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The American Conservative

America's Facebook Friend Allies

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Washington has been supremely embarrassed—by a nominal ally, as usual. After the Trump administration insisted that its involvement in Yemen helped reduce civilian casualties there, Saudi Arabia promptly launched an air attack that slaughtered a bus full of school children.

It was a demonstration of how America's allies often cause more trouble than her enemies do.

No country has more allies than the United States. The most important ones are in Europe and Asia, though Washington also designates favored nations as “Major Non-NATO Allies” (MNNAs), which typically receive some mix of security guarantees and financial support. Then there are a few informal allies, which are security partners in all but name.

This list seems ever to increase. U.S. policymakers constantly seek out more, rather like how many strive to increase their Facebook friends. And indeed, many of America's professed friends have no more value than those on Facebook.

There are 28 other NATO members, including such behemoths as Albania, Montenegro, and Slovenia. Recently invited to join was Macedonia. Presidents have designated 16 nations as MNNAs, which includes Australia, Japan, and South Korea, along with Egypt, Bahrain, Israel, Tunisia, Pakistan, and Argentina. Saudi Arabia and Taiwan are de facto allies, with presumed but unclear security guarantees.

That's a lot of charges for America to keep track of. Unfortunately, many of these allies haven't been putting their best faces forward lately, which has caused plenty of headaches for Washington.

Germany. This enemy turned ally should be the cornerstone of any continental defense alliance. The Federal Republic has Europe's largest economy and population. It also has a history of military accomplishment (though Germans are admittedly uncomfortable pointing that out). Yet Berlin treats Germany's and Europe's defense as an afterthought. The Merkel government has

ramped up military spending slightly, though to what effect is unclear: the Bundeswehr lacks even minimal readiness and could not be deployed in any serious fight.

Turkey. Having morphed into the caliphate that the Islamic State only claimed to be, Turkey is growing more Islamist and authoritarian by the day. The new sultan, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, still feels the need to hold elections. But they are mere formalities, with Erdogan having seized control of the media, imprisoned political opponents, punished critical businessmen, and silenced academics. He's also treated tens of thousands of people as traitors, prosecuting some, firing others, banning travel by many, and scaring private firms against employing most of them. At the same time, Ankara has undermined Washington's security interests, purchasing Russian military equipment, facilitating ISIS activity on Turkish territory, targeting America's Kurdish allies, threatening U.S. troops stationed with Kurdish forces, and confronting NATO neighbor Greece.

Saudi Arabia. Even after modestly loosening the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's cultural strictures, the Saudi government shares few interests and values with America. Politically and religiously, Saudi is a totalitarian state. There are no meaningful elections, no critical media, no opposition activists, no public worship by non-Muslims, and no limits to the abusive power of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman al-Saud. Despite his reputation as a reformer, MbS, as he is known, is unwilling to accept the slightest criticism at home or abroad. Internationally he is a reckless and bloody adventurer. He attacked Yemen to restore a pliable leader to power, creating a humanitarian catastrophe. He supported radical insurgents in Syria, contributing to that nation's violent implosion. He attempted to isolate and apparently planned to invade Qatar with the intention of turning it into a puppet state, until U.S. pressure and Turkish troops prevented that. He kidnapped Lebanon's prime minister and forced his resignation—which was immediately reversed when Riyadh finally allowed its captive to leave.

Egypt. Pharaoh Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who usually uses the title "president," has created a police state far more fearsome than anything deposed dictator Hosni Mubarak ever ran. Cairo, dependent on Saudi subsidies, joined the assault on Qatar. Washington, meanwhile, pays Egypt not to attack Israel, even though the comfortable, well-paid, and influential Egyptian military elite has no intention of risking the good life with a foolish war. The money instead underwrites the imprisonment of tens of thousands of Egyptians, who years hence likely will remember who aided their oppressors.

Israel. Politically inviolate in America, Israel is a regional superpower that requires neither subsidy nor guarantee for its security. Its only serious existential threat comes from within, created by more than half a century of brutal occupation over a large Palestinian population. Moreover, in coming years that occupation could force Israel to choose between being Jewish and democratic. And even worse, the Netanyahu government is driving Washington towards war with Iran, a nation that poses no threat to America and that can be contained by its neighbors.

Poland and the Baltic States. The reason Germany and most other NATO members spend so little on their militaries is because they don't really fear Russia. An attack by Moscow on Europe is only slightly more likely than a Martian invasion. President Vladimir Putin is not pushing a

global ideology and would benefit little if his troops ended up occupying a war-ravaged continent. Russia would also lose any full-scale war with America and Europe. Poland and the Baltics seemingly do worry more about Moscow's ambitions, but they aren't willing to spend on their defense. These governments—other than Estonia—have found it painful to hit even the alliance's recommended military spending level of 2 percent of GDP. Yet even that is a pitiful amount for nations that claim to be at risk of a Russian blitzkrieg. Instead of pouring resources into a tough territorial defense, they want Washington to station U.S. forces on their territory.

Argentina, Tunisia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Philippines, and Morocco. Why are these considered allies? Argentina is a nice place to visit, but it has little security relevance to the United States: years ago, Washington chose the United Kingdom over Argentina when those two states came to blows over the Falkland Islands. Tunisia is the one success of the Arab Spring, but a "major" ally? American forces should have come home from Afghanistan years ago. Pakistan has continually undermined America's policy in neighboring Afghanistan. The Philippines has a military even less fit for combat than Germany's but expects Washington to fight China to protect its contested territorial claims. And although Morocco is a great tourist destination, it occupies the Western Sahara against the wishes of that region's people.

Japan. Another enemy turned friend, Tokyo for decades enthusiastically hid behind its U.S.-imposed constitution, which technically forbids it to create a military. The Japanese instead established a "Self-Defense Force" and greatly limited its responsibilities. That made sense in the early years after World War II, but certainly not today. Japan has the capability to deter both North Korea and China and could contribute significantly to Asian-Pacific security. Even once skeptical nations such as the Philippines want their former occupier to do more. So far, however, Japan prefers that U.S. policymakers risk Los Angeles to protect Tokyo.

Montenegro. This micro-state entered NATO last year, bringing with it a 2,000-man military. The country is best known as the movie set for the James Bond film *Casino Royale*. As an international combatant, it compares poorly to the imaginary Duchy of Grand Fenwick immortalized in the novel and movie *The Mouse that Roared*. Likely next new member Macedonia has a similar feel, though its military is bigger, about 8,000 men.

Facebook friends aren't worth much, but at least they normally don't cost anything. Accepting an online friend does not obligate one to pay his mortgage, gas up his car, and defend him from local gangsters.

America's allies are very different. They expect to be paid for everything they do, don't do, could have done, and were willing to do if we'd thought to ask. They want security guarantees, explicit and implicit. In the worst cases, they drag America into stupid, needless, endless wars.

Alliances are not social clubs to which all countries should belong. They are a means to an end, military organizations that should enhance America's security. Most of our allies today fail that standard. Ending unnecessary alliances doesn't mean always going it alone. It means cooperating with countries towards shared ends while maintaining the flexibility to assess the degree of danger and proper response.

Thankfully, America faces few true existential threats. Washington should stop automatically treating its allies' enemies as its own enemies. Better to avoid unnecessary conflicts, leave capable friendly states responsible for their own defense, and encourage regional security cooperation.

If U.S. military action is necessary as a last resort, so be it. But let that action reflect necessity on behalf of American security, not misguided loyalty to a fake ally.

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