

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## **NATO Security Dependents Are Not Useful Allies**

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Since the end of World War II, U.S. officials have had an unduly expansive concept of what constitutes worthwhile strategic allies for the United States. In too many cases, the “allies” that Washington touts are small, weak, often militarily useless dependents. Worse, some of them are on bad terms with more powerful neighboring states. Under those circumstances, the so-called allies are major liabilities rather than assets to the United States. Indeed, they are potential snares, ones that can entangle America in unnecessary military confrontations.

Washington would do well to become far more selective about which nations it includes in its roster of allies, and U.S. leaders should stop elevating security dependents to the status of allies. When U.S. officials described the regimes that Washington installed through military force in [Afghanistan and Iraq](#) as allies, it became clear that they had lost even minimal understanding of the concept. That point became abundantly evident when their Afghan client collapsed almost overnight in the face of the Taliban military offensive. It’s time for U.S. policymakers to do better.

TROUBLING PROMISCUITY about acquiring weak U.S. security partners was evident even during the Cold War, and the tendency has become even more pronounced in the post-Cold War era. As the fiasco in Afghanistan (and its ugly predecessor in South Vietnam) confirmed, that problem with U.S. foreign policy has existed in multiple regions. However, the defect has become most acute with respect to Washington’s campaign to expand NATO into Eastern Europe. Since the mid-1990s, U.S. administrations have worked to add a menagerie of new NATO members, and it has done so with even less selectivity and good judgment than some people use to acquire Facebook friends.

Many of those new members have very little to offer to the United States as security partners. Indeed, some are mini-states, bordering on being micro-states. Such lightly armed Lilliputians

would add little or nothing to Washington's own capabilities—especially in a showdown with another major power.

As economic assets, their importance is decidedly limited, and militarily, they are even less valuable. It's hard to see how new NATO allies such as Albania, Slovenia, Montenegro, and North Macedonia enhance America's power and security. That point should be apparent based on size of population alone. Albania's 2.87 million, North Macedonia's 2.1 million, and Slovenia's 2.07 million people put those countries squarely in the mini-state category, while Montenegro's 628,000 barely deserves even that label. It doesn't get much better with respect to either annual gross domestic product or size of military forces. Even Slovenia's \$52.8 billion GDP puts that country only eighty-sixth in the global rankings. Albania's \$15.2 billion (125th), North Macedonia's \$12.26 billion (135th) and Montenegro's \$4.78 billion (159th) are even less impressive.

The military forces that our new NATO allies can field are not likely to strike fear into Russia or any other would-be aggressor. Albania's armed forces consist of 8,500 active-duty personnel, Slovenia's consist of 8,500, and North Macedonia has 9,000 available. Montenegro's active-duty force totals 2,400. In comparison, the Austin, Texas, police department has 2,422 people in its ranks.

Granted, the Cold War edition of NATO also had some mini-states as members, most notably Luxembourg and Iceland. However, those members were located within a stable, democratic Western Europe. Their defense also was geographically inseparable from Washington's mission of protecting important military and economic players, such as West Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Great Britain, from what appeared to be a totalitarian superpower with expansionist ambitions. That situation was qualitatively different from Washington's gratuitous post-Cold War decision to manage the security of quarrelsome mini-states in the chronically volatile Balkans. Since the mid-1990s, the United States has entangled itself in the region's parochial spats, but giving some of the countries NATO membership intensified America's exposure to needless risks and burdens.

THE RISK-BENEFIT calculation is even worse with respect to some of the other small nations that have joined NATO in the post-Cold War era. Those partners are not merely irrelevant from the standpoint of U.S. security; they are potentially dangerous tripwires that could trigger a conflict between the United States and a nuclear-armed Russia.

That point underscores one very important difference between individuals casually amassing Facebook friends and the United States promiscuously adding new security mendicants. Facebook friends do not have the ability to entangle anyone in armed conflicts; irresponsible security dependents definitely can do so. Indeed, there are multiple examples throughout history of such clients snaring their patrons into devastating, unnecessary wars. One notable example was how Tsarist Russia's fateful decision to give strong backing to Serbia in the

latter's escalating quarrel with Austria-Hungary following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand helped ignite World War I—and caused the utter ruin of the Russian empire.

The United States is flirting with a similar danger today regarding its small clients in Eastern Europe. President George W. Bush's decision to support the NATO membership bids of the three Baltic republics was—and remains—highly provocative to Russia. One crucial way to reduce the danger of armed clashes between great powers is to show mutual respect for respective spheres of influence. Washington has repeatedly violated that principle by pushing NATO to expand right up to Russia's border.

The addition of the Baltic republics in 2004 was the most dangerous step in that process. As in the case of the subsequent addition of the small Balkan nations to NATO, the three Baltic countries have little to offer in terms of military capabilities. Estonia's 6,700 troops, Latvia's 5,500, and even Lithuania's 20,500 wouldn't be much of a factor if war broke out between NATO and Russia.

However, the drawbacks of making the Baltic republics U.S. security dependents go far beyond their irrelevance as military players. Those three countries were once part of both Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, and substantial ethnic Russian minorities still live in both Estonia and Latvia. The Kremlin has complained on numerous occasions since the Baltic republics became independent at the end of 1991 that the Russian population suffers discrimination and other mistreatment. Indeed, that allegation emerged long before Russian president Vladimir Putin became Russia's leader. Relations between the Kremlin and its former territories remain tense because of that issue.

Perhaps even more troubling, Washington's Baltic allies now are feuding with Moscow's principal client in the region, Belarus. In the summer and autumn of 2021, Latvia and Lithuania (along with the European Union) accused Belarus of trying to use a flood of Middle East refugees as a form of "hybrid warfare." The Lithuanian government even told its border guards to use force if necessary to prevent the continued entry of the migrants. A short time later, Latvia imposed a state of emergency to deal with the same issue. A few weeks earlier, Lithuania had augmented its border barrier by erecting a fence with razor wire. Latvia soon followed suit. A new round of large-scale, Russia-Belarus military exercises (held every four years) in September made tensions even more acute.

By virtue of both size and location, the Baltic republics are not credible strategic assets for the United States. Indeed, they would be virtually helpless if Russia made a military move against them. A 2016 RAND Corporation study concluded that a Russian offensive would overrun their defenses in approximately three days. Such countries are not U.S. "allies" in any meaningful sense; they are vulnerable dependents that could trigger a war between NATO (primarily the United States) and Russia.

Washington's patron-client relationship with the Baltic republics is risky, and U.S. leaders were unwise to push for their inclusion in NATO. However, beginning with George W. Bush's administration, officials have engaged in even more reckless conduct regarding possible alliance membership for two other countries, Georgia and Ukraine. They have done so despite repeated warnings from the Kremlin that making either country (especially Ukraine) a NATO member would cross a red line that Moscow cannot tolerate.

BUSH CONDUCTED a veritable geopolitical love affair with both Georgia and Ukraine, portraying them as models for emerging democracies and repeatedly referring to them as U.S. allies in the most glowing terms. Only firm French and German opposition thwarted Bush's lobbying effort to get NATO to grant Tbilisi and Kiev membership. Berlin and Paris were troubled by evidence of endemic political and economic corruption in both countries, but they were even more worried that further NATO expansion would create a crisis with Moscow. Their continued opposition has thus far prevented the addition of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO's ranks, even as the alliance added multiple Balkan mini-states.

However, U.S. *actions* have increasingly made the issue of formal membership a distinction without a difference, and the outcomes indicate that even unwise informal security relations with client states can cause serious trouble. Bush encouraged Georgia to take a firmer stance against the continued presence of Russian "peacekeeping troops" in two breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In addition, the United States was busily equipping and training Georgian military forces. Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, apparently read too much into Washington's expressions of support. In August 2008, his forces launched an attack on Russian units in South Ossetia, and Moscow responded with a full-scale offensive that soon overran much of Georgia. When Saakashvili begged for U.S. and NATO help to repel the Russian "aggression," Bush expressed firm support for Georgia's sovereignty, but he also indicated that U.S. troops would not be coming to Tbilisi's rescue. A U.S. client had tried to create a military confrontation between NATO and Russia for its own parochial goals, but it had misread Washington's signals. Clumsy U.S. policy, though, was at least partly responsible for that dangerous episode.

Unfortunately, the actions of subsequent foreign policy teams with respect to Georgia, and even more so with respect to Ukraine, indicate that U.S. leaders learned nothing from the mistakes in 2008. Officials in both the Trump and Biden administrations have treated Kiev as a de facto NATO member and a crucial U.S. military ally. Trump's administration approved multiple weapons shipments to Kiev, sales that included Javelin anti-tank missiles that Russia considers especially destabilizing. Such transactions have continued since Joe Biden entered the White House.

Worse, Washington's security relationship with Kiev goes far beyond arms sales. Over the past five years, U.S. forces have conducted multiple joint exercises (war games) with Ukrainian units. Washington also has successfully pressed NATO to include Ukraine in the alliance's war games. Indeed, Ukraine hosted and led the latest version, Rapid Trident 21. It is no secret that such exercises are directed against Russia. In early April 2021, Biden assured Ukraine's president,

Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Washington's "unwavering support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of Russia's ongoing aggression."

Such a pledge places the United States in a very dangerous situation. Kiev seeks to regain Crimea, which Russia annexed following U.S. and European Union backing for demonstrators who overthrew Ukraine's elected, pro-Russian president in 2014. Indeed, Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian officials have expressed that intention repeatedly and in diverse settings. Kiev's behavior also has become disturbingly bellicose. In early April 2021, both the Zelenskyy government and NATO complained loudly when Russia moved some 80,000 troops and heavy weaponry closer to Crimea and other areas along the border with Ukraine. What they did not mention, and most Western press accounts also ignored, was that Kiev had previously executed its own military buildup, amid statements of a determination to regain Crimea. In any case, an extremely tense confrontation between NATO and Russia ensued, which was not resolved until Russia pulled back its forces in late April.

Given the size of its territory and population, Ukraine is not in the same category as the Balkan and Baltic mini-states or Georgia. However, it has an even greater potential to entangle the United States and the rest of NATO in a perilous war. The April 2021 episode was a classic case of a security client behaving in ways that could trigger an armed conflict. For all of Kiev's boasts about regaining Crimea, the outcome of a military clash between Russia and Ukraine would be a foregone conclusion. Ukraine would have no chance of prevailing without massive outside assistance. Even disregarding the crucial difference that Russia possesses a strategic and tactical nuclear arsenal, while Ukraine does not, Russia's advantages in conventional forces are massive. Legislation that the Ukrainian parliament approved in July 2021 will increase Kiev's armed forces to 261,000, but Russia fields more than 1 million active-duty personnel. Moreover, although U.S. aid has improved the quality of the hardware available to Ukraine, Russia's troops are equipped with some of the most sophisticated weapons in the world.

U.S. leaders should be deeply concerned when a security dependent suffering from such quantitative and qualitative disadvantages makes empty boasts about retaking lost territory. It is even more worrisome when that client engages in provocative military gestures toward its powerful neighbor. That is precisely the way that a rogue dependent can entangle its great power protector in a disastrous war. U.S. leaders should want no part of such a risky patron-client relationship.

THE TEST of whether a specific country is a worthwhile U.S. ally or a useless, perhaps dangerous, dependent should not be terribly difficult. A key question that must be asked is: Does that country substantially add to America's own economic and military capabilities without creating significant new dangers or vulnerabilities? Only if that question can be answered with an unequivocal "yes," should the country be considered a beneficial ally. Otherwise, it is either a useless or (even worse) a dangerous security client. U.S. leaders badly need to learn the difference. As a result of NATO's expanded membership and mission, the United States has acquired a worrisome number of both types.

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