



Reviving and Revisiting Alliances

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America's global network of alliances is rightly seen as one of its greatest foreign-policy assets.¹ They are far more numerous and deeper than the clienteles of America's rivals; encompass most of the world's freest and richest states; extend U.S. diplomatic, commercial, and military reach into the world's vital regions; and add substantially to American military power. In an era of great-power competition, they offer important advantages for managing the pressures of protracted rivalry. Preserving them must count among the highest aims of U.S. foreign policy.

Yet U.S. alliances are also, in critical respects, underperforming. Some allies refuse to bear a greater burden for their own defense. Many maintain trade and regulatory policies that disadvantage U.S. firms and could imperil America's technological edge vis-à-vis China. Some have deepening ties with the very adversaries that the United States guards them against. While none of this is particularly new, the return of great-power competition makes these deficiencies more damaging to U.S. interests and more urgently in need of redress by U.S. policy.

Conservatives should want to see U.S. alliances preserved but also renovated and brought into closer alignment with America's strategic needs. Achieving the parallel goals of preservation and renovation will not be easy, since the latter often involves pressing allies to adopt policies that they dislike, thus producing a political dynamic of disharmony. Yet America's ability to preserve its alliances is intimately intertwined with its ability to improve the way they

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, this paper uses the term *alliances* to refer to relationships with foreign states that the United States is bound by treaty to defend in the event of war.

operate. Only by actually resisting China and Russia and aligning with the United States on important issues will allies retain the utility that, from a U.S. strategic standpoint, makes them so valuable.

The Conservative Case for Alliances

There is a long tradition among American conservatives—from John Adams to Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and Ronald Reagan—of seeing alliances as instruments of prudential statecraft. This tradition is distinct from a Jeffersonian-Libertarian approach that sees alliances as bringing unnecessary risk and a Progressive approach that sees them as a stepping-stone to transnationalism. By contrast, the conservative attitude has been grounded in a national-interest-based recognition that alliances, properly situated and delineated, provide tangible advantages that would not be obtained as readily, if at all, by acting alone.

These include, in the first instance, the geopolitical advantage of checking the growth of powerful rivals in their own regions before they can reach proportions dangerous to the United States. While America's insular geography has military advantages, it also complicates our ability to influence developments in Western Europe and East Asia, the two regions that historically have possessed the demographic and industrial strength to generate serious threats to the homeland. As America learned in both world wars, simply reacting to events in these regions requires us to wade, cyclically and at very high cost, back into European or Asian affairs after a hegemon has emerged to upset the regional balance.

By maintaining forward alliances, America can reinforce and work with the natural tendency of smaller states to resist rising powers, thus forestalling attempts at regional hegemony in Eurasia before they occur. Through NATO and its Asian alliances and partnerships, the United States has on its side the combined firepower of scores of states as well as predictable access to bases and ports that extend U.S. power far from its own shores.

There are also broader political, economic, and moral benefits to alliances. The long spans and shared republican systems of government of America's most important alliances make them a natural political base of support vis-à-vis despotic rivals. Their commitment to a generally free and open economic order makes them supportive of international trade practices that tend to favor America.

In all these cases, the value of alliances is likely to grow as great-power competition intensifies. The United States will need alliances

for aggregating capabilities and waging protracted strategic, political, and economic competition with large state actors. Indeed, alliances themselves will be a major object of this competition, as our rivals seek to separate the United States from its allies as a means of dislodging it from their neighborhoods and, in China's case, contesting the commanding heights of international order.

Waging this competition will require not just the fact of alliances but specific outcomes in the policies of allies to shape the balance of power in ways that are favorable to the United States. Namely, America should want its alliances to provide

- a sufficiently large and accessible **economic and demographic base** for sustaining U.S. advantages in key military–technological fields;
- a sufficiently motivated **base of political resistance** to deny Chinese and Russian influence, commercial coercion, and economic-energy leverage in key regions; and
- sufficient **allied military capabilities** to augment U.S. resistance to the pacing threat (China) and backstop stability in secondary theaters.

Where Alliances Fall Short

How well do current U.S. alliances measure up against these requirements? The answer is mixed. On paper, they give America a comfortable margin of strength vis-à-vis rivals that are incapable of mustering more than a few clients. On closer scrutiny, however, many U.S. allies behave in ways that are strategically suboptimal or even deleterious to U.S. interests, and that could impair America's ability to compete effectively with China and Russia in the years ahead.

Most familiarly, there is the problem of overdependence on U.S. military protection. This is especially egregious in Europe where, despite efforts by successive U.S. administrations, average allied defense spending falls short of the metrics agreed to under NATO's Defense Investment Pledge. Germany, our largest and wealthiest European ally, is only able to deploy half of its already limited heavy military equipment at any given moment. The situation is only somewhat better in Asia, where U.S. allies lag in capabilities and readiness and where our largest ally, Japan, continues to limit defense budgets to 1 percent of its GDP.

While the United States has long pressed its allies in both regions to

do more militarily, the return of great-power competition heightens the stakes. Under the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS), the Pentagon relinquished the two-war standard in favor of developing the ability to fight and win a war against one adversary—China. To realize that goal without adversely affecting the stability of Europe, the United States will need European NATO allies to shoulder the primary burden of conventional deterrence against Russia, and it will need allies in the Western Pacific to act as first responders to Chinese aggression. In both cases, the military weakness of our richest allies, occurring at a moment when our rivals are modernizing and expanding their arsenals, increases the security burden on the United States.

The shortcomings of U.S. alliances are not only military in nature—they are also economic. U.S. and allied markets are not sufficiently aligned to give America the scale and access to compete effectively with a rival of China's vast domestic market. America's major allied trade partners—the EU, the UK, Japan, Australia, and South Korea—maintain generally liberal trade regimes, but many apply steeper tariff and nontariff barriers to U.S. goods than we apply to theirs. The EU maintains agricultural tariffs that are more than double those of the United States and onerous nontariff barriers (e.g., quotas, regulations and rules of origin) that hurt U.S. exports.

One area where EU policies especially hinder America's ability to compete with China is in emerging technology. Since most of the critical areas of innovation (e.g., artificial intelligence, quantum computing, fintech, and robotics) are data-driven, those powers that command the largest data pools will have a strategic advantage. This makes a U.S.–EU convergence around an innovation-friendly global standard for technological norms and regulations imperative. Yet, at present, the EU maintains a digital regulatory regime that impedes convergence and a punitive tax and regulatory stance toward American firms—often while retaining a permissive stance toward monopolistic practices by China's Huawei and Russia's Gazprom.

Finally, there is the problem of allies deepening their technological, financial, and energy dependencies on the very rivals that America protects them against. In some instances, this trend has an ideological hue, as U.S. allies with pseudo-authoritarian or weakly democratic governments are courted by, and often welcome, Chinese and Russian influence. Turkey's pursuit of Russian S-400 missile systems, Hungary's hospitality to Huawei and the Russian Global Investment Bank, and Saudi Arabia's purchase of Russian defense systems are all cases in point. This ideological correlation, however, is far from consistent, as illustrated by Germany's development of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, Italy's participation in the South Stream pipeline,

Indian and Israeli defense ties with Russia, and the participation by numerous democratic allies in Chinese state-backed infrastructure and telecom deals.

In the military, economic, and political arenas, the behavior of allies is an outgrowth of the permissive conditions of the post-Cold War era. Without a major threat on the horizon, it was natural that democratic governments would tilt spending away from defense to social welfare and base supply chain, energy, or 5G sourcing decisions primarily on cost rather than security grounds. Reinforcing this tendency has been the appeal of access to the Chinese market, which has given many allies like Germany a perceived interest in courting China as an economic opportunity and opposing efforts at the EU level to treat it as a strategic challenge.

As great-power competition intensifies, this behavior will take on an altogether more damaging effect for two reasons.

First, it sets back the United States in tangible ways vis-à-vis its main rivals, especially China. A Germany that shirks defense responsibilities will make it harder for the U.S. military to secure the European and Asian theaters simultaneously. An EU that saps and fetters Western centers of technological innovation makes it more likely that China will gain a crucial edge over the U.S. military in algorithmic warfare. And a U.S. ally that is dependent on China for financing or 5G capabilities, or on Russia for gas in wintertime, is an ally that will be more susceptible to Beijing's or Moscow's leverage and potentially unavailable to America in a time of crisis or war.

Second, allies that do not carry their weight or that harm U.S. interests are likely to eventually lose American domestic support. Polling suggests that a little over half of Americans view alliances positively. Among Republicans, a far larger number—around half, compared to 15 percent for Democrats—believe that America should go it alone when U.S. and allied interests diverge. As the national debt grows and the trade-offs involved in defending Europe and Asia against rivals on a static defense budget sharpen, voters are likely to become more interested in the tangible results that these investments produce for U.S. national security and the economy.

How Conservatives Should Approach Alliances

Conservatives should prioritize preserving alliances while also delivering better results from them for the American people. A conservative agenda for alliances would include the following steps:

1. *Consolidate the U.S. alliance structure at its heart—Europe.* Even as America shifts its military focus to the Western Pacific, it should see the transatlantic alliance as the seat of its political and economic strength in the world. American diplomacy should prioritize the consolidation of this Western core, as embodied in NATO and the U.S.–EU economic relationship, both as a means of denying Europe’s resources to China and equipping itself with the broadest base possible for sustained competition.

2. *Take calculated risks to rebalance the transatlantic alliance.* America needs a more equitable sharing of burdens and benefits with its main allies. We should be willing to reconsider U.S. opposition to shared European military capabilities (e.g., via a European level of ambition in NATO) in exchange for allies taking greater responsibility vis-à-vis Russia. We should also pursue a technological grand bargain in which we meet the EU halfway on privacy and other digital concerns in exchange for tax and regulatory frameworks that do not sap innovation.

3. *Treat allies as integrated partners rather than as dependents.* Alliances should be America’s foremost tool for managing the trade-offs required for dealing with multifront strategic competition. Our allies, by dint of geography, stand to lose more than we do if China and Russia succeed in their ambitious aims. They thus have a strong incentive to elevate their efforts, as many are already doing. The U.S. government needs an integrated strategy outlining what it needs from allies to plug emerging deterrence gaps and bring U.S. diplomacy into alignment with the military requirements of the NDS.

4. *Find ways to pressure allies other than with sanctions.* Overuse of sanctions creates incentives for allies to decouple from or even duplicate the U.S. financial system. We should use sanctions sparingly with allies and, when their secondary effects are necessary, provide as much clarity as possible on the terms of compliance for allied firms. We need handier tools for providing negative feedback to allies, such as withholding support for allied aims in international forums or restricting cooperation in intelligence-sharing and similar fields. While being selective about the tools, we should not see the fact of pressuring allies to modify behavior that harms our interests as being beyond the political pale.

5. *Favor democracies but do not exclude nondemocracies.* America should use democratic alliances to discomfit despotic adversaries. Pressing China and Russia on human rights abuses is not only intrinsically right; it also binds Europe and allied Asia closer to

America. When it comes to the governance of allies and partners, we should consistently support democracy but not estrange states that share our interests and thereby risk pushing them into rival orbits. As in the Cold War, we should play the long game of competing for positive influence, treat allies better than enemies, and pursue the widest coalition possible to counterbalance China and Russia.

6. *Use a variety of alliance and partnership formats.* The United States will increasingly find itself needing closer alignment with states with which it is unlikely or unable to form formal alliances, especially in Asia and the Middle East. We should develop tools for cementing these relationships; for example, by creating new legal categories that allow us to make wider use of financial and military perks under the Arms Export Control Act with countries like India, Vietnam, or Singapore with which it is in our interest to deepen strategic ties.

Conservatives should treat alliances and partnerships as national assets to be preserved but also as non-static structures that must be continually tended to ensure that their functioning reflects the national interest. Balancing these two goals—what Edmund Burke called the principles of conservation and correction—will require political and diplomatic skill. However, it is the essence of the conservative vocation in both domestic and foreign policy.