

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 47  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2017*

Article 4

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Summer 6-1-2017

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### Recommended Citation

Hal Brands & Peter D. Feaver, "What Are America's Alliances Good For?," *Parameters* 47, no. 2 (2017), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol47/iss2/4>

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## What Are America's Alliances Good For?

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Hal Brands and Peter D. Feaver

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**ABSTRACT:** The costs and risks associated with America's military alliances have always been more visible and easily understood than the benefits. In reality, however, those costs and risks are frequently overstated, whereas the benefits are more numerous and significant than often appreciated. This article offers a more accurate net assessment of America's alliances in hopes of better informing current policy debates.

President Donald Trump has shaken up the foreign policy debate in the United States, and nowhere more so than in relations with America's longstanding treaty allies. Since Trump emerged as a presidential candidate in mid-2015, he has often put US alliances squarely in his crosshairs. Trump labeled the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) "obsolete" and suggested leaving its easternmost members to defend themselves. He floated the idea of encouraging nuclear proliferation by Japan and South Korea to enable US geopolitical retrenchment. As president, Trump pointedly refused to explicitly affirm America's Article 5 commitment at his first NATO summit, and he publicly dressed down the European allies for failing to spend more on defense.<sup>1</sup>

In a subsequent trip to Europe, Trump offered a more robust statement of US commitment to NATO, but nonetheless vented his frustration with allies for not, in his view, shouldering sufficient burdens.<sup>2</sup> Underlying these critiques has been the idea that US alliances are fundamentally sucker bets—one-sided relationships in which a guileless America bears all the costs and parasitic allies derive all the benefits. "We're taken advantage by every nation in the world virtually," Trump commented in February 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the bipartisan US foreign policy elite has generally reacted with alarm at the administration's rhetoric and policies. Leading commentators have warned that Trump is threatening to harm the alliances Washington spent decades building, institutions generally considered to be among America's most precious geopolitical assets.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, international observers have worried that the United States

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1 See, variously, Aaron Eglitis, Toluse Olorunnipa, and Andy Sharp, "Trump's NATO Skepticism Raises Alarm for Allies Near Russia," Bloomberg, July 21, 2016; Stephanie Condon, "Donald Trump: Japan, South Korea Might Need Nuclear Weapons," CBS News, March 29, 2016; and Jeremy Diamond, "Trump Scolds NATO Allies over Defense Spending," CNN, May 25, 2017.

2 Abby Phillip and John Wagner, "In Poland, Trump Reaffirms Commitment to NATO, Chides Russia," *Daily Herald* (Chicago), July 6, 2017.

3 Lauren Gambino and Sabrina Siddiqui, "Trump Defends Chaotic Foreign Policy: 'We're Going to Straighten It Out, OK?'" *Guardian*, February 2, 2017.

4 See, for instance, Dov Zakheim, "Trump's Position on Treaty Commitments Has Already Hurt America," *Foreign Policy*, July 22, 2016.

seems to be turning away from its most important friends.<sup>5</sup> Yet despite the reaction they have provoked, Trump's critiques have nonetheless revealed a fundamental asymmetry in the cost-benefit assessment of US alliances.

The fact of the matter is that the costs and risks associated with America's alliances have always been more visible and easily understood than the benefits. Moreover, because US foreign policy elites have long become accustomed to military alliances as facts of geopolitical life, even proalliance observers often struggle to specify, in concrete terms, why those institutions are so valuable. Supporters are thus at a rhetorical disadvantage in these arguments. They often defend alliances by pointing to vague and ill-defined benefits, or simply by invoking tradition, whereas critics can point to specific dangers and burdens, including those more easily reduced to a campaign trail slogan or a pithy tweet. And Trump is not alone in his attacks on US alliances—many leading “realist” academics have long offered similar critiques, which the president has now effectively appropriated as his own. “The U.S. net gain from its alliance relationships is . . . not commensurate with the cost,” Barry Posen writes: “the bargain has become unprofitable to the United States.”<sup>6</sup>

In this essay, we offer a more accurate net assessment of America's alliances by detailing the purported costs and considerable—if less widely understood—benefits. We first summarize the most common critiques of US alliances and explain why many of those critiques are less persuasive than they initially seem. We then provide a detailed typology of the myriad benefits—military and otherwise—of US alliances. As this analysis shows, the net assessment of US alliances is strongly positive, and the balance is not even particularly close. Today as always, there remain significant challenges associated with alliance management and reasonable debates to be had about addressing them. But those debates need to be informed by a better understanding of what US alliances are good for in the first place.

### **Costs, Real and Perceived**

Trump is not the first prominent observer to critique US alliances. Ever since the country's founding, permanent military alliances have been a source of controversy. The alliance structure built from the ashes of World War II, and gradually expanded in the decades thereafter, has itself been the subject of heated debate. Leading political figures such as Senator Robert Taft initially opposed an American commitment to NATO; Senator Michael Mansfield sought to force withdrawal of half the US troops deployed to Europe in the early 1970s. The post-Cold War expansion of NATO touched off perhaps the most intense foreign policy debate of the 1990s. And in recent decades, there has been a lively cottage industry among academics who deem US alliances expensive, unrewarding, and dangerous, and who argue for attenuating or simply abandoning those commitments. The standard academic critique—much

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<sup>5</sup> Krishnadev Calamur, “Germany's Merkel Urges ‘Europe to Take Our Fate into Our Own Hands,’” *Atlantic*, May 30, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 34.

of which Trump has adopted or adapted as his own—adduces several key costs and dangers associated with US alliances.

First, America's military alliances require Washington to defend countries whose security is not vital to the United States. Second, US alliances compel military expenditures far higher than would be necessary simply to defend America itself. Third, maintaining the credibility of US alliances forces America to adopt aggressive, forward-leaning defense strategies. Fourth, having allies raises the risk of the United States being entrapped in unwanted conflicts. Fifth, America's allies habitually free ride on America's own exertions. Sixth, alliances limit America's freedom of action and cause unending diplomatic headaches.<sup>7</sup>

So how accurate are these critiques? We consider each in its turn. In sum, America's alliance system is hardly costless, and all of these critiques contain at least a kernel of truth. In many cases, however, the costs are significantly exaggerated—or critics simply ignore that the United States would have to pay similar costs even if it had no alliances.

*Alliances require defending countries whose security is not vital to the United States.* The United States has formal security commitments to over thirty treaty allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific and informal or ambiguous security commitments to over thirty additional countries.<sup>8</sup> These commitments, particularly the formal treaty commitments, represent something approaching a solemn vow to shed blood to defend non-American lands. And some of the countries protected by US guarantees are not, in and of themselves, critical to the global balance of power or the physical security of the United States.<sup>9</sup> The United States could be called upon to resist a Russian seizure of Estonia, and yet the American people could survive and thrive in a world in which Estonia was occupied by Russian forces.

Yet if this critique is not baseless, it is often overstated, because the United States does have a vital interest in defending many of its current allies. The basic geopolitical lesson of World Wars I and II—a lesson many critics of US alliances endorse—is that Washington should not allow any hostile power to dominate a crucial geopolitical region such as Europe, East Asia, or the Middle East.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the United States could still find itself compelled to fight to defend those regions—and

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7 For examples of these critiques, see Posen, *Restraint*; Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Stephen M. Walt, *Taming American Power: The Global Response to U.S. Primacy* (New York: Norton, 2006); Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009); Eric A. Nordlinger, *Isolationism Reconfigured: American Foreign Policy for a New Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995); and Ted Galen Carpenter, *A Search for Enemies: America's Alliances after the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 1992). Some of these works build on earlier (and often less critical) studies of alliance dynamics, including Mancur Olson Jr. and Richard Zeckhauser, "An Economic Theory of Alliances," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 48, 3 (August 1996): 266–79, doi:10.2307/1927082; and Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

8 See Adam Taylor, "Map: The U.S. Is Bound by Treaties to Defend a Quarter of Humanity," *Washington Post*, May 30, 2015. A precise count of US allies is difficult to achieve because the actual meaning and implications of certain US defense agreements—the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, for instance—are ambiguous.

9 It is important to note that all of America's defense commitments provide an "out" through clauses allowing Washington to act in accordance with its own constitutional processes. In essence, treaties—although they are ratified by the Senate and carry the force of law—represent more of a moral obligation than a tightly binding legal obligation to other states.

10 See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 95, 4 (July/August 2016): 70–83.

many key countries therein—even if formal alliance relationships did not exist. This was, after all, precisely what happened during both world wars and the Persian Gulf War, when American officials concluded that US security required defending or liberating key countries in these regions, even though Washington had not previously had military alliances there. Alliances do not cause US entanglements overseas; entanglements cause alliances.

*US alliances compel military expenditures far higher than would be necessary to defend America itself.* To defend allies in the western Pacific or Europe, the United States requires global power-projection capabilities and a military that can win not just in its own backyard but in the backyards of its great-power rivals. America thus needs a larger, more technologically advanced, more sophisticated force than would be necessary strictly for continental defense, along with an accompanying global-basing network.

For these reasons, the US military is indeed more expensive than it would be absent US alliances. Yet this critique is also overblown. After all, if the United States has an interest in preventing any hostile power from dominating a key region of Eurasia, then alliances or no alliances, Washington would still require a military capable of projecting decisive power into these regions in an emergency.<sup>11</sup> Likewise, because America has geopolitical objectives beyond the protection of allies—such as counterterrorism and securing the global commons—the need for advanced power projection capabilities and overseas bases would remain even in a world without alliances.

Such a force might still be smaller than today's military. If the United States pursued a strategy in which it rolled back or attenuated key alliances, one critic suggests, it could reduce defense spending to 2.5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), as opposed to 3.5 or 4 percent.<sup>12</sup> Yet America would still have the world's largest defense budget by a considerable margin under this approach, and such a force—which would consist, for instance, of only four carrier strike groups instead of 10 to 11 today—might not actually be sufficient to command the global commons and fight its way back into key regions in a crisis.<sup>13</sup>

In fact, if the United States pulled back from its alliance commitments and waited for a crisis to develop before surging back into key regions, it might find such a mission more difficult—and more expensive—than simply protecting its allies in the first place. It was precisely this fact—that the United States ended up deploying millions of troops to liberate Western Europe and East Asia during World War II, at financial and human costs that would be almost unimaginable today, that led American policymakers to adopt a different approach featuring formal alliances and forward deployments thereafter.<sup>14</sup> Nor would eliminating parts of the US basing network associated with protecting American

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11 Evan Braden Montgomery, "Contested Primacy in the Western Pacific: China's Rise and the Future of U.S. Power Projection," *International Security* 38, no. 4 (Spring 2014): 121, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00160.

12 Posen, *Restraint*.

13 Hal Brands, *The Limits of Offshore Balancing* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2015), 23–28.

14 See Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 205; and James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "An Ocean Too Far: Offshore Balancing in the Indian Ocean," *Asian Security* 8, 1 (March 2012): 11, doi:10.1080/14799855.2011.652025.

allies save much money absent corresponding force reductions, because host-nation support arrangements often make it roughly as cheap, if not cheaper, to station American forces overseas than to station them in the United States.<sup>15</sup> American defense expenditures could slightly decrease in a world without US military alliances, at least in the short-term, but the savings would be less dramatic—and perhaps more ephemeral—than one might expect.

*Maintaining the credibility of American alliances requires adopting forward-leaning defense strategies.* This critique comes closer to the mark. Prior to the Cold War, the US strategic posture was essentially one of allowing aggressors to conquer friendly states in Europe and East Asia, and then mobilizing to liberate those areas. Since the late 1940s, however, US policymakers have worried that American allies will be unlikely to risk aligning with Washington—and thereby antagonizing hostile neighbors such as the Soviet Union—if they believe the United States will simply allow them to be overrun in a conflict. If being liberated first requires being conquered, who wants to be liberated?<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, since the early Cold War, the United States has focused on defending rather than liberating allies. This strategy required Washington to pledge to defend West Germany at the Rhine despite the enormous difficulty of doing so, to forward-station forces in Europe and East Asia, and even to pledge rapid nuclear escalation to defend vulnerable European allies.<sup>17</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, the dilemmas associated with forward defense have been far less dangerous and agonizing because the United States has not confronted a rival superpower. But the return of great-power competition in recent years has begun to raise these issues anew, albeit in less dramatic fashion. Part of the rationale for the Pentagon's much-hyped Air-Sea Battle concept appears to be to cripple China's power-projection capabilities before it can subdue US allies in the Western Pacific.<sup>18</sup> The recent stationing of US and NATO battalions in the Baltic states—in some cases, less than 200 miles from major Russian cities such as St. Petersburg—reflects similar imperatives.

*Having allies raises the risk of entrapment.* Critics of US alliances point to the danger of “reckless driving” and “chain-ganging.” Reckless driving occurs when an ally, protected by a US security guarantee, behaves more provocatively than would otherwise be prudent. Reckless driving, in turn, can trigger chain-ganging. If an ally intentionally or unintentionally triggers conflict with an adversary, a formal security commitment may force the guarantor to enter the conflict whether it desires to or not. There is some irreducible danger of reckless driving and chain-ganging in any credible alliance, of course. Yet historical evidence suggests that this problem is actually less severe in US alliances than one might expect.

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15 See Patrick Mills et al, *The Costs of Commitment: Cost Analysis of Overseas Air Force Basing* (working paper, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, CA, April 2012).

16 On this dynamic, see Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, The Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992).

17 Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

18 On AirSea Battle (now called the Joint Concept for Access and Maneuver in the Global Commons), see Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Why AirSea Battle?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010).

As Michael Beckley and Victor Cha have shown, US policymakers have long been sensitive to this dilemma, and have thus inserted loopholes or escape hatches into security agreements with potentially problematic partners, such as Syngman Rhee's South Korea or Chiang Kai-Shek's Taiwan.<sup>19</sup> Today, for instance, the US security commitment to Taiwan is ambiguous for this very purpose: to prevent Taipei from assuming Washington will automatically rescue Taiwan if its leaders provoke China. NATO forbids new members from having outstanding territorial disputes for the same reason.

In recent decades, moreover, the United States has repeatedly pressured allies and security partners to behave with restraint and warned those allies against provoking stronger neighbors. American officials underscored this point in dealings with Taiwan during the George W. Bush administration, and reportedly, with the Philippines and other allies in their more recent maritime disputes with China.<sup>20</sup> As a result, scholars have found few, if any, unambiguous cases over the past 70 years in which the United States was dragged into shooting wars solely because of alliance commitments.<sup>21</sup> Reckless driving and chain-ganging are risks, but US officials have so far proven fairly adept at managing them.

*Allies habitually free ride.* The opposite of reckless driving and chain-ganging is free-riding. Logically, because America is committed to defend its allies, those states can spend less than they would otherwise on their own defense. In 2011, for instance, the United States spent around 4.5 percent of its GDP on defense, compared to 1.6 percent of GDP for European NATO allies and roughly 1 percent for Japan.<sup>22</sup>

To be fair, these statistics exaggerate the free-riding problem because America's defense budget includes higher-than-average personnel costs as a way of recruiting and retaining an all-volunteer force in contrast to many allies and partners whose labor markets enable them to recruit personnel at lower wages or who rely primarily on conscription.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, this gap was subsequently narrowed as US military spending, which had been inflated by the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, fell after 2010. Yet free-riding is nonetheless real enough, as US officials have frankly recognized. As Secretary of Defense Robert Gates told NATO in 2011, "The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, this problem has troubling implications, for it renders

19 Michael Beckley, "The Myth of Entangling Alliances: Reassessing the Security Risks of U.S. Defense Pacts," *International Security* 39, 4 (Spring 2015): 7–48, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00197; and Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

20 Thomas J. Christensen, *The China Challenge: Shaping the Choices of a Rising Power* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2015), chapter 7. See also Ja Ian Chong and Todd R. Hall, "The Lessons of 1914 for East Asia Today: Missing the Trees for the Forest," *International Security* 39, 1 (Summer 2014): 23–24, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00165.

21 Beckley, "Myth of Entangling Alliances."

22 Posen, *Restraint*, 35–36.

23 Lindsay P. Cohn, "How Much is Enough?," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 47–61.

24 Thom Shanker and Steven Erlanger, "Blunt U.S. Warning Reveals Deep Strains in NATO," *New York Times*, June 10, 2011.

the allies less capable of contributing to either out-of-area interventions or collective defense operations.

If free-riding is indeed a dilemma, however, it is also an implicit goal of US alliances, and it probably costs less—when “cost” is defined holistically—than the likely alternatives. As extensive scholarship demonstrates, a primary reason Washington created its postwar military alliances was to break the cycle of unrestrained geopolitical competition in Europe and East Asia, for fear such competition would give rise to arms races and wars. Moreover, another prominent goal of US alliances has been to restrain nuclear proliferation, for fear the spread of nuclear weapons would make nuclear war more likely and dilute American influence.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, some degree of free-riding is a feature of America’s alliances, not a glitch. The United States has traditionally preferred for allies to spend less on defense than they otherwise might, because this restraint creates a world in which America itself is safer and more influential. To put it another way, does Washington really want a world in which Germany and Japan both spend 5 percent of GDP on defense and engage in nuclear arms-racing with adversaries? The answer is surely no, even if US officials might still urge these countries to spend moderately more than they do today.

*Alliances limit America’s freedom of action and cause unending diplomatic headaches.* This is true enough. In international politics, it can be harder to do things multilaterally than unilaterally. In many cases, relying on allies means relying on less capable military forces to perform functions the US military could better perform on its own, as Washington discovered during the intervention in Kosovo in the late 1990s. Allies bring their own idiosyncrasies into the relationship, often with messy and frustrating results. A vivid example of this dynamic was the set of caveats each NATO ally brought to the mission in Afghanistan—restrictions on when, where, and how its forces could fight—ensuring that, in terms of combat punch, the whole was somewhat less than the sum of the parts.<sup>26</sup>

Making alliances work also requires continual “gardening,” in the phrase of George Shultz—continually massaging difficult relationships and suffering insufferable allies such as Charles de Gaulle. As Jimmy Carter once remarked, a meeting with allies represented “one of the worst days of my diplomatic life.”<sup>27</sup> Yet there are obvious counterpoints here: frustrations are inherent in any diplomatic relationship, the United States undoubtedly finds it easier to address those frustrations within the context of deeply institutionalized alliances, and any constraints on US freedom of action have to be weighed against the myriad other ways in which alliances enhance US flexibility and power.

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25 See Francis Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation” *International Security* 40, no. 1 (Summer 2015): 9–46, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00205; and Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *America Abroad: The United States’ Global Role in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 88–121.

26 Seth Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 238–55.

27 Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 24.

Overall, the costs and frustrations of US alliances are not illusory, but many of those costs are actually less severe or salient than they appear. The benefits of US alliances, by contrast, are both more diverse and more significant than often appreciated.

### **Benefits, Direct and Indirect**

Just as critics overstate the costs of alliances, so they dramatically understate the benefits. The most direct and obvious advantages involve the way allies allow the United States to punch above its own weight by augmenting US military strengths across a range of issues and contingencies. Yet alliances also offer additional geostrategic, political-diplomatic, and economic advantages that enhance American power and support a number of critical US national objectives. In other words, America's alliances are less entangling than empowering. By binding itself to the defense of like-minded nations, the world's sole superpower makes itself all the more effective and influential.

#### *Military Punching Power*

First and foremost, having allies significantly increases the military power the United States can bring to bear on a given battlefield. During the Cold War, European forces were vital to maintaining something approximating a balance of power vis-à-vis Warsaw Pact forces.<sup>28</sup> NATO countries and other treaty allies also contributed to nearly every major US combat operation of the postwar era, even though nearly all of those operations occurred “out of area.” The United States may have waged the Korean War in part to prove its willingness to defend its treaty allies in Europe, but the NATO allies contributed over 20,000 troops—in addition to other capabilities—to the fight.<sup>29</sup> Even during the Vietnam War, treaty allies South Korea and Australia contributed substantial fighting elements (and bore substantial casualties); South Korea sent over 300,000 soldiers to Vietnam over the course of the conflict and lost over 4,500 in combat.<sup>30</sup> Virtually everywhere the United States fought during the Cold War, it did so in the company of allies.

In the post-Cold War era, this benefit has sometimes seemed less important, because of the vast margin of US dominance vis-à-vis its rivals, and because the gap between what Washington could do militarily and what even its most capable allies could do militarily widened markedly. Yet even so, the United States has relied heavily on allied participation in nearly all of its major interventions.

During the Persian Gulf War, key NATO allies such as France and the United Kingdom made large contributions to the coalition effort, with the British providing 43,000 troops along with significant air and naval contingents. The NATO allies provided roughly half of the 60,000 troops who policed Bosnia as part of the Implementation Force mission in that country from 1995 through 1996, and a majority of the 31,000 troops who made up the subsequent Stabilization Force. NATO

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28 See Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*, and Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*, 385–90.

29 The number may well have been higher; 20,000 seems like a rough and conservative estimate. For general information, see Paul M. Edwards, *United Nations Participants in the Korean War: The Contributions of 45 Member Countries* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2013).

30 James Sterngold, “South Korea’s Vietnam Veterans Begin to Be Heard,” *New York Times*, May 10, 1992.

contributions to the US-led war in Afghanistan peaked at around 40,000 troops; this contingent helped sustain the mission at a time of heavy US focus on Iraq and made it possible for Washington to surge 30,000 additional troops into Iraq when its forces were strained to the limit.<sup>31</sup>

Other US wars—in Iraq, Libya, and against the Islamic State—have also featured noteworthy contributions from treaty allies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Both critics and defenders of US alliances often speak of the frustrations of unequal burden sharing. But America's military burdens would be much higher if it did not have allies willing to share them.

Having formal allies as opposed to relying on ad hoc partnerships also yields a second and related military benefit: it eases the process of mobilizing cobelligerents for action in a crisis. It is possible to assemble military coalitions on the fly, of course, and every coalition military venture in which the United States participated prior to 1945 was in some sense improvised. Moreover, even in the post-World War II era, the United States has solicited ad hoc contributions from nonallied partner states. It is even possible, as the United States has repeatedly demonstrated, to make a purely transactional alliance of convenience with a “devil”—a country that otherwise shares very few interests with America, such as the Soviet Union in World War II or Syria in the Persian Gulf War.

The possibility of improvising military cooperation when needed has led some critics to argue the United States can do away with formal, institutionalized alliances altogether.<sup>32</sup> But turning every military operation into the equivalent of pickup basketball greatly increases the difficulty of building an effective combined force. Pushing the analogy further, pickup basketball is very hard to arrange in the absence of long-standing arrangements and customs that increase the predictability of the other actors. Economists refer to these difficulties as transaction costs; the routines and institutionalization of formal alliances make it much easier to bring military power to bear at much lower transaction costs.

In formal alliances, the partners practice together in peacetime, develop interoperability, and may even develop common equipment, thus easing logistics challenges. They also establish diplomatic forums and longstanding, fairly predictable relationships, thereby making it easier to coordinate interests and achieve the political consensus necessary to use force in the first place.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, everything could be negotiated on the fly, but the price America would pay for this flexibility would be the

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31 See Hal Brands, *Dealing with Allies in Decline: Alliance Management and U.S. Strategy in an Era of Global Power Shifts* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), 9–10; Spencer C. Tucker and Priscilla Mary Roberts, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Middle East Wars: The United States in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq Conflicts* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2010), 214; “Peace Support Operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina,” NATO, September 7, 2015, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_52122.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52122.htm); and Jones, *Graveyard of Empires*, 243–45.

32 Benjamin Schwarz and Christopher Layne, “A New Grand Strategy,” *Atlantic*, January 2002, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2002/01/a-new-grand-strategy/376471/>.

33 Both the advantages and limits of these practices are discussed in David P. Auerswald and Stephen M. Saideman, *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014). Seth Johnston argues that institutionalization also facilitates NATO's adaptation and innovation, keeping NATO relevant and useful long after its original purpose had been eclipsed. Seth A. Johnston, *How NATO Adapts: Strategy and Organization in the Atlantic Alliance since 1950* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017).

significantly greater difficulty—and, most likely, the significantly longer timelines—of piecing together a coalition in a crisis.

A third major military contribution of allies is the specialized capability they can bring to the table. Sometimes this is material capability: British, French, and Australian special operations forces have all made vital contributions to the Global War on Terror. The Japanese have some of the finest antisubmarine warfare capabilities in the world, which would be essential in a US conflict with China.<sup>34</sup> More often US allies contribute geographical capability in the form of proximity to the theater of interest. This proximity allows forward staging of the strike and intelligence assets, particularly air assets, on which the American way of war depends. It also allows for specialized technical intelligence collection that would be nearly impossible to conduct without local partners. The counter-ISIS campaign, for instance, would have been vastly more difficult had the United States not had access to key facilities controlled by either treaty allies (Turkey) or long-standing military partners (Qatar or Bahrain).<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the United States would face a nearly impossible task in any North Korean contingency without the extensive US basing network in Japan.

And, of course, the United States has also traditionally relied on another allied contribution: intellectual capability. By virtue of their history, US allies have unique networks of relationships, along with the distinctive insights those relationships afford, in many regions of interest. This translates into intelligence—particularly human intelligence—that would be almost impossible for America to generate on its own; consider, for instance, the intelligence advantages possessed by the French in northwest Africa or the Italians in Libya.<sup>36</sup>

The existence of formal, deeply institutionalized alliances, in turn, facilitates the sharing of such intelligence. Three out of the four countries that make up the Five Eyes intelligence partnership with the United States are longstanding treaty allies; Washington also cooperates extensively with its NATO allies on intelligence matters.<sup>37</sup> In this as in other respects, America's alliances make it far stronger and more capable militarily than it would otherwise be.

### *Geostrategic Influence and Global Stability*

If alliances are thus helpful in terms of the conflicts America wages, they are more helpful still in terms of the conflicts they prevent and the broader geostrategic influence they confer. Indeed, although the ultimate test of America's alliances lies in their efficacy as warfighting

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34 See, for instance, "The Japanese Military's Focus on Anti-Submarine Capabilities," Stratfor Worldview, June 24, 2013, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/analysis/japanese-militarys-focus-anti-submarine-abilities>.

35 American officials described access to Incirlik, Turkey, as a "game changer" in the counter-ISIS campaign. Ceylan Yeginsu and Helene Cooper "U.S. Jets to Use Turkish Bases in War on ISIS," *New York Times*, July 23, 2015.

36 On local and regional advantages, see, for instance, Christopher S. Chivvis, *The French War on Al Qaeda in Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

37 See Sir Stephen Lander, "International Intelligence Cooperation: An Inside Perspective," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, 3 (October 2004): 481–93, doi:10.1080/0955757042000296964; and Richard J. Aldrich, "U.S.-European Intelligence Co-Operation on Counter-Terrorism: Low Politics and Compulsion," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11, 1 (February 2009): 122–39, doi:10.1111/j.1467-856x.2008.00353.x.

coalitions, the most powerful benefits they provide come in the normal course of peacetime geostrategic management and competition.

First, US alliances bind many of the richest and most militarily capable countries in the world to Washington through enduring relationships of deep cooperation. Alliances reflect shared interests rather than creating them, of course, and the United States would presumably have close ties to countries such as the United Kingdom even without formal alliances. But alliances nonetheless serve as “hoops of steel.” They help create a sense of permanence and shared purpose in key relationships; they provide forums for regular interaction and cooperation; they conduce to deeply institutionalized exchanges (of intelligence, personnel, and other assets) that insulate and perpetuate friendly associations even when political leaders clash.<sup>38</sup> And insofar as US alliances serve these purposes with respect to immensely influential countries in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, they help Washington preserve a significant overbalance of power vis-à-vis any competitor.

Second, alliances have a strong deterrent effect on would-be aggressors. American alliances lay down “redlines” regarding areas in which territorial aggression is impermissible; they complicate the calculus of any potential aggressor by raising the strong possibility that an attack on a US ally will mean a fight with the world’s most formidable military. The proposition that “defensive alliances deter the initiation of disputes” is, in fact, supported by empirical evidence, and the forward deployment of troops strengthens this deterrence further still.<sup>39</sup>

NATO clearly had an important deterrent effect on Soviet calculations during the Cold War, for instance; more recently, Russia has behaved most aggressively toward countries lacking US alliance guarantees (Georgia and Ukraine), rather than toward those countries possessing them (the Baltic states or Poland). In other words, alliances make the geostrategic status quo—which is enormously favorable to the United States—far “stickier” than it might otherwise be.

Third, and related to this second benefit, alliances tamp down international instability more broadly. American security guarantees allow US allies to underbuild their own militaries; while always annoying and problematic when taken to extremes, this phenomenon also helps avert the arms races and febrile security competitions that plagued Europe and East Asia in earlier eras. In fact, US alliances are as useful in managing tensions among America’s allies as they are in constraining America’s adversaries.

NATO was always intended to keep the “Americans in” and the “Germans down” as well as the “Russians out”; US presence, along with the creation of a framework in which France and Germany were

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38 On deep institutionalization, see Celeste A. Wallander, “Institutional Assets and Adaptability: NATO after the Cold War,” *International Organization* 54, 5 (Autumn 2000): 705–35; and Aldrich, “U.S.-European Intelligence Co-Operation.”

39 Jesse C. Johnson and Brett Ashley Leeds, “Defense Pacts: A Prescription for Peace?,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 7, 1 (January 2011): 45–65, esp. 45, doi:10.1111/j.1743-8594.2010.00122.x; Brett Ashley Leeds, “Do Alliances Deter Aggression? The Influence of Military Alliances on the Initiation of Militarized Interstate Disputes,” *American Journal of Political Science* 47, 3 (July 2003): 427–39, doi:10.2307/3186107; Paul K. Huth, “Extended Deterrence and the Outbreak of War,” *American Political Science Review* 82, 2 (June 1988): 423–43, doi:10.2307/1957394; and Vesna Danilovic, “The Sources of Threat Credibility in Extended Deterrence,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, 3 (2001): 341–69, doi:10.1177/0022002701045003005.

incentivized to cooperate rather than compete with one another, would help stifle any resurgence of tensions between these historical rivals.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, US alliance guarantees in the Asia-Pacific were designed, in part, to create a climate of security in which Japan could be revived economically without threatening its neighbors, just as the expansion of NATO after the Cold War helped prevent incipient rivalries and territorial irredentism among former members of the Warsaw Pact.<sup>41</sup> US alliances keep things quiet in regions Washington cannot ignore, thereby fostering a climate of peace in which America and its partners can flourish.

Fourth, US alliances impede dangerous geostrategic phenomena such as nuclear proliferation. As scholars such as Francis Gavin have emphasized, US security guarantees and forward deployments have played a critical role in convincing historically insecure, technologically advanced countries—Germany, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, among others—to forego possession of the world’s absolute weapon. In several of these cases, moreover, the United States has used the security leverage provided by alliance guarantees to dissuade allies from pursuing the bomb after they had given indications of their intent to start down that path.<sup>42</sup> If, as seems likely, a world with more nuclear powers is likely to be a more dangerous world in which crises more frequently take on a nuclear dimension and the risk of nuclear conflict is higher, then the value of American alliances looms large indeed.

In sum, as the framers of the post-World War II order understood, phenomena such as massive instability, arms racing, and violence in key regions would eventually imperil the United States itself.<sup>43</sup> Whatever modest reduction in short-term costs might come from pursuing a “free hand” or isolationist strategy was thus more than lost by the expense of fighting and winning a major war to restore order. Accordingly, America’s peacetime alliance system represents a cheaper, more prudent alternative for maximizing US influence while also preventing raging instability by deterring aggression and managing rivalries among friends. The fact that so many observers seem to have forgotten why, precisely, America has alliances in the first place is an ironic testament to just how well the system has succeeded.

### *Political Legitimacy and Consultation*

Beyond their military and geostrategic virtues, alliances provide important political benefits that facilitate the use of American power both internationally and with respect to the domestic audience. The chief political advantage of alliances is enhanced international legitimacy.

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40 See Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace*; also Timothy P. Ireland, *Creating the Entangling Alliance: The Origins of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981).

41 The role of NATO’s persistence and expansion in stifling security competition in Europe is, ironically, acknowledged by one of the alliance’s foremost academic critics. See John J. Mearsheimer, “Why Is Europe Peaceful Today?,” European Consortium for Political Research Keynote Lecture, *European Political Science* 9, 3 (September 2010): 388, doi:10.1057/eps.2010.24.

42 See Gavin, “Strategies of Inhibition”; Gene Gerzhoy, “Alliance Coercion and Nuclear Restraint: How the United States Thwarted West Germany’s Nuclear Ambitions,” *International Security* 39, no. 4 (Spring 2015): 91–129, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00198; and Mark Kramer, “Neorealism, Nuclear Proliferation, and East-Central European Strategies,” in *Unipolar Politics: Realism and State Strategies after the Cold War*, ed. Ethan B. Kapstein and Michael Mastanduno (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 385–463.

43 Leffler, *Preponderance of Power*.

Formal alliances and the partnership of allies—particularly democratic allies—in cooperative ventures confer the perceived legitimacy of multilateral action. This perception is especially important when an administration is unable to secure the formal legitimacy of a UN Security Council Resolution authorizing the use of force. In the case of the Kosovo conflict, for example, being able to conduct the mission under NATO auspices somewhat mitigated charges of “American unilateralism.”<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the ability of the United States to muster a coalition of the willing involving both NATO and Asia-Pacific allies in the Iraq War provided some rebuttal to critics who declaimed the invasion as a “unilateral” endeavor.

Allied support also enhances the perceived legitimacy of the actions for domestic audiences, thus strengthening the political foundations for military ventures.<sup>45</sup> The willingness of other states to participate in a military intervention can signal that the resort to force is a wise and necessary move, has reasonable prospects for success, and will enjoy some minimal moral legitimacy. All of these factors can shore up public support and give the intervention greater political resilience should it prove more difficult than expected, and this international cooperation is easier to achieve in the framework of longstanding military alliances.

Finally, allies provide useful input on use of force decisions. Particularly when the deliberations involve long-standing treaty allies, US officials can have more honest discussions about difficult policy choices because the participants are “all in the family.” Put another way, every US president reserves the right to use force unilaterally when American interests demand. Yet as presidents have generally understood, the failure to persuade other partners to approve and to join America in the effort is itself a powerful cautionary warning.<sup>46</sup> The need to make persuasive arguments to allies and partners is a useful disciplining device to prevent policy from running off the rails.

### *Diplomatic Leverage and Cooperation*

Beyond their military, geostrategic, and political impact, having formal military alliances greatly increases the diplomatic leverage US leaders can bring to bear on thorny international challenges. Formal alliances and long-standing partnerships give US leaders myriad fora in which to raise concerns and advocate favored courses of action. Europeans are obliged to listen to the United States on European issues because Washington’s leading role in NATO makes it the central player in European defense; the same dynamic prevails vis-à-vis US allies in the Asia-Pacific. To give just one concrete example, the United States has repeatedly prevented the European Union from lifting its arms embargo on China because of the security leverage it has through NATO.<sup>47</sup>

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44 For an argument stressing the reliance on alternative sources of legitimacy during the Kosovo crisis, see Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 83, 2 (March/April 2004): 74–77.

45 Joseph M. Grieco et al., “Let’s Get a Second Opinion: International Institutions and American Public Support for War,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2011): 563–83, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2478.2011.00660.x.

46 For instance, the Bush Administration was stymied on the Sudan by the reluctance of the rest of the international community to intervene. Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2011), 582–85.

47 See Glenn Kessler, “Rice Warns Europe Not to Sell Advanced Weaponry to China,” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2005.

Having allies also increases US diplomatic options vis-à-vis adversaries. Here, the danger of entrapment (getting drawn into conflicts America might otherwise have avoided) must be weighed against the benefits of having more options in dealing with the adversaries Washington cannot ignore. One such benefit is the increased range of signaling options available to strategists during an unfolding crisis. Consider US efforts to constrain the North Korean nuclear program. Without military alliances with South Korea and Japan, the United States would have only two baskets of military options short of actual resort to force in order to signal resolve and to shape North Korean calculations: either taking relatively meaningless actions, such as changing the alert levels in the homeland or in other theaters, or taking relatively dramatic escalations, such as moving an aircraft carrier battle group within range of the Korean peninsula or flying sorties close to the North Korean border. With South Korea and Japan as allies, however, Washington has a wider variety of midrange actions—increasing missile defense capability or readiness in theater, raising local alert levels, and so on.<sup>48</sup> These steps give leaders ways of responding, and thereby influencing diplomatic negotiations, while also better positioning America to respond if diplomacy fails.

Finally, alliances enhance US diplomatic efforts on security issues beyond those directly related to collective defense. The United States has used its alliances as vehicles for cooperation on counterterrorism (both prior to and since September 11, 2001), as well as for countering cybercrime, proliferation, and piracy; addressing climate change; and responding to other challenges. All of these efforts involve substantial intelligence sharing, information pooling, and coordination across law enforcement and other lines of action. And all of this coordination is greatly facilitated when conducted through deeply institutionalized alliances and long-standing cooperative relationships.<sup>49</sup>

The United States has, of course, also been able to achieve tactical cooperation even from long-standing adversaries on issues such as counterterrorism, but such cooperation is frequently less significant, harder to obtain, and comes at a higher price in terms of the reciprocal American “gives” required in transactional relationships. It is thus with good reason that, when an international crisis breaks or a new global challenge emerges, the first phone calls made by US leaders are usually to America’s closest allies.

### *Economic Benefits*

As noted, the economic costs of US alliance commitments are lower than conventionally assumed because the alliances allow Washington to project military power much more cheaply than otherwise would be the case. Alliances also generate numerous indirect economic benefits—so many that they may constitute a net profit center for the United States.

As a recent analysis of the deployment of US troops abroad and of US treaty obligations shows, both of these forms of security commitments

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, the US-South Korean incremental tit-for-tat response to recent North Korean military provocations, Dan Lamothe, “U.S. Army and South Korean Military Respond to North Korea’s Launch with Missile Exercise,” *Washington Post*, July 4, 2017.

<sup>49</sup> Art, *Grand Strategy*, 201–2.

are correlated with several key economic indicators, including US bilateral trade and global bilateral trade.<sup>50</sup> The more US troops are deployed to a given country, the greater US bilateral trade is with the country in question. Furthermore, the effect extends to non-US global bilateral trade: “Countries with U.S. security commitments conduct more trade with one another than they would otherwise.” Adding all the economic costs and benefits of these treaty commitments together produces the estimate that the alliances offer more than three times as much gain as they cost.

American alliance commitments advance US economic interests in other ways, as well. For decades, US diplomats and trade negotiators have used the security leverage provided by alliance commitments to extract more favorable terms in bilateral financial and commercial arrangements. During the Cold War, West Germany made “offset” payments to the United States—transfers to shore up the sagging US balance of payments—as a means of preserving the American troop presence in Europe.<sup>51</sup>

More recently, American negotiators obtained more favorable terms in the South Korea-United States trade agreement than the European Union did in a parallel agreement with Seoul. “Failure would look like a setback to the political and security relationship,” one US official noted; this dynamic gave Washington additional negotiating leverage.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, as other scholars have shown, the US willingness to defend other states and police the global commons reinforces the willingness of other countries to accept a global order which includes favorable economic privileges for the United States, such as the dollar as the primary global reserve currency.<sup>53</sup> And, of course, by sustaining a climate of overall geopolitical stability in which trade and free enterprise can flourish, alliances bolster American and global prosperity in broader ways, as well.

## Conclusion

The balance sheet on America’s alliances, then, is really not much of a balance at all. There are costs and dangers associated with US alliances, and some of these are real enough. But many of those costs and dangers are exaggerated, blown out of proportion, or rest on a simple misunderstanding of what the United States would have to do in the world even if it terminated every one of its alliances. The benefits of US alliances, conversely, are far more diverse and substantial than critics tend to acknowledge. In sum, any grand strategy premised on putting America first should recognize that by creating and sustaining its global alliance network, America has indeed put itself first for generations.

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50 Daniel Egel and Howard Shatz, “Economic Benefits of U.S. Overseas Security Commitments Appear to Outweigh Costs,” The RAND Blog, September 23, 2016, <http://www.rand.org/blog/2016/09/economic-benefits-of-us-overseas-security-commitments.html>.

51 Francis J. Gavin, *Gold, Dollars, and Power: The Politics of International Monetary Relations, 1958–1971* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

52 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home, America: The Case against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, 3 (Winter 2012/13): 44.

53 G. John Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

If this is the case, then why have alliances proven to be such lightning rods for both academic and presidential criticism of late? Part of the answer lies in the dynamic noted at the outset of this piece. The dangers and risks inherent in US alliances are mostly obvious and intuitive, whereas the benefits are often subtler, more indirect, or require digging deeper into the underlying logic of American internationalism to understand. Those benefits, moreover, often reside in things that do not happen—and are thus harder to observe, let alone measure. Yet part of the answer also undoubtedly lies in the fact that American alliances, like so much of American foreign policy today, appear to be in danger of becoming a victim of their own success. The fact that US alliances have been so effective, for so long, in maximizing US influence and creating an advantageous international environment has made it all too easy to take their benefits for granted. It would be a sad irony if the United States turned away from its alliances, only then to realize just how much it had squandered.

American alliances do not function perfectly, of course, and today as at virtually every point since the late 1940s, there are challenges on the horizon: the relative decline of many key US allies vis-à-vis US adversaries, the difficulties of prodding partners in Europe and Asia to do more on defense, the threat posed by coercion and intimidation meant to change the geopolitical status quo without triggering alliance redlines. Likewise, reasonable observers can debate what military strategy the United States should pursue for upholding its alliance commitments in the Baltic or the western Pacific. But the vexations of addressing these challenges within the framework of America's existing alliances are undoubtedly less than the costs and perils to which the United States would be exposed without its alliances. Winston Churchill had it right when he said, "There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and that is fighting without them." The US policy community would do well to heed this admonition today.

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