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Alliances And American Greatness

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THE ISSUE

The United States is the world's richest and most powerful country. But its greatest strength lies in its diplomacy—not in its economy or its arsenal. No country in the history of the world has ever had such abundant and enduring alliances.

These alliances are force multipliers for the United States. They make war less likely and share the burden of maintaining peace. In the event of war, they make it more likely that U.S. interests will prevail. But their importance is not solely military. America, as a country governed by the rule of law, flourishes in a rules-based international environment. For example, alliances not only keep sea lanes open and safe from pirates; they form the basis of American policy in keeping the Internet free and open too. Without allies, the United States risks being outvoted in international rules-setting bodies of all kinds, on everything from commerce to outer space.

True, Washington can use its diplomatic, economic and military weight unilaterally. It can walk away from international bodies it regards as inimical to its interests. But this approach has high costs: if it becomes the standard operating procedure for all American interaction with the outside world, then American interests will suffer.

Alliances and American greatness

The overwhelming lesson of history is that alliances work. Everyone involved must set priorities and make trade-offs, but over time—even from a strictly pragmatic point of view—durable alliances are a win-win for all concerned. By joining forces, countries can establish rules-based formats that ease intercourse between nations.

Such systems are good for small countries that would otherwise have to survive in a might-is-right world. But they are good for big countries too, which gain the greatest influence for the lowest cost. In short, alliances allow you a say in writing the rules that govern other countries' behavior, and in deciding how those rules are enforced.

This matters all the more in an era where the United States—because of economic development in other countries—is becoming proportionately weaker. In 1950 it accounted for one-fourth of world GDP. By 1980, the U.S. share had dropped to 22 percent, and by 2008 to 18 percent. Today, measured by purchasing power parity, the United States accounts for just over 16 percent of world GDP, slightly behind China.

In such a world, alliances matter more rather than less. America's allies in the European Union—whose members have a combined population of 508 million and a GDP of \$20 trillion (again at PPP)—are bigger and stronger, in population and in economic terms, than the United States itself.

Other countries have their arrangements too: Russia can count Armenia, Belarus, Tajikistan, Syria and Venezuela as supporters of its foreign and defense policy. China has arm-twisted Cambodia. But these are satrapies, not allies.

What makes America's alliances—notably in Europe and Asia—so remarkable is that they are mostly based not on exigency, dependence or coercion, but on deep trust and friendship. They are not short-term tactical arrangements, but reflect strategic choices, in most cases dating back many decades. Their roots lie in the wartime alliance against Nazism and Japanese militarism. The democracies could have lost those conflicts. Adolf Hitler could have throttled Britain into submission and then beaten the Soviet Union. He could have gained atomic weapons. If so, the United States would not have been able to liberate Europe. American public opinion might even have flinched at the cost of beating a more wisely led Japan.

These wartime alliances deepened during the Cold War. Old foes—Italy, Japan and Germany—became friends in the cause of freedom. America in the late 1940s committed itself permanently to being a European security power. That helped forestall communist subversion and aggression in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and other countries. It also fostered a deep network of transatlantic ties at all levels—not only in the military, security and intelligence communities but across politics, the media and cultural life.

“The alliance-based system *has been eroded severely in the past 15 years.*”

We had other allies in the Cold War where the alliance was ruthlessly pragmatic, and the trade-offs difficult or even disgusting; support for the bloodstained dictatorship in Indonesia, kleptocrats in Africa, and death-squad regimes in Latin America were among them.

We made compromises in Europe too—going slow on denazification in Germany, turning blind eyes to dictatorships in Greece and Portugal, colluding with organized crime and other sinister elements in Italy. But the main aim never wavered: to prevent further countries falling into communist captivity, and by constraining the Soviet empire, sowing the seeds of its downfall.

The United States could not have done that alone—and Western Europe could not have survived without the United States. Similarly in Asia, U.S.-led alliances could not prevent the fall of Indochina, but they did save South Korea and Taiwan from Chinese communist aggression.

These Cold War achievements risk being forgotten amid the rise of neo-Jacksonian foreign policy thinking, as characterized by international relations expert Walter Russell Mead.¹ This anti-elitist, hyper-patriotic approach has no room for the careful compromises of the alliance-centred approach. Mead writes: “Jacksonians tend to advocate an insular foreign policy, while lashing out with a ‘don’t tread on me’ ferocity when challenged from abroad.”

Dealing with this challenge requires more than simply asserting the virtues of the existing approach. The alliance-based system has been eroded severely in the past 15 years. It was gravely tested by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which exposed poor planning and execution in U.S. foreign and defense policy. A country that aspires to lead others cannot rest on past successes: it needs to prove its capabilities. The United States under both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations disappointed its allies—and its own people.

Perhaps an even bigger setback lay in the failure to change the center of gravity in both the Pacific and Atlantic alliances from military to economic security. The Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership both had the potential to reshape the American-led West on the basis of mutual economic interests. These two landmark agreements were in truth about far more than boosting trade, growth and jobs. They would have also cemented the role of American-led alliances as global rule-setters for the economy of the 21st century. It is regrettable that the Obama administration and European leaders were so timid in making the case for these agreements.

A third failure involves burden-sharing. For historical reasons, the two biggest U.S. allies—Germany and Japan—have taken a cautious attitude to military spending and capability. They have also indulged in damaging anti-American posturing—in Japan’s case over U.S. military bases, and in Germany’s case over the invented scandal surrounding Edward Snowden, an NSA contractor who defected to Russia.

Other allies can be exasperating too. Only a handful of European countries—notably Estonia, Poland and the United Kingdom—spend the 2 percent of GDP on defense that NATO mandates. Others were quick to cash the “peace dividend” in the 1990s. U.S. officials have for years rightly berated their European allies for the lamentable quantity and quality of their defense spending. The trend is now upwards—particularly in the frontline states of Latvia and Lithuania. Any incoming American administration would need to say clearly that the alliances must be future-proofed with a sustainable mix of military and other contributions from all sides.

But it is worth remembering that even military flyweights have sent their sons and daughters to die in U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Countries like Estonia and non-NATO Georgia were not attacked on 9/11. They faced no serious threat from Islamist terrorism. But they believed that their duty as allies was to fight alongside the United States, which had invoked NATO’s “one for all, and all for one” mutual-assistance clause, Article 5 of the Washington Treaty.² This was not only the right thing to do; it also added to their countries’ geopolitical insurance. Were they ever to be attacked, America would surely honor its obligation to defend them. That trust has been rattled lately, but it still holds.

The big picture is bleak and simple. The world is a dangerous place where a rising China and a declining Russia both pose existential threats to U.S. interests. Americans also face a range of secondary threats including nuclear-armed North Korea, Iran and global terrorism.

The United States cannot wish those dangers away. It can choose only how to react to them. It can accommodate one or more of these challenges, abandoning allies—and along with that, American global leadership. It can try and deal with them alone—at a huge cost in effort, money and probably lives—or it can build and sustain coalitions and alliances. These are imperfect and on occasion infuriating. But both alternatives are worse. As Winston Churchill noted: “There is at least one thing worse than fighting with allies—and that is fighting without them.”

Endnotes

1. Walter Russell Mead, *Andrew Jackson, Revenant*, The American Interest, January 17, 2016.
2. “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.”



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