



## **Allies Are Supposed to Help the US, but Americans Always Do the Paying**

Doug Bandow

July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2020

U.S. foreign policy is dominated by a constant search for allies. Big or small, rich or poor, strong or weak. It doesn't matter. The more the merrier, rather like acquiring more Facebook Friends than anyone else, thereby winning bragging rights.

This incessant search for new allies turned into farce with NATO's celebration when Montenegro and North Macedonia were admitted. Members of the transatlantic pact exulted, apparently believing that they finally could rest easy, sure that Vladimir Putin's Slavic hordes would be kept at bay by the vast new armies added to NATO's ranks.

The US once sought alliances to achieve a common purpose and enhance its security – in theory, at least. Having decided to intervene in Europe in World Wars I and II and the Cold War, it good policy to cooperate with allied powers. (Not that joining the conflicts themselves necessarily made any sense. For instance, the New World had no security stake in the Great War, the imperial murderfest that brought mankind communism, fascism, Nazism, the Second World War, and endless Middle Eastern conflicts in succeeding years.)

Today, however, alliances have gone from means to ends for Washington policymakers. Of course, Europe should be defended, but not by America: the Europeans collectively outclass Russia on most every important measure of national power, and nothing suggests that Vladimir Putin hopes to achieve conquests that Joseph Stalin eschewed. Since NATO serves no necessary military purpose, it has become something very different, a welfare organization by which Americans subsidize the defense of European states which neither feel threatened nor see any reason to invest in their militaries since America has promised to do the job. Indeed, Washington's defense guarantee almost makes it stupid for Europeans to even field militaries, other than for ceremonial purposes.

Are there other issues on which the US and Europe could cooperate? Proposals are routinely proffered for the allies to work together on international development, cybersecurity, medical pandemics, and more. However, none of these tasks require Washington to promise to defend rich friends and do so no matter how little they contribute militarily. The core defense function of an American-led NATO is obsolete and cannot be rescued by concocting new and different duties.

America's Asian alliances suffer from similar problems. The Republic of Korea was about to be overrun in 1950 and was a national wreck when the Korean War ended in 1953. Today South Korea enjoys a population twice that of the North, and an economy more than 50 times as large. An alliance by which the US defends the South does not advance America's security. There are other issues on which the two governments could cooperate, but they do not require that Washington continue to protect a nation more than able to defend itself. Much the same goes for Japan, which matches the Europeans in minimal economic effort devoted to defense, despite the supposed horrid threat posed by the People's Republic of China.

Yet for some American policymakers defending prosperous and populous allied states is not enough. Americans also are supposed to rescue nations that find themselves in Beijing's financial crosshairs. If China applies economic pressure, it is America's job to intervene there too. Apparently an ally's job, at least if that ally is the US, is never done.

The Trump administration recently issued a new paper on confronting the PRC. One of Washington's (many) goals is "to compel Beijing to cease or reduce actions harmful to the United States' vital, national interests and those of our allies and partners." Complained the administration: "Given Beijing's increasing use of economic leverage to extract political concessions from or exact retribution against other countries, the United States judges that Beijing will attempt to convert [One Belt One Road] projects into undue political influence and military access. Beijing uses a combination of threat and inducement to pressure governments, elites, corporations, think tanks, and others – often in an opaque manner – to toe the CCP line and censor free expression. Beijing has restricted trade and tourism with Australia, Canada, South Korea, Japan, Norway, the Philippines, and others, and has detained Canadian citizens, in an effort to interfere in these countries' internal political and judicial processes."

Well, stuff happens internationally, especially when you tangle with a nationalistic rising power. The administration doesn't say exactly what it wants to do, but proposals are now being advanced on the Right to create an international dole for allied governments. Conservatives might believe welfare to be bad at home, but they apparently view it as a great policy abroad.

For instance, *Washington Examiner* columnist Tom Rogan is upset that the PRC threatened to retaliate against Australia, after the latter penalized Beijing for its crackdown in Hong Kong. Canberra announced its willingness to accept Hong Kongers seeking to escape what likely is to become an open air prison, like the rest of China. It is a wonderful gesture, which Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian denounced as "in serious violation of international law and the basic norms governing international relations." He said the PRC reserves "the right to make further reaction, and Australia should bear all the consequences."

Rogan is outraged that an American ally might have to pay a price for acting as a sovereign state. Indeed, Beijing already applied trade sanctions against Australia after the latter called for an investigation of the development of COVID-19. So there might be more to come. Who would have imagined: actions have consequences! It isn't like Washington ever punishes another country, or an organization, company, group, or individual, for doing something US policymakers don't like, right?

Thus, Rogan insisted that the president and secretary of state should warn China that if it sows the wind, it will "reap the whirlwind: There are many possible means of action there. An expansion of rightly escalating sanctions on Chinese human rights abuses offers one opportunity.

More powerful, however, would be Washington's explicit threat to introduce commensurate tariffs on Beijing for any economic penalties it imposes on Canberra."

Similar was the case made by Matthew Ha of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, who was irritated that Beijing was discouraging the Republic of Korea from following America's anti-China policy, despite administration pressure. He wrote: Beijing "launched an economic warfare campaign that **cost** South Korean companies operating in China at least \$15.6 billion in losses" because Seoul deployed the THAAD missile defense system.

Ha further claimed that "due in part to concerns over Chinese retaliation, Seoul has not completely **divested** its telecommunications infrastructure from the Chinese company Huawei." He also blamed the PRC for the fact that the South had not backed the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" plan, instead favoring its policy focused on Southeast Asia, and failed to criticize Beijing over Hong Kong.

He fears that China will "undermine" what turns out to be a stunningly fragile alliance, at risk for an economic drop in the bucket for one of the world's largest economies. Ha wants Americans to "assuage ROK concerns about Chinese coercion by committing to proportionately punish China for any attempted coercion and to provide South Korea with immediate economic support to cope with Beijing's retaliation."

The idea of indemnifying allies for doing what is supposed to be in their interest is a truly bizarre notion. First, the complaint is magnificently sanctimonious and hypocritical. After all, America led the way using commercial and financial means to punish and reward other countries. There was foreign aid, which was often referred to as walking around money for the secretary of state. Another economic tool was tariffs. Now Washington uses sanctions, threatening to destroy any bank or other company in any nation which ignores America's dictates. Needless to say, the US has done far more than \$15.6 billion in damage to Cuba, Venezuela, Iran, Russia, North Korea, Syria, Sudan, and more.

So much for being shocked, *shocked* at the fact that economic coercion is going on in the world.

Moreover, the interests of other governments, even ones termed partners, friends, and/or allies by Washington, are not the same as America's interests. Nor are they necessarily important, let alone vital. Sometimes they aren't even consistent with US policy.

Consider Rogan's indictment. China is threatening Australia for doing something the Trump administration – fearful of immigration, asylum, refugees, and most everything else foreign – has not done and almost certainly won't do, invite Hong Kongers to come. "Do as we won't say, let alone do" would be a curious policy for the US to adopt.

More important, paying off allies for doing the right thing infantilizes them. Australia is a serious country and partner because it *believes in doing the right thing*. That is why the Aussies can be relied upon: they don't sell out to the highest bidder. They shouldn't be put on a new American dole for their policies. Especially since Washington already is widely seen as guaranteeing Canberra's independence if not necessarily every aspect of its security. If the US is going to protect wealthy allies – Australia is in much better financial shape than America – it doesn't seem unreasonable that they bear at least a little bit of the cost and risk of their policies.

Nor does the US have a lot of extra funds to go around. Uncle Sam is essentially bankrupt. Entering 2020 Washington had run up a trillion dollar deficit (\$984 billion to be exact) the previous year. Then came the COVID-19 pandemic. In June alone the US posted an \$864 billion deficit. The deficit already has passed \$3 trillion for the year and is likely to blow past \$4 trillion by the end of 2020, especially if Congress passes another bail-out bill. Next year the annual deficit will exceed \$2 trillion, at least. At the same time the US is still involved in a trade and economic fight with China and Europe. It is time to stop acting like America is an economic superpower flush with cash and able to underwrite most of the planet. Tariffs, sanctions, and subsidies all hurt the US economically. Washington's resources have limits and spending, even for alleged security purposes, should be prioritized.

At the same time, US retaliation is almost certainly doomed to fail. Shocking though it might be to American policymakers, foreign governments rarely sacrifice policies seen as necessary for security and dignity in response to Uncle Sam's threats. Moreover, Washington is not the only national capital in which considerations of "credibility" are viewed as important. If Beijing surrendered to US demands, its officials would have to wonder: where would US policymakers stop? The answer is, they wouldn't. So far none of the administration's ongoing economic wars have caused any of the target governments to surrender and crawl to Washington, ready to sign a diktat. The president has been reduced to pathetic begging in his attempt to get Tehran to simply talk about making a new deal.

More sanctions are not better, nor even necessarily more effective. The more penalties Washington piles on China, the less flexibility US policymakers have to address potentially more serious problems in the future. And if everything is sanctioned, and for multiple reasons, Beijing is more likely to choose confrontation over negotiation. No government will surrender important policies, let alone many important policies, to an arrogant, aggressive adversary perceived as self-serving and self-righteous.

Finally, US bribes are not likely to get America's allies to act against what they see as their interests. Ha complained: "Seeking to avoid conflict, Seoul took a neutral position [on Hong Kong's new national security law], thereby undermining the protesters and revealing an alarming inability to support the liberal democratic values that underpin the ROK-U.S. alliance." Yet there is no reason to believe that an indemnification offer would cause the South to enthusiastically join a half-cocked, maladroit, and hypocritical effort by an incompetent US administration which is ostentatiously using China as a reelection issue and would have no hesitation tossing the Moon government under the proverbial bus once November 3 passed.

The ROK's long-term security requires not making an enemy of the PRC. China will be a neighbor long after America's military has gone home. And Beijing officials won't forget if Seoul undermines what they view as their essential security interests. I have often asked South Korean diplomats if their government would allow the US to use bases on the peninsula in a war against China. Most look ready to run screaming from the room. It is very likely *that South Korea does not want to join the US* and uses the threat of Chinese retaliation as a good excuse. One wonders: would Ha would be prepared to sanction the ROK if it refused his offer to join the US if reimbursed for any damages caused by China?

Alliances are supposed to benefit the US, not become financial blackholes and security doles. Unfortunately, Washington has turned such ties into the end rather than the means. Yet Americans can't afford to continue doing everything and paying everyone.

When possible, the US should cooperate with like-minded democratic states in addressing the many challenges posed by the PRC. However, rather than offering to buy the allegiance of the financially-minded, Washington should avoid the "summer soldier" of Thomas Paine's telling. Better to work with friends which share both America's values and interests. The US doesn't need any more costly defense dependents.

*Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of several books, including Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire.*