

What Trump Gets Right About Alliances

He appears willing to kick nations off of the U.S. defense dole.

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America collects allies like Americans collect Facebook friends: the more the better. As a result, Washington defends more than a score of prosperous European states, several leading Asian nations, and a gaggle of Middle Eastern regimes.

Yet most of the countries on the Pentagon dole appear to be perpetually unhappy, constantly complaining that Washington doesn't love them enough and demanding reassurance that America, without hesitation, will sacrifice ever more of its people's lives and money on their behalf.

Their sense of entitlement exceeds that of the average trust-fund baby. The U.S. is expected to protect virtually every prosperous, populous, industrialized nation, but that's just a start. Washington also must coddle, pamper, praise, uplift, pacify, encourage, and otherwise placate the same countries. Once great powers, they now believe it to be America's duty to handle their defense, what should be the most important duty of any government. Alas, U.S. officials are only too willing to enable this counterproductive behavior.

Except for Donald Trump. There is much to say about his candidacy, most of it bad. Even when he makes basic sense his view is, shall we say, rather unsophisticated. And that certainly applies to his view of U.S. alliance policy.

Nevertheless, he gets one big concept very right. He's not interested in reassuring allies. Or, as he might put it, he won't make nice to a bunch of wimpy leeches living off of America. If he's president, party time at U.S. expense will be over.

Which has horrified the gaggle of well-to-do nations on America's defense dole. For instance, the *New York Times* reported "an undercurrent of quiet desperation" among European officials. They could instead have demonstrated "quiet determination" in choosing to rely on their

collective economic strength and population—larger than America’s—to ensure their defense. But no. They went to Hillary Clinton’s campaign begging for, yes, reassurance.

As for Washington’s major Asian defense dependents, *Bloomberg* explained that they found Trump’s views “baffling.” The South Korean newspaper *JoongAng Daily* proclaimed itself to be “dumbfounded.” After all, what could be more mysterious than an American politician suggesting that 66 years of defending the Republic of Korea is enough? That wealthy, sophisticated Tokyo should take over its security? Outrageous!

Self-serving foreign expectations are bad enough. The American people should feel betrayed by the rush of both Republicans and Democrats to promise well-heeled allies that they shouldn’t lose any sleep over Trump’s message, since nothing will ever change. Indeed, the *Times* reported that European leaders visited the Democratic convention and found the message “soothing.” (Cynics might call it obsequious, embarrassing, and several other words best not repeated in polite company.)

It is not just well-subsidized foreigners who have responded with disbelief that a presidential candidate is more interested in the welfare of Americans than in that of other nations. Supposedly responsible U.S. leaders joined in.

Washington officials simply have lost sight of why any country, America included, should participate in an alliance. They really believe that their goal should be to collect as many allies as possible.

Never mind if a country is unable to do anything to advance America’s security, as is Montenegro, which has 2,080 men under arms. And don’t worry if the state could drag the U.S. into unnecessary conflict, as could Ukraine, which is at violent odds with Russia. Turn all of them into allies so the current administration can bask in the glory of its immense following.

Alliances should be a means to an end. Their purpose is to increase American security. They aren’t particularly useful where there’s no significant threat to the U.S., Washington can easily deter any significant adversary on its own, and/or America’s friends are capable of protecting their own interests. Which is the case for most U.S. allies today.

Russia’s Vladimir Putin is a nasty fellow, but he has demonstrated no interest in challenging America. And while Moscow deploys a capable military, it would lose in a contest with the U.S. Russia doesn’t even appear to be much interested in Europe—which has a larger economy and population than America (to say nothing of Russia) anyhow. Europe has chosen to remain seemingly helpless.

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is an unpleasant actor, but it is interested in America only because America, in the form of 28,500 military personnel, is next door in the South. Yet South Korea enjoys a vast economic and technological lead, an overwhelming

international and diplomatic advantage, and a sizable population edge over the North. Seoul long ago should have graduated from America's defense dole.

China, like Russia, is a regional power unlikely to seek war with America, which enjoys a large military lead. Japan, which long possessed the world's second-largest economy, could have done much more to advance its and its region's defense for years. Even today Tokyo is well able to deter any Chinese threat to the former's existence.

No Middle Eastern state directly threatens the U.S. America's friends all are dominant: Israel is a regional superpower, Saudi Arabia vastly outspends Iran on the military, and Turkey's armed forces, despite the aftermath of the coup attempt, outrange those of all of its neighbors, aside from Russia, which has no cause for conflict.

Why is the U.S. providing all of these nations security commitments, military equipment, and promises to go to war? What threat to America looms? Which allied states are vulnerable to attack? Which of them truly matters to U.S. security?

The honest answer: not many. Which makes it even more ridiculous for American officials to desperately attempt to reassure Asian and European governments afraid that they might have to do more for their own defense. Instead, Washington should insist that its friends take over responsibility for their own security and that of their regions.

It's impossible to predict what Donald Trump would do as president. However, he would not likely treat dependent allies as the equivalent of Facebook friends. America might have a president willing to kick nations off of the U.S. defense dole.

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