

Chicago Tribune

Commentary: Donald Trump has put America's allies on the hot seat. Good.

Doug Bandow

August 24, 2016

America collects allies like Americans collect Facebook friends. 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 demanding reassurance of Washington's love. Their sense of entitlement exceeds that of the typical trust fund baby.

As a result, 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. 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. Nevertheless, he's right not to be interested in reassuring allies.

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, they find Trump's views "baffling," according to Bloomberg. The South Korean newspaper JoongAng Daily proclaims itself to be "dumbfounded."

Americans should feel betrayed by the rush of Republicans and Democrats promising well-heeled allies that they shouldn't lose any sleep over Trump's message, that nothing will change.

Indeed, The Times reported European leaders visiting the Democratic convention, where they found the message "soothing." (Cynics might call it obsequious, embarrassing and several other words best not repeated in polite company.)

Washington officials simply have lost sight of why America should participate in an alliance. Never mind if a country is unable to do anything to advance America's security, such as Montenegro, which has 2,080 men under arms. And don't worry if the state would risk dragging the U.S. into unnecessary conflict, such as Ukraine, at violent odds with Russia.

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 United States. Washington can easily deter any significant adversary on its own, and 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 has demonstrated no interest in challenging America. And while Moscow deploys a capable military, it would lose in a contest with the U.S.

He doesn't even appear to be much interested in Europe: The Russian republic, like the old empire, is primarily focused on border security and respect, not conquering non-Russian people. Anyway, Europe has a larger economy and population than America, and far larger than Russia. Europe has chosen to remain seemingly helpless.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is an unpleasant actor but is interested in America only because America, in the form of 28,500 military personnel, is right next door. Yet South Korea enjoys a vast economic and technological lead, overwhelming international and diplomatic advantage and sizable population edge over North Korea. 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? And reassuring governments desperately afraid that they might have to do more for their own defense?

Washington should insist that its friends take over responsibility for their own security.

It's impossible to predict what Donald Trump would do as president. However, he might be willing to put muscle behind bluster and kick nations off of the U.S. defense dole.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of several books, including "Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire."