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America's Alliances Are Costly Relics

By JUSTIN LOGAN
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Over the past 60 years, the United States has accumulated a remarkable number of alliances. Today, nearly all of Europe, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Australia and a range of other nations peer out at the world from behind America's skirts. America's allies bring a multitude of liabilities and few assets to the table, however, and it is unclear how today's global archipelago of alliances serves American interests.

Start with the locus classicus of American alliances, NATO. Several former heads of state and other policymakers from Central and Eastern European NATO members greeted the Obama administration six months into its term with a hectoring letter demanding Washington pay more attention to their region. The letter argues that these leaders' "ability to sustain public support at home for our contributions to Alliance missions abroad ... depends on us being able to show that our own security concerns are being addressed in NATO and close cooperation with the United States."

In other words, these countries have options, and if Uncle Sam would like to continue receiving their contributions in places like Afghanistan, Washington had better pony up. The authors have several suggestions for us, one being to deploy military personnel on their territory. After all, they argue, "at a regional level and vis-à-vis our nations," Russia acts as a revisionist power.

It is easy to understand why these countries, given their experience with Russia, want increased American support. The trouble is that capitals across Central and Eastern Europe have shown precious little interest in carrying their own weight within the NATO alliance.

This past summer, for example, the Czech Defense Ministry announced it was cutting its defense budget by more than 10 percent. Other countries complaining of the looming threat from Russia, such as Poland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, all spend less than 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense, an anemic figure.

Note that the countries could afford a robust defense against Russia if they chose. In 2008, the combined GDP of the NATO members added after the Cold War was roughly equal to Russia's. Along with wealthier Western European countries, these nations could keep Russia from pushing them around.

The simplest explanation for these countries' low defense spending is that their leaders know that Washington will do the work for them. And why should they pay for a service that will be provided anyway? That was more or less how things went during the Cold War.

U.S. alliances in Asia are almost as perverse. During his recent visit to Japan and South Korea, Defense Secretary Robert Gates faced a plucky new Japanese prime minister, Yukio Hatoyama. After imploring Hatoyama to continue Japan's miniscule contribution to the war in Afghanistan and not to

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reconsider the deal to realign U.S. forces in Japan, Gates was asked

whether the U.S. military role in Japan might be scaled back. Offering the obligatory reference to the countries' "shared interest" in regional security, Gates admitted that "the primary purpose of our alliance from a military standpoint is to provide for the security of Japan ... It allows Japan to have a defense budget ... of roughly 1 percent of GDP."

This is an excellent reason why the Japanese should support the alliance, but it raises the question of why U.S. taxpayers should want to pick up the tab for Japan's security.

The next day, Gates was in South Korea, where he reassured the South Koreans that the United States would continue to provide extended deterrence to Seoul, "including the nuclear umbrella." There is such a thing as too much reassurance, however. Gates' statement likely had two effects: one, to diminish Seoul's concerns about the threat posed by the North, and two, to diminish Chinese apprehension that a nuclear North Korea may ultimately lead to a U.S. departure from Japan and South Korea, possibly causing those countries to develop their own nuclear arsenals.

Given that Washington's current policy on North Korea would benefit from a greater, not lesser, concern about the future in both Seoul and Beijing, Gates' explicit promise of nuclear extended deterrence to Seoul likely dampened the admittedly low prospects for progress on the North Korean nuclear issue.

America's alliances are no longer considered responses to security challenges. Instead, they have become ends in themselves. In an era of record-breaking budget deficits and serious economic problems at home, the billions of dollars Uncle Sam pays each year to baby-sit Europe and East Asia ought to be coming in for scrutiny, not perpetual affirmation. ■

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