Why aren't they defending themselves?

Columnist Michael Barone argued that "The U.S. is abandoning friends." *Foreign Policy's* Kori Schake claimed that the administration is "making America's allies homesick for the administration of George W. Bush." The U.S. "is always frustrating to deal with," but "the president's supreme indifference" makes the problem worse, she added. Not, however, bad enough for these countries to put in a bit more effort and take over their own defense.

Most striking is how little America's allies do for the U.S. In the main, their view is that Washington's job is to defend them. Their job is to be defended by Washington. The idea that America might expect something else in return is considered to be, well, churlish.

For seven decades Washington faced down a nuclear-armed power—the Soviet Union and then Russia—to protect the Europeans. Until 2001 the Europeans did essentially nothing for the U.S. They routinely refused to increase their military outlays; they built a natural gas pipeline to their presumed enemy, the U.S.S.R. The Europeans also interfered with other American

objectives, such as ousting communist governments in Cuba and Nicaragua, and refused to allow overflight for U.S. planes to strike Libya, for instance. The Europeans were not necessarily wrong in the positions that they took, but they weren't very good allies—for the U.S., at least.

To their credit, several of the European states contributed to America's efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Neither invading the latter nor attempting to build a democratic central government in the former made policy sense, but some Europeans actually sacrificed on behalf of a professed U.S. interest.

However, Washington quickly repaid the favor, underwriting Britain's and France's war in Libya. This conflict made no sense for America. With the Europeans even running out of missiles (to take on Moammar Qaddafi's military!) the U.S. became the essential partner in another war that yielded another disastrous failed state.

Now the Europeans want Washington to save Ukraine and "reassure" countries to the east. Exactly why that is necessary when the European Union has a larger GDP and population than America and roughly eight times the economic strength and three times the population as Russia is unclear. However, the U.S. is supposed to accept the possibility of a nuclear exchange to protect countries that are not vital to American security and whose neighbors could defend them.

With the U.S. now calling for assistance against ISIL, the continent has turned more frigid. No one seems interested in joining Washington's air war, even Great Britain. London offered only logistical assistance. Germany might help arm the Kurds. But when it comes to bombing America's new enemies America's old allies apparently "have other priorities," rather like Richard Cheney during the Vietnam War.

Washington's Asian friends are even less helpful. For decades Japan wouldn't aid U.S. forces, *even if they were defending Japan*. Tokyo certainly would do nothing to promote other U.S. priorities in Asia. And obviously not elsewhere in the world. That changed a little with Iraq, to which Japan send some personnel, though, bizarrely, they weren't allowed to defend themselves: the Australians and Dutch had to handle that duty. Such a deployment was hardly adequate recompense to America for protecting what long was the world's second-ranking economic power. Now Washington is expected to stare down the People's Republic of China to secure Tokyo's disputed claim to the Senkaku Islands. However, the administration apparently has not asked for any assistance in its "counter-terrorism" operation against the Islamic State. Presumably the answer would be no.

Similar is the case of South Korea. The U.S. defended the Republic of Korea during the Korean War and since then has maintained a "mutual" defense treaty and military garrison. Even as the South swept past North Korea economically America kept the ROK as a defense dependent. Seoul contributed detachments to America's Afghanistan and Iraq operations, a nice gesture, but little return for decades of protection from Pyongyang, an unpredictable regime steeped in brinkmanship which would not threaten America absent the latter's alliance with (meaning defense of) the South. The administration also doesn't appear to have suggested that Seoul add its weight to the anti-ISIL "coalition."

In contrast, Australia volunteered 600 troops and ten planes. That doesn't offer much reason for Washington to defend a wealthy nation which could do much more for itself and its region. However, at least Canberra is acting like a real ally.

What about allies in the Middle East? Turkey is a member of NATO, but apparently said no to participation in the new grand coalition and even to American use of Incirlik Air Base. This is the country which allowed Islamic State fighters free access to Syria and has far more at stake in ISIL's defeat than does America. Indeed, the Islamic State already has many Turks under arms and continues to recruit more; it has kidnapped Turkish diplomats and family members in Iraq and included Turkish territory on its target list. However, Ankara, too, "has other priorities" than assisting the U.S. in cleaning up this mess on Turkey's border.

What other ally will, well, act like an ally? Iraq's last prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, is more responsible for the rise of ISIL than anyone else, except, perhaps, George W. Bush, who ordered the counterproductive invasion of that nation. Baghdad also has the most at stake in overthrowing the Islamic State. The bilateral relationship is entirely one-sided, with the U.S. protecting a government which did much to destroy itself and harm its neighbors.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are little better. The Saudis long have subsidized virulent Wahhabi Islamist teaching around the world. Riyadh has underwritten radical insurgents in Syria. Almost certainly Saudi money has reached the Islamic State. Saudi Arabia's neighbors, most notably Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, also have played active, though not always positive, roles. Yet there are few nations more at risk from the Islamic State. However limited the group's military reach, its theological appeal is particularly threatening for what many see as licentious and rapacious apostate regimes. The Arab monarchies look to Washington for their defense—like in the first Gulf War, for instance—but so far have committed little to the battle against ISIL.

The administration claims that Arab states are lining up to join Washington in "taking more aggressive kinetic action," apparently including bombing the Islamic State. However, the administration won't give any names or detail any plans. Doing so would be premature, said a State Department official. Let's see what happens.

The U.S. gets little from its many alliances. Washington is expected to confront Russia, China, Iran, North Korea, the Islamic State, Syria, and anyone else who might misbehave to defend a host of Asian, European, and Middle Eastern nations. Few, if any, can be described as vital to U.S. security. America's traditional objective of preventing a hostile power from dominating Eurasia remains as important as ever, but today no one threatens to do so.

Equally important, most of these nations are capable of defending themselves. Yet America discourages them from doing more for themselves by promiscuously issuing security guarantees. Why spend money on the military when Washington will do it for you?

Even worse, setting tripwires risks having some of them go off. History is filled with cases where deterrence failed: consider a century ago when an assassination in Sarajevo, Bosnia set off a war that consumed Europe and ensnared Asia and North America. Multiple alliances acted

as transmission belts for rather than firebreaks to war. The same could easily happen today. Alas, the U.S. would find conflict with China or Russia far different than war with Serbia or Iraq.

Instead of adding allies, Washington should drop them. Instead of taking on broad, permanent defense obligations to other states, the U.S. should cooperate with other nations on issues of mutual interest. Instead of promiscuously intervening overseas, thereby creating new enemies and encouraging new terrorist attacks, American officials should treat bombing, invading, and occupying other countries as a last resort. Equally important, the U.S. should stop doing for other states what they can and should do for themselves.

These principles apply to the defense of Asia and Europe. They apply even more to Middle Eastern countries versus the Islamic State.

ISIL is evil, but until now, at least, has not been much interested in the U.S. The Islamic State wants to become a traditional government, ruling over a specific territory and population. America is not on its target list. Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Turkey are. The Sunni group despises Shia majority Iran. ISIL also views the Sunni Gulf States as enemies. Indeed, virtually no one in the region is not targeted by the Islamic State.

So far these countries have fallen short as allies in joining America to challenge ISIL. They are more likely to act for themselves, but only if they must, that is, they cannot rely on Washington to take on their problems as its own. In terms of the Islamic State the U.S. does not need allies. The U.S. needs self-interested nations determined to act on their own behalf.

The administration's new Middle Eastern war has all the makings of a disaster. The president is launching another attack by Christian America against Arab Muslims. He doesn't want to call the war a war. He gave the Islamic State advance notice of U.S. bombing, allowing the group to prepare. He put the U.S. in the middle of another bitter sectarian conflict. He is stepping up aid to Syrian rebels, which will weaken the Damascus government and increase the likelihood that ISIL will emerge victorious. He promised to eradicate a new Islamist force after failing to eliminate al-Qaeda, the target of American arms for 13 years. He is relieving a host of "allies" of their responsibility to act on their own behalf.

What could possibly go wrong with this approach?

There is much to criticize in the Obama administration's foreign policy. The non-war war against the Islamic State would be bad enough in the best circumstances. But relying on empty alliances for international assistance exacerbates the potential for failure. Washington should leave responsibility for dealing with the Islamist group to a coalition of the threatened. If those most at risk can't be bothered to use their abundant power, influence, and resources to protect themselves, they shouldn't expect Washington to help.

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