

U.S. Foreign Policy Should Focus on Protecting Americans, Not Reassuring Friends and Allies

By: Doug Bandow
Date: April 21, 2014

The United States is busy in the world, with the Secretaries of Defense and State always on the international move. No function seems more important to [Washington](#) than acting as the world's universal comforter, constantly "reassuring" friends and allies no matter where located.

Russia's annexation of Crimea created a flood of European anxieties that America attempted to relieve. For instance, in early March the administration undertook what Secretary of State John Kerry termed "concrete steps to reassure our NATO allies." The *Military Times* reported that Washington dispatched aircraft "to reassure NATO partners that border Russia." *Washington Post* columnist Charles Krauthammer urged the administration to set as a top objective to "reassure NATO."

Also last month Vice President Joe Biden was reported to have "swept into Poland and the Baltic nations ... with a message of reassurance." Indeed, headlined the *New York Times*: "Biden in [Europe](#) to Reassure U.S. allies over Russia's Moves in Ukraine." [Fox](#) News reported that he had arrived in Poland "to reassure allies." (That Biden's presence would reassure anyone raises serious questions.)

The process continues. The *Wall Street Journal* entitled an article "U.S. Tries to Help Ukraine, Reassure Allies Without Riling Russia." ABC News announced: "U.S. Destroyer Headed to Black Sea to Reassure Allies." Last week Reuters reported additional deployments "to reassure allies worried by Russia's annexation of Crimea." *USA Today* said the moves were intended to "reassure jittery allies in Central Europe."

Gen. Philip Breedlove said the transatlantic alliance would maintain new security measures throughout the year "to assure our allies of our complete commitment." Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski insisted that Eastern Europe "deserves a reassurance package." Apparently Washington's efforts are bearing fruit. The *Washington Post* headlined an article two days ago: "NATO Reassurances Ease Fears in Baltics."

Beijing's willingness to throw some sharp elbows in Asia has resulted in another gaggle of friendly states clamoring for reassurance, and the administration is responding there too. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel visited Asia in early April; the *Washington Post* reported

that he sought “to reassure allies in Asia amid questions about U.S. commitment.” About the same time Eugene Kogan of the Kennedy School wrote a commentary in *National Interest* online entitled “Reassuring Jittery Asian Allies.”

The president is heading to Asia tomorrow, explained Voice of America, “in a bid to reassure allies in the region.” According to the *Washington Post*, “he and his top aides will be less focused on any big policy announcements than on reassuring jittery allies.” The *Gulf News* was positive, titling its analysis: “Obama’s Asia Tour Will Reassure Allies.”

Obviously the conventional wisdom continues to dominate American foreign and defense [policy](#). Washington’s obligation always is to give. The U.S. not only is supposed to guarantee the security of assorted friends and allies. It also must constantly *reassure* them. Americans must not only be prepared to die for anyone and everyone who wants protection, but Americans must always and in every way demonstrate that willingness. Apparently U.S. officials should not sleep easy unless the people and leaders of other (at least friendly) nations also sleep easy.

It’s a strange, even bizarre policy.

First, the overriding responsibility of Washington officials is to safeguard America—its people, territory, constitutional liberties, and prosperity. The Department of Defense is not a charity created to protect the world, defend the self-important, secure the rich, subsidize the improvident, calm the nervous, guard the pacifist, or save the indifferent. The American armed forces aren’t designed to advance human rights, aid humanitarianism, promote democracy, rebuild nations, or even rescue the helpless, though some or even all of these might at times be consistent with Washington’s fundamental responsibility to defend the U.S.

Second, America’s broader foreign policy should be directed at advancing the interests of Americans. The national government is the agent of those who fund, staff, and support it, the American people. Their welfare is primary. Washington should look after their interests, not those of some imaginary “international community” that exists only in the minds of social engineers who desire to escape even minimal national restraints.

However, interest is necessary, not sufficient, to justify Washington’s actions. The U.S. should act within a larger ethical framework that values human life and respects people’s liberty and dignity. The tendency of political organizations to live out Lord Acton’s famous warning that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely” requires the U.S. government to build limits into its own institutions and especially those beyond its borders. The latter typically are the least representative and accountable, and the most susceptible to special interest manipulation.

Reassuring other nations—whether their leaders or peoples—is rarely a worthwhile objective for the U.S. government. In contrast, America should behave in ways that are naturally reassuring. For instance, it should be apparent from its actions that the United States does not intend to launch wars of conquest, seize other countries’ resources for profit, oust other governments’ leaders for convenience, or compel other societies’ compliance with America’s cultural, economic, political, or social preferences. Washington’s actions also should

demonstrate that it is committed to shared liberty and prosperity with other nations and peoples in the great global commons. The U.S. should act to promote an international order rooted in the understanding that political institutions exist to serve human beings, not vice versa.

The notion of America having an obligation to constantly “reassure” others is particularly pernicious when applied to the military. Washington’s principal obligation is to protect the American people, not those who desire to be defended by the world’s greatest military power. Unfortunately, sometimes the latter seems include most everyone else on earth. When I visited North Korea two decades ago one official suggested that our two nations should cooperate against Japan, which Pyongyang reviled even more than the U.S.!

There are occasions when it is in America’s interest to defend other states, but only rarely. Today Washington collects allies like most people accumulate Facebook friends. The more the merrier, even when they are security black holes.

Unfortunately, almost all U.S. allies expect to be defended by America rather than to help defend America. Some contribute small troop contingents to Washington’s unnecessary wars elsewhere, such as in Iraq, but only after the U.S. helps fund and equip those forces. Alas, gaining marginal assistance from, say, Georgia in return for promising to face down nuclear-armed Russia on Tbilisi’s behalf would be a poor bargain indeed.

One of the worst consequences of America’s Asian and European alliances is discouraging prosperous and populous states from defending themselves. Europe has eight times Russia’s GDP—why is it relying on America at all? And why isn’t it moving forces into Eastern Europe if the continent’s security is at risk?

Similarly, why is Japan, a wealthy state which until recently had the world’s second largest economy, expecting Washington’s help to assert control over contested islands? Why does South Korea, with 40 times the GDP of North Korea, presume the U.S. will forever maintain military forces in the peninsula? Alas, these countries are responding rationally to America’s incentive for security free-riding.

Now Washington is sending Cabinet secretaries and military forces hither and yon to “reassure” these same nations that it will continue to subsidize their defense. Indeed, the consistent message is that they need not worry even if they do little on their own behalf. Of course, Washington officials periodically voice frustration that their rich dependents aren’t doing more. But why should governments in Asia and Europe inconvenience their peoples when Washington is willing to burden Americans to pay for the former’s defense?

It oft has been said that the State Department needs an America desk. So does the Pentagon. And the White House. And Congress. Washington should stop reassuring friendly nations that they will forever be security wards of America. The people who most need reassuring are Americans.

Obama administration is busy “reassuring” US allies. Instead should be reassuring Americans who are paying the bills.

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