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Bad Idea: Permanent Alliances

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In Washington, military alliances have become an end in themselves rather than a means to security; an icon for worship, instead of a policy with costs and benefits worth weighing. The idea that alliances should be permanent—“embedded in the DNA of American foreign policy and not sort of beginning and ending,” as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton [put](#) it—has replaced George Washington’s fear that permanent alliances meant “infusing” foreign enmities into U.S. politics and needless participation in other states’ wars. The United States now casually collects allies, like Montenegro, which became the twenty-eighth member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) last year after the faintest of Senate debates, as if they are friendship badges rather than promises to defend states, risk nuclear war, and possibly kill millions of people on their behalf.

About a third of the world’s countries are U.S. allies in some sense. The commitments through the Rio Treaty to most of South and Central America do not mean much these days, but the extension of security guarantees to NATO nations, plus Asian allies South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines, are key drivers of U.S. military requirements. Besides that, the United States has a number of quasi allies, who are not provided U.S. security guarantees by treaty, but get something similar through U.S. politics; the key ones are Israel, Taiwan, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf States.

U.S. alliances were formed by two goals. One was to balance the power of states viewed, usually with some exaggeration, as threats to overwhelm local rivals and become local hegemons threatening to the United States. The other was to integrate past rivals Germany and Japan into coalitions less threatening to others.

The fear of regional hegemony is significantly diminished today. With an economy smaller than Italy's and demography only a tad better than a death spiral, Russia is not able to restore its Soviet empire. China is investing a steady share of its growing economy in its military but has little ability, whatever its desire, to overcome East Asia's defense-dominant geography by bringing its forces across water or mountains to conquer rich and technologically proficient rivals. Technological trends [are](#) heightening the advantages afforded the defender in a conflict and should make U.S. rivals more self-reliant.

When making wars or deterring imminent aggression, allies are mostly good to have. The trouble is making defense commitments permanent. Open-ended security obligations encourage free-riding and moral hazard among those protected. They also require the maintenance of excessive U.S. force structure, which wastes money, encourages needless war, and perpetuates the myth that our security demands global dominance.

Free-riding is the most obvious problem. President Trump's treatment of NATO allies has created much Beltway consternation, but the United States has [complained](#) about its NATO allies' defense spending since the midst of the Cold War, albeit more politely. The reason these complaints are not heeded, besides limited threats, is that U.S. defenses undercut European incentives to heighten their own. Washington's rhetoric insisting that U.S. alliances are sacrosanct, regardless of conditions, tells allied leaders that they can safely genuflect to, but essentially ignore, U.S. demands for bigger military investment.

Complaints notwithstanding, free-riding is largely an intended consequence of U.S. defense strategy. As the 1992 Defense Planning Guidance [admitted](#), protecting allies prevents them from emerging as rivals to U.S. preeminence. Allies are meant to be useful but infantilized, like little brothers that do our bidding without too much guff. That thinking [explains](#) Washington's hostility to independent European military capability—better to have NATO subordinates than a European superpower that is not dependent.

U.S. security guarantees also encourage [moral hazard](#)—where a person takes greater risk because someone else bears the cost. The protection of the world's preeminent military can make allies incautious in dealing with rivals. Even non-allies fall prey to the phenomenon if they think they have something approaching a U.S. security guarantee, as occurred with Georgia and Russia in 2008. Using NATO to aid Ukraine could produce similar results today. Saudi Arabia's recent adventurism is another example. Alliances can cause instability

among neighbors, via moral hazard, pulling the United States into wars it unintentionally encouraged. Were allies more concerned about losing U.S. protection, this problem would be reduced.

A related phenomenon occurs when states that the United States protects abuse their citizens. Turkey, Hungary, Poland—all NATO allies that have recently backslid away from liberal values—are examples, along with various Middle-Eastern states. No doubt, these countries' rulers would still abuse civil liberties if U.S. protection were less assured, but the assurance removes an incentive for better behavior.

Permanent alliances also cause damage at home, starting with excessive defense spending. Hawks argue that alliances are nearly free since allies subsidize basing costs, and U.S. forces would incur similar expenses at home. But with fewer allies to defend, the United States could maintain a [leaner](#) force structure.

The large and dispersed force structure that permanent alliances demand also leads to [temptation](#). Forces deployed around the world, generally in undemanding security environments like Europe, are too easily repurposed to questionable wars. The same goes for the swollen force structure alliances create at home. As Madeline Albright [asked](#) Colin Powell, “What's the point of having this superb military you're always talking about if we can't use it?”

Permanent alliances also confuse the United States' idea of its interests. It takes a lot of persuasion to convince Americans that their geographically favored and historically safe nation depends on intervening in so many distant conflicts. To make the case, leaders are often “clearer than truth,” as Secretary of State Dean Acheson [explained](#), in hyping the monsters for alliances to destroy.

With repetition over decades, cynical exaggerations [become](#) like strategic sacraments, part of policymakers' operational code. History is adjusted to accommodate supporting myths. For example, we are told that the United States always meant to stay at the center of [the](#) “liberal order,” it created in the early Cold War. Never mind that U.S. strategy was [expressly designed](#) to allow U.S. forces to come home from Europe once Germany was rebuilt and its military integrated into Europe's or that the Eisenhower administration [supported](#) the development of a European Army outside NATO to that end. Likewise, policymakers often

assume that stable military balances demand a hegemon backing one party, even though [history suggests](#) otherwise, especially where geographic barriers dampen security competition, as in Asia.

Early in the Cold War, the extension of U.S. military commitments mostly made sense. But today no power—China notwithstanding—threatens to dominate Eurasia. Germany and Japan’s expansionism is gone. Most U.S. allies are rich. Trade, diplomacy, and goodwill do not depend on endlessly protecting them.

Permanent defense guarantees inflate U.S. military costs, makes rich states into enfeebled dependents, and heightens the danger of getting pulled into needless wars. Over time, U.S. entanglements caused Washington to exaggerate its insecurity, conflate U.S. interests with other states,’ and dismiss their ability to secure themselves without our help. It should be obvious that U.S. alliances should serve U.S. security interests. But if alliances are permanent, U.S. security interests serve them.

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