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Allies Are Not Like Facebook Friends: US Should Drop Useless and Dangerous Alliances

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If America ends up at war, it almost certainly will be on behalf of one ally or another. Washington collects allies like most people collect Facebook "friends." The vast majority of U.S. allies are security liabilities, tripwires for conflict and war.

Perhaps even worse, American officials constantly abase themselves, determined to reassure the very countries which the U.S. is defending at great cost and risk. Indeed, America's most hawkish politicians, who routinely posture like reincarnations of Winston Churchill, routinely talk of sacrificing U.S. lives, wealth, and security for the benefit of other nations. For instance, Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fl.) recently worried, "What ally around the world can feel safe in their alliance with us?" The more relevant question should be with what ally can America feel safe?

Instead of relentlessly collecting more international dependents, Washington policymakers should drop Allies In Name Only (AINOs). The U.S. should return to a more traditional standard for alliances: Join with other nations only when doing so advances American security. Alas, that rarely is the case today.

Indeed, contra the scare-mongering of hawkish politicians such as Sen. Rubio and his GOP compatriots, the strategic environment today is remarkably benign for the U.S. The world is messy, to be sure, but that's always been the case. The number of big conflicts is down. More important, America faces no hegemonic threat or peer competitor and is allied with every major industrialized state other than China and Russia.

All of Washington's recent wars have been over -- from America's standpoint -- unimportant, indeed, sometimes frivolous stakes. The Islamic State, Libya and Iraq were regional problems for U.S. allies with minimal impact on America. Iran and North Korea are ugly actors, but mostly for Washington's dependents. The two would face destruction if they attacked America. The latest crisis du jour, Yemen, worries Riyadh but is not even a speed bump for the globe's sole

superpower. Yet Washington now is involved in another sectarian proxy war through its totalitarian "ally" Saudi Arabia.

Terrorism remains a genuine threat, but falls far short of the sort of existential danger posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Worse, terrorism typically is a response to foreign intervention and occupation. Washington has inadvertently encouraged terrorism by backing authoritarian regimes, joining foreign conflicts, and creating enemies overseas. America has done some of the worst damage to itself when protecting the interests of allies -- fighting their wars, killing their enemies, backing their campaigns, advancing their interests.

Adding unnecessary allies obviously makes this problem worse. In Ukraine, for instance, the Obama administration is under pressure to treat a non-ally as an ally -- arming and/or defending Russia's neighbor -- which would yield a proxy war with Russia, a nuclear-armed state which considers border security a vital interest. Bringing Ukraine (and Georgia) into NATO would be even more dangerous, inviting a geopolitical game of chicken over minimal stakes. Neither country has ever been considered even a marginal security concern of America. In contrast, both were long ruled by Moscow, which sees their links to the West as a form of encirclement, capping the extension of NATO up to Russia's borders.

Of course, both nations have been treated unfairly and badly by Moscow. But that doesn't justify a military alliance with the U.S. Alliances should be based on interest, not charity. They should not be an end, an independent security interest, but a means to an end, to protect America. Adding troubled states with limited military capabilities and unresolved conflicts turns the purpose of alliances on their head.

The U.S. long eschewed alliances and other "foreign entanglements," against which George Washington had warned. Even in World War I, a foolish imperial slugfest of no concern to America, Woodrow Wilson brought in the U.S. only as an "associated power." Popular and congressional opposition then prevented Wilson from guaranteeing the allied powers' post-war territorial seizures. Nevertheless, Washington's involvement was a catastrophic mistake, making possible the Versailles Treaty, which turned out to be only a generational truce before the combatants returned to fight a second and far bloodier round.

The extraordinary circumstances of World War II led to a genuine and justifiable alliance. During the Cold War the U.S. created what were intended to be temporary alliances. This policy was justified by the vulnerability of America's war-ravaged friends and hostility of the great communist powers, China and the Soviet Union. But even Dwight Eisenhower warned against turning the Europeans into permanent dependents. It makes no sense for Washington to retain responsibility for defending a continent with a larger economy and population than America -- and vastly greater resources than its only serious potential threat, Russia.

Much the same has happened in Asia, which Washington filled with allies after World War II. Even as Japan became the world's second economic power Tokyo relied on the American military. South Korea now has 40 times the GDP and twice the population of the North, yet Washington is responsible for the South's defense.

The problem is not just wasted resources, but tripwires for war. Alliances deter, but they also ensure involvement if deterrence fails, as it often does. And lending smaller states the services of a superpower's military changes their behavior, causing them to be more confrontational, even reckless. America and China aren't likely to come to blows over, say, Hawaii, which Beijing has no intention of attacking. But conflict could erupt over irrelevant allied territorial disputes, such as the Senkaku Islands and Scarborough Reef, claimed by Japan and the Philippines, respectively, and China.

Unfortunately, commitments to marginal allies determine basic U.S. defense strategy. Should America be prepared to fight one, one and a half, two, or more wars at once? These prospective conflicts invariably involve allies, not America directly. After all, what state can actually harm the U.S.? Other than Russia (and to a much more limited degree China) with its ICBMs, there is none. If war comes, it will involve Korea, Japan, the Persian Gulf, or Europe. The greater the number of dependent allies, the larger the number of possible wars. But when the interests involved are unimportant and the nations involved are capable of defending themselves, why is Washington sacrificing its people's lives and wealth for other states?

The U.S. should start defenestrating AINOs. Most of these nations would remain close. With all of them commerce should be free, culture should be shared, people should be friends, and governments should cooperate. In some cases military coordination may be called for, when the U.S. and other nations share vital objectives.

However, Washington should stop defending South Korea. With an overwhelming resource advantage, the South should deter North Korean adventurism and build cooperative regional relationships to preserve security in Northeast Asia. Despite historic tensions, Seoul should build ties with Japan, another American dependent which should transcend the past and create a military sufficient constrain a growing China. Washington should base relationships on equality rather than dependence.

The U.S. also should end its European defense dole. Today, NATO is effectively North America and the Others. Yet the Europeans collectively are wealthier and more populous than the U.S. They should take over NATO or set up their own alliance. No doubt there still would be important occasions for Washington to work militarily with these nations, which share history and values. But they, not America, should secure Europe.

Even more so the U.S. should not turn conflict-prone nations like Georgia and Ukraine into allies. Europe, not America, should protect the continent's eastern reaches and police North Africa, such as Libya. If the Europeans prefer not to pacify their neighborhood, Washington certainly shouldn't do so. Life might not be fair for Russia's immediate neighbors, but that's no reason to make them U.S. "allies."

Washington should be particularly wary about turning less important and less democratic states into allies. America's wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were misguided. Neither nation warrants a long-term security commitment or permanent military garrison. Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are at most "frenemies," which Washington should deal with as circumstances warrant. Americans should refuse to allow such nations to drag the U.S. into extraneous conflicts, like that in Yemen.

Washington still has an interest in preventing a hostile, hegemonic power from dominating Eurasia. But that possibility isn't likely for decades to come. Russia is a declining power, despite Vladimir Putin's pretensions. Europe is unlikely to ever marry economic strength with political unity and military power, let alone direct its resources against America. India must raise its people out of poverty before it will be ready to impose its will on the international system.

The People's Republic of China is most likely to become a superpower peer of America. However, the PRC remains relatively poor and faces enormous economic and political challenges. China is surrounded by states with which it has fought in the past -- and which remain interested in restraining Beijing's ambitions. The U.S. should watch warily, but act only if the PRC threatens far more than a border scrape with a well-heeled U.S. ally.

America has benefitted much from its relative geographical isolation. It rarely needed allies in the past. It requires even fewer allies today. When appropriate, Washington should cooperate with like-minded states to promote shared objectives. In the rare case, the U.S. should make an alliance to advance American security. But Washington should beware allowing the tail to wag the dog. Washington should create alliances to deter and win wars, not go to war to promote and preserve alliances.

Geopolitics is not a grand version of Facebook, with the objective of amassing as many "friends" as possible. While America's faux warriors see allies as another reason for promiscuous war-making, alliances instead should reduce the likelihood of conflict. Since most of Washington's military pacts endanger the U.S., America should be dropping, not adding, allies.

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