

U.S. Alliances: Crucial Enablers in Great-Power Competition

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The United States today is at a geostrategic disadvantage that is significantly greater than the “correlation of forces” (as Soviet generals put it) that the U.S. confronted during the Cold War. Unlike in the era of great-power competition with the Soviet Union when the U.S. faced a single geopolitical foe, today America is confronted by two great powers—one revisionist, the other transformational—aligned in the common goal of displacing the United States from its dominant position as the hub of the liberal world order.

Three decades of unequivocal and misguided commitment to globalization and the internationalization of our manufacturing have left America’s power significantly depleted. The post-Cold War era has seen persistent budget and trade deficits, deindustrialization and the attendant radical centralization of supply chains in China, and an overall decline in the competitiveness of the American labor force, with U.S. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) programs at premier universities increasingly catering to foreign students, fewer of whom are choosing to remain and work in the United States after graduating. At the same time, two decades of low-intensity wars-cum-“state building” projects in Afghanistan and the Middle East have

depleted the capabilities of the U.S. military, and the demands of these theaters have driven a large portion of defense systems acquisition programs and contracting.¹

The Grand Strategic Challenge

Meanwhile, the Russian Federation has undergone two cycles of military modernization. The scope of this effort may pale in comparison to expenditures by the United States, but two decades of *de facto* disarmament by our European allies have allowed Moscow to change the balance of power along NATO’s eastern flank.

More important, China’s investment in its military—especially qualitative improvements facilitated by massive technology transfers from the United States and increasingly from Europe, as well as the rapid expansion of its navy—has begun to tilt the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific region against the United States, with the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) staking an exclusive claim to the South China Sea. While the PLAN is already challenging the sovereignty of Taiwan and putting Japan on notice that its security can no longer be taken for granted, it is also increasingly operating in the Mediterranean, entering the Baltic Sea, and—with its tenders to buy 33,000-ton

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nuclear-powered icebreakers—preparing to punch through the Arctic Ocean.

Last but not least, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with some 50 "special economic zones," and its "17+1" initiative are critical steps toward tying the economies of Europe, Russia, and Africa to China as part of China's larger effort to form a single Eurasian supply-chain network. Once in place, centered on the yuan as the new reserve currency and defended by Chinese military power, the BRI will be poised to effect a "grand inversion" in which the maritime supremacy over the land domain that for half a millennium has favored the West would effectively be reversed. In such a scenario, the European Rimland would cease to be the transatlantic gateway to Eurasia, becoming instead the terminal endpoint of a China-dominated Eurasian empire.

In short, the grand strategic challenge that this round of great-power competition poses for American security and for the democratic West (as well as democracies in Asia) cannot be overstated. Consequently, the role of alliances as a fundamental enabler of American power will be critical in the next decade and beyond.

The Trump Administration's realignment of U.S. national security and defense priorities toward great-power competition is encapsulated in the 2017 *National Security Strategy*² and the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.³ Both documents (the latter's unclassified 12-page summary having been released by then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis) were long overdue, as changes in the balance of power worldwide have only accelerated following the 2008 "great recession" that exposed deep structural imbalances in the United States economy. Although the United States government managed to stabilize the situation by flooding the markets with liquidity in the aftermath of that crisis, the structural deficiencies of the U.S. economy—especially our excessive reliance on foreign supply networks for ever-greater portions of the economy, including military contracting—were not addressed.

This weakness was exposed during the devastating aftershocks of the Wuhan coronavirus

pandemic, with the United States learning the hard way how vulnerable it had become to its principal adversary, China, on account of Beijing's radical centralization of supply chains for products critical to dealing with the crisis. The pandemic has made it imperative that the United States relearn the lesson of the importance of allies who can provide diffuse and redundant supply chains in critical areas while also serving as key enablers for the United States when it comes to its foreign and security policy.

NATO

No alliance proved more essential to the United States' victory in the Cold War than the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and no other alliance is in greater need of repair today. In the first few decades following the Cold War, NATO devolved into an essentially political structure used to integrate post-Communist states into the transatlantic system and, although membership in the European Union was never expressly conditioned on NATO membership, to help lay the groundwork for the EU's *acquis communautaire*.⁴ In the first decade of the 21st century, the alliance became, on the one hand, a growing source of friction between the United States and the largest European allies while, on the other hand, old allies such as the United Kingdom and new ones, including Poland, enabled the United States' global war on terrorism after 9/11.

The process of deconstructing NATO into a collective security organization of sorts continued unabated through the 2014 Russian seizure of Crimea and the invasion of eastern Ukraine. By then, NATO's military capabilities, including the residual forces deployed by the United States to Europe, had become a pale shadow of its once-formidable armies. Furthermore, logistical infrastructure across NATO had become degraded to the point that even moderate-scale joint exercises were problematic. Recent efforts to reverse the trend—the DEFENDER-Europe 20 exercise, for example, was to be the largest such exercise along the eastern flank of NATO since the

end of the Cold War, combining some 20,000 U.S. forces and 18,000 European forces—were effectively stopped by the “shelter-in-place” orders triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, with only a portion of the troops exercised across the theater.

In addition to the fact that NATO’s forces are inadequate to the task at hand, an even greater challenge may be that the alliance’s political consensus concerning the overarching strategic threat is fractured. I call the latter problem the “regionalization of security optics,” whereby the nature and degree of threat perception morphs as one moves from east to west. Countries along the front line such as Norway, the Baltic States, Poland, and Romania see Russia as a clear and present danger, while countries in the middle of the continent such as Germany have an attenuated view of the risk. France sees the principal pressure points as being in the Mediterranean and North Africa, and the Russian threat registers only remotely in Spain or Portugal.

This fractured threat perception—rather than the oft-discussed resentment against the alleged “transactionalism” of the Trump Administration—is the key reason why the majority of the European NATO allies have consistently failed to meet their agreed-upon 2 percent of GDP defense spending targets, which have been in place since the Warsaw summit of 2016.⁵ The much-touted argument that NATO is not just about shared interests but also about shared values (President Trump’s critics point to his alleged de-emphasis of the latter) is a false binary because NATO, as the most effective military alliance of like-minded democracies in history, has always been about both.

What has fueled the current turmoil in the alliance is the inability of key governments to see eye-to-eye with the United States on the nature of the threat to the West that is posed by Russia, which wants to revise the post-Cold War political settlement, and by the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which wants to replace it. The absence of a policy consensus on Russia in particular is likely to remain the

foundational obstacle to properly resourcing NATO and may in fact cause continued spikes in disagreement within NATO like the one triggered by reports that the Trump Administration planned to remove 9,500 U.S. troops from Germany.⁶

The United States will continue to draw great benefit from its leadership role in the NATO alliance, which serves both as an effective force multiplier and as a source of political influence in Europe and Eurasia more broadly. NATO’s contribution to American security in an era of resurgent great-power competition rests on its ability to offset Russian and, increasingly, Chinese pressure on and in Europe, especially the two powers’ ongoing efforts to reduce U.S. influence on the continent and *ad extremis* to separate European defense from America’s. The critical importance of the NATO alliance as a force multiplier and pathway to lowering the overall price tag for American defense worldwide cannot be overstated.

The question, however, that continues to polarize the U.S. security community is the practical scope of what NATO should be contributing to the common defense and how such contributions address the challenges facing the United States not only in the European theater, but also in the Indo-Pacific region. Some analysts have gone so far as to suggest that NATO has an important role to play in Asia and that it should plan accordingly.⁷ Such a strategy would be yet another permutation of the “burden sharing” that has been much debated throughout NATO’s history, except that this time, the burden would be extended to a theater that historically has not been part of NATO’s strategic domain, making such a strategy likely to fail.

What NATO needs is not more “burden sharing” but “burden transferring,” a term I use to indicate that the greatest contribution NATO can make to the defense of the transatlantic community is for its European allies to resource their defense properly. This is necessary if the Europeans (with U.S. enablers in place and a modernized core strategic nuclear deterrent) are to be able to deter and, if need be,

defend Europe against a revisionist Russia in the event that the United States is pulled into an emergency in the Indo-Pacific region.

The imperative of “burden transferring” to Europe reflects the twin dilemmas facing the United States when it comes to collective defense: The geostrategic challenge we confront is orders of magnitude greater than in the Cold War, but the size of the United States military is simply too small to meet the requirements in both theaters, deter aggression, and win decisively. The United States should maintain a significant component in Europe. U.S. Army Europe, as currently structured, serves a critical role as both an enabler and a fighting force, with exercises on allied territory along NATO’s eastern flank essential to developing the warfighting capability of U.S. troops and ensuring that they are fully interoperable with our allies. The same goes for continued exercises that serve to demonstrate the ability of the United States to reinforce the European theater in a crisis.

However, these will never fully replace the manpower and resources that the Europeans must bring to bear if deterrence in Europe is to hold. This is especially the case should a crisis arise elsewhere, as the United States military is no longer structured as it once was to fight two major theater conflicts plus one smaller engagement in a secondary theater; rather, we are—and are likely to remain—able to engage in only one major theater and one smaller operation if we want to prevail.

The key variable in a workable “burden transferring” approach as NATO’s strategy in the unfolding era of great-power competition is an urgently needed political consensus within the alliance. In this context, the ongoing efforts, driven principally by France, to establish “strategic autonomy” for Europe in NATO—exemplified by programs such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), Coordinated Annual Review on Defense (CARD), and the European Defense Fund as currently conceived—are counterproductive and likely to fail because the divergent security optics mentioned earlier will block any such

consensus on defense-spending formulas that does not include the United States. The current tenor of the European defense and security debate—punctuated by occasional injudicious outbursts by European leaders that the NATO alliance is “brain dead”—only further undermines the ability of the alliance to come together around a common strategy.

Alliances in the Asia-Pacific Region

Asia is fast becoming the principal area of concern for U.S. defense strategy. The exponential growth of Chinese economic power over the past decade in particular has given rise to military capabilities that increasingly challenge the United States Navy’s ability to dominate the theater. China has one-fifth of the world’s population, and its military budget is second in size only to that of the United States.⁸ Moreover, financial reserves accumulated over decades of predatory trade practices will allow it to continue buying companies, technologies, and expertise unless the United States and its allies impose severe restrictions on China’s access. As many as 200 million Chinese citizens travel the world as tourists and work, study, and live abroad, and this number could increase significantly when the current pandemic restrictions are lifted.

The Indo-Pacific theater is also dramatically different from Europe: It rests on a series of bilateral alliances between the United States and its key partners, not on one bureaucratized structure like NATO’s. The region is increasingly being transformed by China’s abandonment of its former reticence and its growing geostrategic assertiveness, and the leadership of the People’s Republic of China under Xi Jinping sees the PRC as having effectively caught up with the United States.

China is a Communist neo-Confucian state marked by repression and rigidity at home, and its foreign and military policy is marked by political and military mobilization and the putting forth of ever-bolder claims, its claim to “exclusivity” in the South China Sea being perhaps the most visible example. The leadership in Beijing seems certain that its path to global

economic dominance will soon be accompanied by expanding military influence that, as the PLAN's power projection capabilities grow, will allow it to dominate militarily.

With this in mind, Beijing has been building its hard power arsenal at a rapid pace, with the expansion of the nuclear, conventional, space, cyber, and information components at an unprecedented pace, posing a truly multi-domain challenge to the United States military. Aided by four decades of unprecedented freedom of access to America's technology, research, and knowledge economy, Beijing is poised to compete for supremacy in the Pacific within the next decade.

When it comes to China, Europe is unlikely to become a close ally of the United States any time soon. Although the devastation wrought by the Wuhan coronavirus on EU economies and Beijing's aggressive information campaigns targeting Europe could change elite attitudes to some extent, Germany, France, and especially Italy (but also a number of other countries, including some in Central Europe) see China principally in economic terms, with opportunities still outweighing risks, especially for smaller, capital-starved European economies outside the European Union and hence not eligible for recovery assistance funds.

The pivotal allies for the United States in Asia are Japan, South Korea, and Australia—the Asian “troika”—whose continued alliance with the United States stands in direct contradiction to Xi Jinping's “China Dream” of a globally dominant PRC to be established through a purposeful strategy of expansion across Eurasia and into the Pacific. The United States also has formal alliances with the Philippines, Thailand, and New Zealand, but their overall strength is derivative when it comes to our core alliances with the troika. The future of the troika depends on the future of each of its members: If China should succeed in isolating one of them, the risk to the security of the others would grow exponentially.

Chinese expansion is already well underway, though Beijing continues to face considerable obstacles to displacing the United States from

the center of the global system. The immediate targets of this expansion drive are Hong Kong, where the process of dismantling its autonomy is already near completion, and Taiwan, which will face increased pressure once Beijing has bent Hong Kong to its will. This pattern of expansion targeting the three key U.S. allies in Asia can be seen in the proliferation of Chinese port investments; the development of PRC naval capabilities (including tenders for several nuclear-powered aircraft carrier battle groups); and the exponential investments in anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities by the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and PLAN.

China's overarching strategy is to break out of a territorially based defense strategy, harden its defenses of transcontinental and overseas transportation routes, and leverage its decades-long access to America's research and development (R&D) base and—even more important—its manufacturing and materials technologies to bring about a qualitative leap in PLA and PLAN capabilities vis-à-vis the United States. This is especially the case when it comes to command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR); strategic support forces; cyber and information; and unmanned systems in space.

Interlocking Alliances

The United States continues to derive great benefit from its leadership position in the NATO alliance and its close bilateral alliances with the troika in the Western Pacific. Our naval, air, and ground troop basing in Europe as well as in Japan, South Korea, and Australia continues to give us flexibility and supportability in power projection across both the Atlantic and the Pacific with the ability to rely on the military resources of our allies as a force multiplier.

In Europe, the effectiveness of NATO demands a strategy of “burden transferring” with continued U.S. nuclear strategic guarantees and continued coordination with our enablers. This must be combined with a small but effective, trained, and integrated Joint

Force component that both provides strategic linkage for the United States and Europe and reinforces the credibility of the larger transatlantic defense strategy.

Arguably, the greatest challenge facing the United States and its European allies, more than the interminable debates about the percentage of GDP to be allocated as a sign of commitment to the alliance, will be the imperative need to rebuild Europe's real usable military capabilities. This strategy of "burden transferring," whereby the Europeans take core responsibility for the continent's defense across multiple domains—not as an exercise in "strategic autonomy" but as a clearly defined and agreed-upon task *within* NATO—will be key to preserving European security and ensuring that the transatlantic bargain holds as we enter arguably the most dangerous period of great-power competition.

In Asia, the Western Pacific is also critical to the security of the Eurasian landmass, with continued close U.S. alliances with the troika presenting a direct challenge to Beijing's military planners. Coupled with U.S. bases on its territory, in Guam, and in Hawaii, the United States has the ability to develop a successful strategy to contain, deter, and if need be defeat China in a future conflict in the Pacific, provided it retains the flexibility to move its forces in the region in a crisis. We must therefore ensure that the troika can withstand direct pressure from China and that its members do not become vassalized over time. Continued close alliance with the United States will allow the three countries to exercise effective counterpressure against the advancing militarization of great-power competition in Asia and respond with effective force if deterrence fails.

There can be little doubt today that the PRC's primary goal is to reestablish itself as a dominant power in eastern Eurasia and the Western Pacific, absorbing Taiwan, isolating and ultimately vassalizing Japan, and pushing the United States back to the margins of the

Asia-Pacific region. The second element of Beijing's strategy, which entails its close cooperation with Moscow, is to accomplish the decoupling of the United States from Europe, with long-term economic and population trends favoring China in its *de facto* alliance with the Russian Federation against the United States.

These two trends inextricably connect America's alliances in Europe and in the Asia-Pacific region: They mutually reinforce one another if successfully consolidated and conversely contain within themselves the seeds of each other's destruction. Preserving and strengthening the two as part of a coherent global defense strategy should be a key U.S. policy priority.

Conclusion

Grand, bureaucratized alliances do not simply unravel. They become hollowed out over time as threat assessments change and political will atrophies. This is the risk if NATO continues along its current path of "burden sharing" amid ongoing allegations of American "transactionalism." The preservation of NATO is vital to both Americans and Europeans because the alliance continues to serve both as a deterrent to Russia and as a values-based framework with which the West can confront China. NATO offers the best existing format for common defense and effectively ensures that the North Atlantic remains the internal waterway for Western democracies.

The preservation of America's alliances in Asia is essential to our ability to contain and deter China, for without them we cannot ensure that our rethinking of the U.S.–China relationship will take place on American terms. If NATO were to unravel or the troika to fall out of its close alliance with the United States, or if both were to occur, the entire Pacific Ocean west of Hawaii would become a contested space with the United States directly exposed to the risk of being pushed into its own hemisphere.

Endnotes

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