

Unreliable Partners Make Even More Unreliable Allies

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Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates began pursuing a defense treaty on March 30th as Gulf countries have begun to question the efficacy of U.S. assurances in the wake of the Russo-Ukrainian War. The two monarchies have proposed joining U.S. efforts to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine in exchange for a commitment from the United States to defend their sovereign territories. Not only would entering a treaty alliance strengthen Washington's shackles to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, it would inexorably commit the United States to protecting the two Gulf powers.

It is important to note that neither Saudi Arabia nor the UAE want a potential trilateral treaty to require them to come to the United States' defense. Reports suggest that the Gulf countries want to use the UAE's security agreement with France as a guide to a new security agreement between Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Washington. The French president notes that the Franco-Saudi-Emirati agreement states that the two countries "would jointly decide of specific and tailored responses, including military ones, if the security, the sovereignty, the territorial integrity and the independence of the UAE was threatened."

A similar arrangement should be a non-starter for the United States for three reasons. First, the agreement is certainly vague enough to allow France to skirt its military commitments; however, it also fails to provide the French with any political leverage. Despite Abu Dhabi's calls on Paris to respond to the Houthi attack on the UAE in January, the latter opposed France during Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Washington already provides a large security commitment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, making them the first and fourth largest U.S. weapons purchasers since the start of the Obama administration. American officials and defense companies justified these sales with claims of gaining leverage over two key players in the Gulf. The record, however, shows that the coalition has simply used U.S. weapons to commit more atrocities in Yemen, creating a "reverse leverage," in which Washington feels required to send additional equipment to clean up the client's mess. A security guarantee will simply increase the degree of American entanglement in the Middle East, which is a region that the Biden administration wants to leave, not stay.

Second, attempts to end alliances by Congress are nearly impossible. The legislature's ability to force America to leave a treaty is, at best, unclear and it has never been successful in doing so. One example of Congress's inability to stop treaties is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It was not until former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from the JCPOA, despite earlier, repeated Congressional votes to do so. Recent reports suggest it is nearly impossible for Congress to successfully stop the executive's ability to sign and enforce treaties.

Enacting this treaty would go beyond the tacit support for human rights abuses already provided to these countries through by U.S. weapons sales. In fact, the proposed treaty would require not only providing U.S. defense to countries that frequently abuse human rights, but it would also associate the United States with these actions. Washington would suddenly find itself backing policies detrimental to American security and global human rights.

Third, beyond long-term consequences to U.S. security, deepening ties with Saudi Arabia and the UAE threatens to drag the United States into the war in Yemen. Washington has already played a role in extending the violence against the Yeminiis by selling the coalition weapons used in attacks against civilians and air refueling support that helped the Saudis more easily execute air raids.

It would be unheard of in recent history for Washington to extend such a guarantee to a country engaged in ongoing hostilities. Ukraine could not join NATO because of fears that its ongoing conflict would entrap the United States. In this case, though, the Ukrainians are the victims in the attack on their country, whereas Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been the primary perpetrators in the war on Yemen from beginning – despite the UAE ending involvement a few years ago. Forming a treaty alliance with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi would all but guarantee that Washington ends up directly involved in this conflict. In essence, if a Houthi rebel attacks Saudi Arabia, the United States would technically need to defend Saudi Arabia.

The United States is a good ally, honoring commitments where it carries most of the burden. This is, in part, the nature of being a superpower. More powerful alliance partners will always pay higher costs in defense agreements because they can. With that in mind, policymakers in Washington need to avoid burdensome alliances, even if the goal is simply short-term support. Once signed, an alliance commitment to Saudi Arabia and the UAE will result in long-term, unavoidable costs to U.S. security and global human rights.

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