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Are America's Alliances Fraying?

By [Paul Starobin](#)

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Washington got the U.N. Security Council to approve a new round of sanctions against Iran on June 9. But the sanctions, watered down by China and Russia, are far from "crippling," as initially sought by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. And two usual U.S. allies, NATO member Turkey and Brazil, voted against even this modest package.

The episode begs a larger question: Is the ability of Washington to assemble coalitions on behalf of its global objectives starting to ebb, even with the White House now in the hands of a president, Barack Obama, who touts himself as a committed multilateralist, opposed to the "go-it-alone" mindset of his predecessor, George W. Bush?

Another point in favor of this proposition is Obama's failure to get the Europeans to commit a large number of troops to the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Then again, in East Asia, with a rising China and an ever-dangerous North Korea both stark geopolitical facts, both Japan and South Korea are still looking to align themselves under the U.S. security umbrella.

What do you think? Are our alliances fraying -- and if so, why? Does this trend have to do with our flailing economy, with inept diplomacy, or with some other set of factors?



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Fraying, Yes; Disappearing, No

By [Christopher Preble](#)

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It is hardly newsworthy when one of America's allies bucks Uncle Sam. It has become an almost daily occurrence. The latest snub by Turkey and Brazil at the UNSC wasn't even a surprise. The two countries had signaled their discontent with Washington's approach toward Iran's nuclear program by sponsoring a compromise aimed at thwarting the drive for another round of sanctions. And Turkey's role in the Gaza-blockade-busting flotilla has elicited a chorus of criticism.

But just because the United States has had difficulty keeping its allies in line doesn't mean that it can't assemble a coalition to deal with common challenges. It all depends on whether the parties agree on the nature and severity of the threat, and on the best means for mitigating it. In this context, the multinational naval task force operating off the Horn of Africa has had great success beating back piracy in the region. The countries that choose to participate agree that piracy poses a threat to their commercial interests, and are

willing to band together in a loose coalition -- and not as part of a formal, permanent alliance -- in order to deal with the challenge. Their contributions are generally consistent with their interests; the benefits seen as in line with the costs.

Alliances are no different, or, at least, they shouldn't be. Alliances are supposed to be sustained by interests. (British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston's observation that "nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests" has been repeated so many times that it has become cliched). And yet, the United States has maintained its commitment to NATO, South Korea and Japan in recent months, even as it is obvious that the parties do not share common interests. The alliances have become an end in and of themselves, instead of the means to an end.

Thus we have the spectacle of the Obama administration pressuring the Japanese government to relent on the permanent stationing of U.S. troops in Okinawa -- and forcing Prime Minister Hatoyama from office in the process (more on this [here](#)). Meanwhile, we see European countries cutting defense spending at a time when U.S. spending continues to rise. When she presented the Obama administration's national security strategy late last month, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared that NATO was one of several global commitments that was "[embedded in the DNA of American foreign policy](#)."

Hardly. While a bipartisan consensus in Washington is enamored of Europe's dependence upon the United States, most Americans tire of defending our wealthy European allies who are eminently capable of defending themselves. The resentment has only grown as these same allies have shown precious little enthusiasm for supporting the United States in its hour of need in Afghanistan.

So while the alliances are fraying, they aren't going away. They should be. As Ben Friedman and I explained in a [just-released report](#) "The imbalance of power that brought our Cold War alliances long ago disappeared. The alliances should follow suit." If the United States were to adopt a more restrained grand strategy, one less concerned with defending other countries, and more focused on our core security interests, we would still retain the ability to assemble coalitions of the willing when circumstances called for such a multilateral approach. As it is today, we have created a class of wealthy and secure allies who lack the capability, but most importantly the will, to act on their own behalf, let alone in the service of the world's policeman.

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