



Reviving and Revisiting Alliances

Response from Nadia Schadlow

Dr. Wess Mitchell’s essay affirms what most of us (perhaps all but the most ardent isolationists) believe: that alliances provide broad political, economic, and moral benefits and that they are a competitive advantage for the United States. Mitchell ably describes many of these advantages. They include a shared commitment to political systems that value liberty and openness and a “base of political resistance” to deny Chinese and Russian influence and economic leverage in key regions. He describes how the military capabilities of allies contribute to deterrence, noting that these capabilities augment U.S. resistance to the pacing threat (China) and backstop stability in other theaters. Alliances, Mitchell concludes, “provide tangible advantages that would not be obtained as readily, if at all, by acting alone.”

Mitchell’s paper also highlights the challenges that the United States faces today in managing its alliances in order to deter adversaries and, if required, prevail in conflict. These challenges are significant. In recent years, many key allies have deepened their technological, financial, and energy dependencies on the very rivals that America protects them against. As Mitchell explains, an ally dependent on China for financing or 5G capabilities or on Russia for natural gas supplies is an ally that is more susceptible to manipulation by those adversaries and “potentially unavailable to America in a time of crisis or war.”

Mitchell then summarizes the problem posed by a divergence of interests among allies, noting that “pressing allies to adopt policies that they do not want to adopt” can produce a “political dynamic of disharmony.” Such a dynamic of disharmony has implications beyond burden sharing. In thinking about this, I was struck by a concept that Richard Nixon advanced some 40 years ago in his

short but insightful book *Real Peace*. Nixon—having described the contest between the United States and the Soviet Union as based on “profound and irreconcilable differences”—reminds us that “real peace” requires active management. Peace is not “an end to conflict” but a means of living with conflict. Peace requires constant attention, without which it cannot survive. In the face of a threat like the Soviet Union, the United States could not undertake this requirement alone. Allies were a central part of the formula.

The question today is whether our allies would agree with Nixon’s formulation of “real peace.” Are they actively managing the peace that is required to deter war? A commitment to *active competition* involves more than burden-sharing, though that, of course, matters. Equally important is the broader political zeitgeist of European nations—especially that of Western Europe. In an insightful essay, Ulkrike Franke, a young German scholar, observes that Germans have “learned to reject” interests almost completely. Her generation, she adds, has developed an almost romantic idea of international relations in which alliances are seen as “friendships.” Today, “German millennials struggle with the idea that the military is an element of geopolitical power.”¹ Such views are not limited to Germany alone. According to recent polling, Japanese citizens would prefer by a 10-to-1 margin that the United States, not China, lead the world. However, as of 2015, less than a quarter of Japanese believed that Tokyo should play a more active military role in regional affairs.²

Certainly, the United States would do well to advance many of the suggestions that Mitchell outlines. These include treating alliances as a tool for promoting the national interest, consistently affirming U.S. treaty obligations, remaining unafraid to use pressure—even coercion—to modify allied behavior while “treat[ing] allies better than enemies” and exhausting all means before applying punitive tools, and remaining open-minded when it comes to including non-liberal states in coalitions to compete with China and Russia.

Yet, missing from his thoughtful analysis is additional emphasis on what Europe itself must do to meet us halfway. Western nations can pat themselves on the back, congratulating themselves that we are “friends” again now that President Donald Trump has left office, but how have conditions actually changed?³ In our self-congratulatory

¹ Ulkrike Franke, “A Millennial Considers the New German Problem After 30 Years of Peace,” *War on the Rocks*, May 19, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/a-millennial-considers-the-new-german-problem-after-30-years-of-peace/>.

² *Pew Research Center*, November 2018, “Despite Rising Economic Confidence, Japanese See Best Days Behind Them and Say Children Face a Bleak Future,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/11/12/views-of-the-u-s-and-president-trump/>; *Pew Research Center*, April 2015, “Americans, Japanese: Mutual Respect 70 Years After the End of WWII,” <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/04/07/americans-japanese-mutual-respect-70-years-after-the-end-of-wwii/>.

³ It’s worth noting here that, despite recent news that the EU–China CAI is unlikely to pass, the very fact that it is still under consideration undermines the EU’s tough rhetoric on China.

bubble, we risk falling into what Mitchell calls the trap of “optical comity.” I would add that pursuing optical comity risks creating *optical illusions* over real capabilities. The Biden administration appears to be overcorrecting for President Trump’s supposed eschewing of allies and risks by using summitry and messaging to perpetuate an optical illusion of strength, while allowing real capabilities to atrophy. This will only harm U.S. interests as well as the interests of our allies.

How could policymakers avoid optical illusions and achieve real outcomes? Ultimately, since much of the strategic competition we face will take place within alliance frameworks, the European public and business communities must show more support for policy shifts—for the active maintenance of real peace. The signs are not good.

Europe’s economic dependencies on China play to Beijing’s strengths, allowing the Chinese Communist Party to use economic leverage toward a divide-and-conquer strategy. Some have argued that to counter China’s economic statecraft, an economic alliance is necessary. Such an alliance would provide a vehicle for the coordinated use of economic tools. Under a collective defense provision, allies would take swift and immediate action in response to Chinese coercion.⁴ Alliance members would impose tariffs on Chinese goods or lower tariffs on allied countries who are threatened. They may have to directly buy goods from the allied countries that are under attack or provide subsidized loans. The first few uses of such a collective defense procedure may be costly. Is such an approach feasible? Probably not. But the fact is, without allies on board, we cannot outgun, outspend, or outproduce China.

Mitchell is right to point out that “those powers that command the largest data pools will have a strategic advantage,” but it seems that U.S.–EU convergence on high technology issues is aspirational at this stage. Before pushing for an even more complex technological alliance, perhaps U.S. policymakers should begin working through ground-level differences, especially on matters of data privacy surrounding the General Data Protection Regulation.

We must ask ourselves: What are the alternatives should the EU refuse to shift fully into our orbit? One question that deserves further discussion is whether Europe remains the true linchpin of the U.S. alliance system. Mitchell does not discuss the Quad. Yet, in the face of a rising China, America’s Asian allies may have the most to lose. In an age when Washington is shifting its military focus to the Pacific, perhaps it is time we shift our diplomatic focus there as well.

⁴ See Anthony Vinci, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/08/like-nato-but-for-economics/614332/>.