

## Lost In The Furor Over Syria: Alliances Are A Means, Not An End

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Despite the cacophony in Washington, President Donald Trump's decision to move U.S. forces out of northern Syria was fundamentally correct. His choice was unfortunately influenced by a mix of dubious formal alliances and informal partnerships. Unwinding them has proved chaotic – and deadly. Avoiding such a tragic outcome in the future requires more than critiquing the current president's bluster; it means learning to rein in U.S. policymakers' impulses to add new allies and partners, even when the latter's interests conflict, and curing Washington officials of their desire to retain those relationships when circumstances change.

To be sure, the president went about it the wrong way, and in the process demonstrated a shortsighted indifference to the suffering of millions of people. He would have done better to forewarn the Syrian Kurds, which would have allowed them to consider alternate arrangements that could have deterred a Turkish invasion, or begun the process of creating a safe haven under Syrian auspices. This is the deal that the Kurds and Bashar al-Assad's government are trying to work out now. But this would still have been making the best of an unwinnable situation.

Rather than reflexively treating even passing cooperation as a long-term alliance, and every long-term alliance as permanent, the United States should take a more skeptical view of its security commitments. Washington should only rarely turn political relationships into military obligations, and American officials should periodically review previous alliances and partnerships, terminating them when they no longer serve the parties' interests. Taking these steps is particularly important when the relationship is transitory, as in the case of Syria's Kurds.

### **A History of Temporary Alliances — But an Aversion to Permanent Ones**

Historically, the United States eschewed military alliances, as in this colonial grievance advanced by Thomas Paine in *Common Sense*: “any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint.”

After achieving independence, President George Washington issued a similar warning in his famous Farewell Address, saying, “permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular nations, and passionate attachments for others, should be excluded.” He explained that “habitual hatred or a habitual fondness” turns a nation into “a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”

Of course, Washington was not against alliances in the right circumstances: French support was critical for the colonies' success in throwing off the mantle of British imperialism. But the preeminent founding father declared the young United States' neutrality in the wars of the French Revolution, despite cries by many French and American Francophiles that he had betrayed America's essential benefactor. Undeterred, Washington put America's interests first.

To be sure, a nation's core interests — maintaining territorial integrity, national independence, economic prosperity, and constitutional liberty — do not change. But they sometimes manifest themselves in different ways. And lesser interests, such as in the affairs of individual Middle Eastern countries, will vary substantially over time.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government has recently forged alliances with far less relevance to American security. And the alliances that America has entered into have been permanent in practice. Most notably, three major relationships forged after World War II — the NATO alliance plus bilateral treaties with South Korea and Japan — remain in place despite the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and the death of Mao Zedong. Friendly nations once ravaged by war have now recovered or even surpassed the United States in terms of per-capita wealth.

### **Not all Allies are the Same (and Some aren't Even Allies)**

The disadvantages of having too many allies — and the wrong allies — are not just historical. The bitter controversy over America's military presence in northern Syria highlights a similar challenge today. Most commentary has reflected horror at relocating U.S. military personnel who were once stationed with Kurdish militias and which had once battled ISIL militants.

That relationship, however, was an alliance in mind but not in fact. The Syrian Kurds used Americans much as the Americans used them, to battle a common foe. Washington provided military assistance to a group which faced extinction should the Islamic State triumph. Importantly, the U.S. commitment was against ISIL, not Syria, Iran, Russia, or Turkey. And there was no formal alliance, no treaty ratified by the Senate, and no public debate. There wasn't even legal authority for the deployment, let alone a commitment to go to war on behalf of the Kurds. The U.S. mission in Syria cannot reasonably be counted as legitimate under either the 2001 or 2002 versions of the Authorization for Use of Military Force — though the Obama and now Trump administrations have tried.

On the other hand, the United States and Turkey have been formal treaty allies for almost seven decades. Ankara has not been a very good ally of late, but it remains a member in good standing in the NATO alliance. Long ago, the U.S. Senate ratified Turkey's inclusion in that treaty, which includes a promise to act collectively in defense of individual members. Washington has sold weapons to, manned bases in, provided aid to, stored nuclear weapons in, and otherwise cooperated with Turkey *for decades*.

And U.S. officials knew that Ankara viewed Washington's relationship with the Syrian Kurds as a serious, even existential, threat. The issue is not whether U.S. officials believed Turkey's claims. In fact, the connections between the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units, or

YPG, in Syria, with the Kurdistan Worker's Party, or PKK, in Turkey are real, but seem unlikely to threaten the integrity of the Turkish state. Nevertheless, Ankara, not America, makes decisions on Turkey's security. Turkish officials repeatedly and loudly informed Washington of their concerns.

Turkey sees America's seeming insouciance as abandonment, especially coming after the tepid response of the United States and NATO's European members to Turkey's shootdown of a Russian warplane in November 2015. At the time, Ankara's allies showed little interest in triggering NATO's Article 5, under which all NATO members are expected to treat an attack on any other state as the functional equivalent of an attack on themselves.

In the case of its invasion of Syria, Turkey initiated the attack, so Ankara should not have expected help from the alliance. But the earlier point stands: Turkey's behavior was motivated, in part, by a desire to resolve a security problem that it sees the United States as having made worse.

### **More Partners Mean More Potential Conflicts or Contradictions**

Most were quick to blame the ensuing chaos on the Trump administration's flagrant incompetence. But even a well-organized White House would struggle to reconcile the many contradictory impulses embedded within U.S. policy toward Syria's civil war in particular, not to mention the greater Middle East in general. An ever-increasing number of allies and security dependents makes conflicting interests almost inevitable.

For instance, NATO incorporated two countries — Greece and Turkey — with a long history of enmity toward one another. It appears poised to admit Macedonia (since renamed the Republic of North Macedonia), which also has disputes with Greece. These may never spill over into actual conflict, but the possibility cannot be discounted completely.

And U.S. treaty allies *have* gone to war with one another. In 1983, the United States nominally backed the United Kingdom over Argentina in the Falklands/Malvinas conflict. That seems an obvious choice given the United Kingdom's status as a NATO ally, but ignores Argentina's coverage by the Rio Pact, which, like the NATO treaty, formally declares an attack on one as an attack on all. Washington might have justified sorting through such challenges during the Cold War, when there was an overriding shared interest in containing the Soviet Union. No similar argument can be made, however, for attempting to adjudicate among the numerous factions battling it out in Syria today.

Washington should take greater care in creating and maintaining alliances. U.S. officials add allies to NATO, such as Montenegro and North Macedonia, rather like most people collect Facebook friends. Proposals to add Kosovo and Serbia, which remain at odds over the former's secession from the latter, would bring new conflicts into the organization, as would including Georgia and Ukraine.

### **Revisiting Alliance Commitments**

The broader lesson here is that Washington should also reconsider past commitments which have outlived their usefulness. That includes cases in which the initial circumstances giving rise to the alliance — say with respect to South Korea or NATO — have changed dramatically, as well as cases in which the supposed ally, like Turkey, has changed dramatically. Alliances, like underlying foreign and military policy, should be based on circumstances, which can change significantly over time.

In fact, Tim Sayle, author of *Enduring Alliance*, notes that U.S. and Canadian officials considered adding to the NATO Treaty an explicit provision to remove countries no longer deemed fit for membership. The drafters were most concerned about negative changes in allied governments, for example if democracies turned illiberal, or autocratic states moved toward authoritarianism. Sen. Arthur Vandenberg, a leading NATO advocate, concluded that “if one of the existing signatories itself fundamentally changes character,” then it would not be formally expelled, but rather “the pact simply ceases to be operative in respect to them.”

The idea of revisiting whether alliances serve vital national security objectives, however, deserves to be resurrected. Diplomats have long recognized that changed circumstances warrant adapting or even dissolving alliances. For centuries, the United Kingdom famously shifted military partners to maintain a continental balance of power. The Anglo-Japanese Alliance originally was envisioned as a counter to Imperial Russia. Inked in 1902, the pact fell victim to London’s desire to strengthen ties with the United States and was officially terminated in 1923.

More recently, regime changes ended treaties. For example, in 1955, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan, and Iran joined the United Kingdom in the Baghdad Pact. Directed against the perceived communist menace, the organization lost Iraq in 1959 after a Baathist coup overthrew the ruling Hashemite monarchy. Renamed as the Central Treaty Organization, it limped along for another two decades. The revolution that overthrew the shah of Iran in 1979 effectively ended Iran’s membership in the organization, and Pakistan withdrew in that same year. The Central Treaty Organization was no more.

Washington’s turn away from a collective defense agreement with South Vietnam is a more familiar case for most Americans. Washington had plunged into a massive ground war to, it believed, confront a monolithic communist bloc, led by the Soviet Union and China. Within a few years, however, those notions were mostly shattered. The Soviets and Chinese engaged in a brief but violent border war in 1969, and U.S. policymakers moved swiftly to widen the Sino-Soviet split through arms negotiations with Moscow and by increasing diplomatic contact between East and West. The most dramatic move was Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger’s secret diplomacy with Beijing.

This context is critical to understanding why, by 1973, American policymakers had decided that the costs of the Vietnam War were too high, the likelihood of success too low, and the consequences of failure no longer so fearsome. The Saigon government was toppled just two years later. But Beijing ended up at war with *both* Moscow and Hanoi. Washington exploited the

communist breach with the opening to — and later formal recognition of — the People's Republic of China.

These decisions engendered harsh criticism, perhaps especially from within Nixon's own party. And America's decision to terminate support for South Vietnam wasn't pretty. But very few scholars today believe that normalization of relations with China was a mistake. Such policy changes almost certainly improved American security by transforming the international threat environment. A similar adaptation to global power shifts is needed today.

Unfortunately, few U.S. policymakers seem to agree. They still believe that the United States can obtain all that it desires, with minimal effort, and without having to choose among many desirable outcomes.

However, that illusion should long ago have been shattered. The policy of successive administrations in the Middle East has been disastrous. Trump's use of "maximum pressure" has failed in every case. Indeed, Washington has managed to unite Europe with China and Russia in search of alternatives to dollar dominance of the international financial system. Maintaining a thousand or so American personnel amidst multiple warring factions in Syria is unlikely to end any better.

It makes no more sense for Washington to anoint new allies, and maintain every alliance forever, irrespective of circumstance. In that vein, the United States and all other NATO members should reconsider Turkey's status.

Meanwhile, there is neither moral cause nor legal warrant to turn the Syrian Kurds into permanent defense dependents. President Trump can be ever counted on to do even the right thing badly. But he is acting far more responsibly than members of Congress who are using the present fiasco as an excuse to prolong an endless war which they failed to authorize. It is time to end U.S. military involvement in Syria and encourage development of a durable, if imperfect, peace.

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