



Reviving and Revisiting Alliances

A Response from Richard Fontaine

A searching debate has emerged in recent years about the value of U.S. allies. For traditionalists, America's alliances are a defining advantage. If its global alliance network did not exist today, they contend, leaders would no doubt be trying to construct one. For all the difficulties inherent in alliance management, traditionalists hold, it's better to fight with allies than without them and easier to deter with them than on our own. For those of a more Trumpian bent, allies are more frequently a problem rather than a solution: free-riding countries smugly enriching themselves under American protection, underinvesting in their own defense while inadequately reimbursing the United States for the cost of their security. Members of a third group, the restrainers, fret that even full-freight allies do not add to American security but subtract from it, entangling us in conflicts marginal to our national interest.

The traditionalists have, in my view, the strongest claim, for some of the reasons Wess Mitchell enumerates in his paper. They add to American military power, generate a broader sense of legitimacy for U.S. actions, and convey economic benefits through close alignment. Recent history backs up this view. NATO countries went to war in Afghanistan after we, not they, were attacked; China discerns a material difference between an American position and an allied one; most of our closest and most reliable economic partners are also military allies.

At the same time, a good deal of the recent debate about allies has been misplaced. Whether it's Trumpian haranguing or Bidenesque nice-guyism that elicits increased defense spending is an interesting question. So too is whether reassurance or hints of abandonment

better induce allies to fall in line with American plans for geopolitical competition. Yet a better course would be to shift the focus on our inquiry. We should think of American alliances in a way that is simultaneously *more reductive* and *broader* than existing concepts.

The debate is more reductive, because it alternately fetishizes, romanticizes, or finds moral inequity in alliance arrangements.¹ In fact, they represent insurance policies against threats that may or may not materialize and hold as their objective not the mystical union of two peoples but rather the mitigation of security risk. That is not often how we speak of allies. Leaders frequently invoke national affinity, shared military sacrifice, historical triumphs and traumas, and, more recently, the presence or absence of fair and good-faith burden-sharing. It is perhaps natural to do so when the currency is national blood and treasure and great, even existential, risks are at stake. The owner of an insurance policy is naturally interested in the assets behind it, the inclinations of its managers, and its other attributes. Nonetheless, what matters most is its *performance*.

So it is—or so it should be—with American alliances. The Trump administration’s monomaniacal focus on the percentage of GDP spent by NATO members on defense is understandable, to some extent. Underinvesting in defense, as Germany and other allies have done for years, renders them incapable of acting meaningfully in key contingencies. Lack of capacity and capability in some countries requires other allies to fill in the gaps or forgo a mission. Unbalanced burden-sharing undermines shared enterprises. That hardly seems fair to those pulling their weight. The topline of allied defense budgets is an important thing.

It is not, however, the most important thing. Treating it as such means leaving critical dimensions of allied value unappreciated and pulls focus away from factors that matter more.

Consider the NATO Wales summit’s totemic 2 percent target for domestic defense spending. What originated as a loose, in-the-future commitment buried in a NATO communiqué eventually became the stuff of political rallies and presidential summits. But there is spending, and then there is spending wisely. In some European countries, defense spending is as much about job creation as about safeguarding national security. Other allies squeeze greater capacity out of smaller total expenditures. Norway, for instance, spends less than 2 percent but contributes across the board, in part because personnel costs do not consume its budget. Denmark

¹ Here defined, as in Mitchell’s paper, as relationships with foreign states which the United States is bound by treaty to defend in the event of war.

eliminated a costly submarine fleet in order to afford a doubling of its expeditionary forces.²

Which NATO ally spends the greatest proportion of GDP on defense? It is not Britain, which has fought alongside the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and in operations against the Islamic State and which this year is sending a carrier group into the Indo-Pacific. Nor is it the Germans, who, with their paltry 1.53 percent, nevertheless made the third-highest troop contribution to the counter-Islamic State campaign and sent 100,000 troops to Afghanistan over two decades. The winner is Greece, which allocates a whopping 2.58 percent of GDP to defense but can hardly be considered NATO's vanguard. Today, Portugal is closer to the target, percentage-wise, than the Dutch, and Albania is closer to it than Canada. Clearly such budget numbers tell just part of the story at best.

One could spin a similar story in Asia. South Korea is well above 2 percent, and Australia is likely to crack the threshold this year. Japan hovers around 1 percent of GDP, even after a decade of defense budget increases. Treaty ally Thailand spends a greater proportion than Japan, but Tokyo is the more valuable security partner.

A more accurate evaluation of allied worth would look to other important criteria. Some bring niche capabilities to the fight, such as special operations forces and maritime assets, while others are integrated into America's extended nuclear deterrent. Still others host American bases or troops on rotation. At times, allies shoulder some of the defense load in certain arenas. France, for example, took charge of counterterrorism operations in Mali, allowing the United States to focus elsewhere. When Germany declined to participate in the 2011 operation in Libya, it took on other missions to free up NATO assets. A broader measure of worth would look at allies' reliability and their will to stay engaged in grinding fights.

Defense spending is, of course, just one area in which allies sometimes fall short of America's desired mark. In Mitchell's essay, allied underperformance is said to include discriminatory regulatory and trade practices that hurt U.S. businesses. And so it does, since tensions in the economic arena could infect comity in the security sphere. Three cheers, then, for pressing our allies toward a liberal international economic agenda. However, we should take care to include the world's largest economy—our own—in that rallying cry. The United States has put steel and aluminum tariffs

² For recent figures, see NATO Public Diplomacy Division, "Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2013-2020)," https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/10/pdf/pr-2020-104-en.pdf. See also Richard Fontaine, "What's a NATO Ally Worth: Getting Beyond the Two Percent Benchmark, Center for a New American Security, February 21, 2017, <https://isnblog.ethz.ch/defense/whats-a-nato-ally-worth-getting-beyond-the-two-percent-benchmark>.

on its allies, adopted “Buy America” provisions that disadvantage allied suppliers, cancelled key projects (e.g., Canada’s Keystone Pipeline), imposed duties when allies sell products to Americans at a price below cost, and enshrined an industrial policy to incentivize domestic manufacturing. A key near-term objective, it would seem, is to keep our own protectionist impulses from diminishing allied solidarity.

Conceptualizing alliances as insurance policies designed to buy down security risk helps clarify what American leaders should care about most. It does not, however, address the sources of risk themselves. Here the ambit of American alliances must be broadened.

Take, for example, foreign efforts to disrupt a country’s democratic practice. Such activities represent an acute national security threat, as evidenced by Russia’s behavior during the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections. NATO must remain prepared for Russian tank columns to roll across Baltic borders. Seoul and Washington will train for a barrage of North Korean artillery aimed south of the demilitarized zone. Japan and the United States should ready themselves for a Chinese move on the Senkaku Islands. All those are appropriate measures, but they make up an incomplete allied agenda. An updated one, both for Europe and the Indo-Pacific, must focus to a far greater extent on protecting political systems and societies against malign foreign interference.

So far, such threats have remained strangely siloed. The 9/11 attacks properly elicited a response from all NATO allies. Russia’s seizure of Crimea from Ukraine elicited a coordinated, coercive (nonmilitary) reaction from transatlantic allies. The poisoning of a Russian national in Britain did the same, and even the Alexei Navalny case—in which a Russian citizen was targeted by Russians on Russian soil—brought transatlantic partners together in common response. Yet political interference has elicited no similar reaction. Russian activity during the 2016 U.S. election was treated as a domestic American affair, to be dealt with (or not) only by the United States. Meddling in the French presidential election was seen as a matter for Paris, Chinese interference in Australian politics as an issue for Canberra. The high probability of continued malign efforts such as these, together with the vast damage such operations can inflict, requires allies to treat them as common threats, deserving of shared defenses and common responses.

The traditional way of conceptualizing American alliances should be broadened in another way as well. In the medium term, adding new, formal treaty allies to the American collection is unlikely. Finland, Ukraine, and Georgia will not join NATO anytime soon; India resists

anything that smacks of a formal alliance; and neither Vietnam nor Singapore would join the United States in a mutual defense pact. Many other mechanisms for partnership are, however, possible.

The past decade has seen an explosion in informal security ties—mostly bilateral, mostly in Asia—that include American allies and other partners.³ The region is awash with high-level defense visits, bilateral security agreements, joint operations and military exercises, arms sales and military education programs driven by worries about China’s rise and uncertainty about American staying power. The United States can be a leading beneficiary of this growing network of relationships. More diverse security ties in Asia can have the dual effect of creating a stronger deterrent against coercion and aggression while simultaneously diminishing the bilateral intensity of U.S.–China competition. As a continued American presence in and security commitment to Europe renders war there virtually unthinkable, U.S. diplomacy should prioritize the deepening and broadening of this Indo-Pacific security network.

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Reduce conceptually. Focus on the most meaningful measures of value. Expand the perceived range of threats, broaden the possible structures of cooperation, and double down on American alliances as the greatest distinguishing factor between us and our rivals. In 1984, President Ronald Reagan said that “to keep the peace, we and our allies must be strong enough to convince any potential aggressor that war could bring no benefit, only disaster.” Not just *we*. We and our allies. True enough then. Wise enough today.

³ See Richard Fontaine, et al., “Networking Asian Security: An Integrated Approach to Order in the Pacific,” Center for a New American Security, June 2017, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/networking-asian-security>.