

## What Good are Allies? Turning Means into Ends

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The strategic environment has grown remarkably benign for the U.S. America faces no peer competitor and is allied with every major industrialized state outside of China and Russia. Terrorism falls far short of posing the sort of existential threat that existed during the Cold War.

Yet Washington is making its world more dangerous by protecting and even adding unnecessary allies and taking on their potential conflicts as its own. Policymakers appear to be confusing means and ends, taking alliances which are supposed to help protect the U.S. and turning them into a "vital interest" separate from that of American security.

The U.S. generally eschewed alliances and other "foreign entanglements" until World War I. It is hard to discern America's interest in joining that war, but at least



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# FOREIGN FOLLIES

AMERICA'S NEW GLOBAL EMPIRE



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the U.S. limited the alliance to winning the conflict. Washington saw no need to subsequently guarantee British and French territorial booty seized from Germany. Tragically, Versailles turned out to be the long fuse of a new conflict, largely the fault of greedy, grasping allies empowered by America's foolish intervention.

Only after World War II did the U.S. turn temporary alliances into permanent military blocs. Such a policy was understandable, given fears of Soviet (and later Chinese) adventurism in a war-torn world. And in an important sense American policy was a brilliant success: U.S. security guarantees allowed allied states to recover economically and join in constructing a prosperous new global order.

However, in time Washington's alliances demonstrated obvious downsides, including encouraging friendly states to free ride on the American military. If U.S. taxpayers were willing to guarantee your security, why burden your own voters? Thus, Europeans routinely violated their promises to do more militarily; Japan remained a military midget; South Korea relied on an American military tripwire for its security. Washington was stuck in the uncomfortable position of constantly begging its allies to do more to defend themselves.

With the end of the Cold War all of America's alliances essentially lost their raison d'être. The Soviet Union dissolved and the Warsaw Pact nations changed sides. The Soviet Pacific fleet rusted away. In China Red Guards in Mao suits gave way to entrepreneurs in business suits. Isolated and decrepit North Korea lagged behind the Republic of Korea on almost every measure of national power.

Then, at least, America's carefully constructed alliance structure merely appeared to be a waste, an unnecessary subsidy to friendly nations which needed no aid to defend themselves, especially in the face of fading threats. Today all of these alliances live on, to America's security detriment. Although the potential for U.S. involvement in a traditional war seems small, it remains real -- and almost entirely due to American security guarantees for other nations.

The latest Quadrennial Defense Review contends: "as a global power, the strength and influence of the United States are deeply intertwined with the fate of the broader international system -- a system of alliances, partnerships, and multinational institutions that our country has helped build and sustain for more than sixty years. The U.S. military must therefore be prepared to support broad national goals of promoting stability in key regions, providing assistance to nations in need, and promoting the common good."

The QDR has it precisely backwards. The fact that the U.S. is a global power reduces the impact of instability in any particular region. Whatever "the common good" is internationally, it rarely is promoted by war. And the "systems of alliances, partnerships, and multinational

institutions" so busily supported for decades should be capable of promoting stability, reducing the need for American military intervention.

Yet today policymakers tend to describe protecting allies as a "vital interest." The QDR notes that we maintain a nuclear arsenal to deter attack "on our allies and partners" as well as the U.S. The document also asserts the importance of "maintaining the ability to prevail against two capable nation-state aggressors" even though it is inconceivable that such aggression would be committed against America. Rather, Washington is configuring its military to protect other states from "'capable nation-state aggressors."

Europe is the most obvious example. NATO no longer makes any sense from America's perspective. Even a paranoid schizophrenic would have a difficult time concocting a military threat to Western Europe. There is no there there, as Gertrude Stein once said of Oakland.

Eastern Europe worries more about a revived Russia, but Moscow is demanding respect, not territory. With a shrinking population, political system built on personal rule rather than democratic legitimacy, unstable resource-based economy, and badly faded version of the Red Army, Russia's ambitions far exceed its capabilities.

That might not stop Moscow from beating up on hapless, irresponsible Georgia. But that is not a conflict requiring U.S. military intervention. Europe has far more at stake in the security and independence of its eastern reaches, and the EU has roughly thrice the population and ten times the GDP of Russia. The Europeans might prefer not to do more, but that's no reason for Washington to treat the fate of Tbilisi or other distant states as America's responsibility.

NATO was established to prevent an attack on the U.S. or large historic allies intimately tied to America. In that sense, the alliance was to preserve international space for the U.S. to survive and thrive in the midst of a global struggle with an antagonistic ideological hegemon. Washington now dominates the globe, enjoying as much space as it could desire. Expanding NATO to the Caucasus puts America at risk by adding an enormous security liability: Washington would have to be prepared to face down a nuclear-armed power on its border involving interests it, with far greater justification than America, views as vital.

Similarly dangerous is Washington's security guarantee to South Korea. In 1950 North Korea's invasion of the Republic of Korea was seen as part of the great global game with the Soviet Union. Today Pyongyang is isolated; the ROK vastly outranges the North in resources and capabilities.

Yet the U.S. remains dangerously entangled in the vagaries of inter-

Korean politics. The South is well able to defend itself. If Washington did not deploy troops on the Korean peninsula, it could lean back and let Seoul in conjunction with Japan and China take the lead in dealing with the North. Indeed, the nuclear issue is of far greater concern to them than to America, which possesses the ability to destroy the Kim regime many times over even if North Korea developed a nuclear arsenal. The U.S. has an interest in promoting nonproliferation, but not in being the guarantor of Northeast Asian stability.

The impact of America's alliance with Japan is only slightly less pernicious. Grant that historical memories are long, and Tokyo's neighbors prefer U.S. to Japanese warships plying Pacific sea-lanes. That preference is no cause for Washington to take on the burden of defending populous and prosperous nations which have reason to cooperate to maintain the peace and stability which is in all of their interest. Japan and its neighbors need to -- and without a forward American presence would be forced to -- work together to protect their region.

The U.S. should watch warily from across the Pacific should a potential hegemonic threat arise. But none currently exists. Even China fails the test. Beijing is assertive but so far not aggressive, and is ringed by states with an interest in preserving China's "peaceful rise." They should be encouraged to do so.

In time American military engagement will become unacceptably costly. The People's Republic of China is developing a military capable of deterring American intervention, and there is nothing the U.S. can do at reasonable expense in response. It will cost the Chinese far less to be able to sink American carriers than for Washington to build new ones. One can argue that the U.S. must do whatever is necessary when American survival is at stake. But that surely is not the case in East Asia; the security of allies is not the same as U.S. security.

Perhaps the most threatening situation today involves Iran, with politicians from across the spectrum demanding military action. There's obviously no urgency: there is no proof that Tehran is planning to build nuclear weapons even if it is seeking the capability, and there is abundant evidence that Iran is finding the development process more complicated and slower than expected. Moreover, the U.S. possesses an overwhelming retaliatory capability and the Iranian regime has demonstrated no suicidal tendencies.

Given America's obvious ability to defend itself, much of the demand for U.S. action is actually directed at protecting an unofficial ally, Israel. Yet despite obvious reasons to value friendship with Israel, its defense is not a vital American interest warranting war. In any case, Israel possesses upwards of 200 nuclear weapons as well as the region's most competent conventional military. There is nothing in Iranian behavior even as an Islamic republic that suggests a desire for self-

immolation.

The U.S. gains much by cooperating with like-minded states to promote shared objectives. Creating alliances can be a cost-effective means to promote American security. But the tail should not wag the dog. Washington should maintain alliances to deter and win wars, not go to war to preserve alliances.

America has vital interests, but aiding friendly nations, especially those capable of defending themselves, is rarely one of them. Far more important is keeping America secure and at peace.

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—Thomas Jefferson