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U.S. Domestic Polarization and Allied Assurance

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U.S. domestic polarization affects U.S. foreign policy by negatively shaping allies' perceptions of Washington's credibility, hence undermining the U.S. goal of assuring them and managing the alliance structure. While the impact of polarization on U.S. foreign and defense policy has been extensively studied from a U.S. domestic perspective, very little analysis has focused on the effects of domestic polarization on allies' perceptions of the United States as a credible, reliable ally. U.S. assurance depends on allies believing that the United States has sufficient capabilities and that it will come to their defense if they are attacked. Yet, it appears that U.S. domestic polarization undermines allies' assessment of U.S. will to do so. This dynamic weakens allied perceptions of U.S. credibility, which in turn hampers its ability to assure allies and manage allied relations – ultimately damaging U.S. security.

Introduction

Many allies do *not* have a mature understanding of U.S. foreign and defense policy processes and the many varied actors that impact its formulation. This can make them more susceptible to misunderstanding the diverse debates and widely differing expressed positions of domestic partisans. As a result, domestic polarization and the domestic debates that accompany that polarization can lead to mixed allied perceptions of the United States that can make alliance management more challenging at a time when the United States and allies need unity and consensus to counter a rising China, an aggressive Russia, and other disruptive regional actors.



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In offering an allied perspective on polarization and how it shapes allies' policy choices, this analysis facilitates a broader recognition of the impact of U.S. domestic polarization on Washington's ability to manage alliance relations. It identifies how U.S. political polarization affects allied perceptions of U.S. credibility as an ally, and how those perceptions shape allied behavior vis-à-vis the United States. This analysis also examines the effects of domestic polarization on U.S. alliance goals and offers recommendations regarding how Washington might mitigate those effects.

U.S. alliances are perhaps the most important U.S. advantage over its adversaries. That is why enemies are so intent on disrupting them. Exploiting political polarization in the United States, as well as in allied countries, serves as one of the potential vehicles for them to do so. Improving the U.S. understanding of how domestic political polarization shapes allied perceptions of the United States, and how foes exploit that polarization to disrupt U.S. alliances, can help make U.S. policies more resilient and resistant against adversaries' information warfare efforts.

Deterioration of the Strategic Environment and the Impact on U.S. Alliances

The 2017 *National Security Strategy (NSS)* noted that "China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests" and mentioned the increasing resources these countries, especially China, are investing to improve their capabilities to do so.¹ The 2022 *NSS* argued that the United States is "in the midst of a strategic competition to shape the future of the international order."² Published after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the *NSS* noted that "Russia poses an immediate threat to the free and open international system, recklessly flouting the basic laws of the international order today," and that Russia and China "now seek to remake the international order to create a world conducive to their highly personalized and repressive type of autocracy."³ The bipartisan 2023 *Congressional Commission on the Strategic Posture of the United States Report* concluded that within the 2027-2035 timeframe, the United States "will face two nuclear peer adversaries for the first time" and that two previous *NSS* documents do not adequately address this reality.⁴

These trends are worsened by Russia's cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea. According to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China "has become a decisive enabler of Russia's war against Ukraine" through its large-scale support for Russia's defense industrial base.⁵ In June 2024, Russia and North Korea signed a treaty committing them to providing military assistance to each other.⁶ North Korea has provided Russia with millions of artillery shells since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁷ The treaty comes at the heels of months' worth of North Korea trading ammunition for Russia's know-how, presumably in space and missile technologies.⁸ Since Russia's full-scale invasion, Iran has also emerged "as a key enabler of Russia's air and ground campaign in Ukraine."⁹



Polarization and U.S. Domestic Politics

Domestic polarization, or when a preference of a group regarding an issue becomes both distinctly bimodal and the two modes are moving further apart,¹⁰ is a long-standing feature of the U.S. political system and has been increasing for years.¹¹ A close examination of congressional voting indicates a disappearance of centrist politicians and bipartisan activity (Democrats who vote with Republicans at least on some issues, and vice versa).¹² With respect to foreign affairs, despite both majorities of Democrats and Republicans arguing that the United States should maintain or increase its commitment to NATO, the difference between them is the largest it has ever been in Chicago Council polling since 1974 (60 percent of Republicans and 80 percent of Democrats agreed with the statement in 2020).¹³ The 2024 *National Defense Strategy Commission* noted that “the polarization of U.S. domestic politics is harming the U.S. military and U.S. national security” and led the Commission to be concerned “that the traditional post-World War II bipartisan support for a strong military, preservation of alliances, and engagement in international affairs is waning.”¹⁴

Contemporary political science research focuses on mapping the rise of polarization in Congress and its impact on U.S. foreign policy,¹⁵ discusses the effects of polarization on arms control,¹⁶ or whether external threats reduce polarization.¹⁷ It argues that domestic polarization makes it harder to obtain support for force deployments abroad, for the conclusion of treaties, and for the United States to learn from failures and adapt to them; moreover, it complicates the U.S. ability to make long-term commitments to allies, and makes the United States more vulnerable to foreign intervention in its domestic political system.¹⁸

Yet, there is a paucity of information on how U.S. domestic polarization affects allies’ perceptions of the United States as a security guarantor and how these perceptions could undermine the U.S. ability to manage alliance relations. Another glaring gap in the body of research on polarization is how little it discusses the importance of how allies view U.S. domestic polarization. One study assesses different U.S. assurance strategies from an allied country’s citizens’ perspective, but does not take polarization into account.¹⁹ Another study examines the attitudes of the British public toward U.S. domestic polarization.²⁰ The latter study argues that polarization “may cause states to doubt existing commitments that America has made to its allies,” “can affect the willingness of allies to engage in future partnerships or agreements with the United States,” and, “can have downstream reputational consequences for the United States by negatively impacting perceptions of American global leadership.”²¹

This analysis is an initial attempt to answer two questions: 1) What do policymakers and experts based in allied countries have to say about polarization in U.S. domestic politics; and, 2) How should U.S. policies and communication strategies be adjusted in the light of this information? After all, to tailor effective assurance policies, U.S. policymakers must understand how allies’ views of the United States inform their perceptions of assurance.



Polarization and U.S. Allies' Views

U.S. domestic polarization is concerning for U.S. allies. According to interviews with foreign experts, polarization creates expectations of U.S. unpredictability and instability.²² It fosters allies' concerns regarding erratic U.S. decision-making (e.g., witness the Obama Administration's shifting "red lines" in Syria, President Trump's statements concerning NATO, and the Biden Administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan) and fears that a distracted United States will stand back from the global engagement upon which its allies' security depend. Polarization is causing U.S. allies to question U.S. credibility as a guarantor of their security.²³

In the long run, if the trend worsens, allies may well work to obtain alternative means to strengthen their security, from conciliating to America's adversaries to developing independent nuclear weapon capabilities. In many foreign countries, discussions about U.S. allies "going nuclear" independently of the United States are heard much more often and are more socially acceptable within the policy-making community than they were even 10 years ago.²⁴ Yet, more nuclear-armed states, even if allied, would be a significant failure of decades of U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Domestic Politics and the Case of U.S. Aid to Ukraine

The case of U.S. aid to Ukraine is an instructive example of how U.S. domestic polarization undermines the nation's efforts to assure allies. Other countries are looking to U.S. actions in Ukraine as a litmus test for U.S. willingness to help them in potential regional conflicts. While Ukraine does not have a formal alliance treaty with the United States, Washington pledged to safeguard Ukraine's territorial integrity in the 1994 Budapest Memorandum.²⁵ U.S. help to Ukraine does not include direct military deployment; it is limited to providing (substantial) military and economic support, which the United States was able to do without much political controversy for the first two years of the war. By the end of 2023, however, a significant portion of congressional Republicans refused to support another aid package for Ukraine absent immigration reform (a largely domestic issue) to which Democrats would not agree.²⁶ Even though the package ultimately passed in April 2024, the delay enabled Russia to achieve successes on the battlefield that will be difficult to reverse, a fact that has not gone unnoticed, particularly by those U.S. allies that are in increased danger of Russia's aggression.²⁷

Moreover, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia are also assessing the U.S. willingness to help Ukraine and using it as a proximate indicator of how likely the United States would be to help them if there is a regional war with North Korea or China. On one hand, the United States remains one of the largest supporters of Ukraine.²⁸ On the other, it was too slow to provide the kinds of advanced weapons that could have made a difference prior to Russia placing its economy on a war footing. Ongoing restrictions, such as how far the Ukrainians can strike into Russian territory with U.S.-provided weapons, give Russia operational depth and enable it to conduct its campaign of terror against Ukraine's civilians.²⁹



Implications for U.S. Assurance Efforts

The increase in allies' efforts to insulate the transatlantic alliance from the effects of U.S. domestic polarization appear to have taken on a greater urgency since former President Donald Trump became the Republican Party's nominee in the 2024 presidential elections. The number of articles on "Trump-proofing" U.S. alliances has since increased, partly because of the insistence with which President Trump pushed allies to meet their defense commitments and partly because of the President's rather blunt communication style.³⁰ For example, allies agreed to have NATO take over a substantial part of coordinating efforts on Ukraine aid.³¹ They are also collectively increasing their defense spending, even though this is likely impacted by their threat perceptions as much as the eventuality of a Trump second term. But allies (ought to) know that President Trump's approach is a reflection, not a cause, of a broader fear of profligate Washington spending that leads to resistance to expensive foreign involvement. The percentage of poll respondents who think the United States will be better off if it engages globally has been decreasing steadily in recent years.³²

Several trends are apparent in allies' adjustments to U.S. domestic politics. First, they are increasing their defense spending. While increases are perhaps more driven by Russia's threat to Europe's security order than by concerns over U.S. polarization, this is a good start to counter the narrative that Europe is "free-riding" on U.S. defense investments. Defense spending across the European allies and Canada rose by 11 percent in 2023 and 18 allies spent more than two percent of GDP on defense in the same year.³³ The number of allies meeting or exceeding their commitment is up to 23 in 2024.³⁴ While significant capability gaps remain, increasing allies' own ability to defend their territories is a worthy investment regardless of who becomes the next U.S. president and a step toward insulation against the potential loss of Washington as a credible ally due to domestic polarization.

Another way to insulate alliance relationships from the effects of U.S. domestic polarization is to maintain good relations with leaders in both political parties and presidential campaigns. Some countries, like the United Kingdom, are reportedly doing just that.³⁵ But many European countries have adopted a potentially counterproductive attitude if they need to work with a new Trump Administration, from disparaging the Administration's past policies (that turned out to be warranted) to using somewhat hyperbolic language with regard to the potential effects of a possible Trump second term.³⁶ This allied response may contribute to Russian efforts to exploit U.S. domestic polarization to degrade alliance cohesion.³⁷

Next, to further insulate themselves from the potential lack of consistency in U.S. policy due to polarization, European countries can strengthen mutual military and defense cooperation, and make processes like help for Ukraine independent of direct U.S. participation.³⁸ In the near term, these steps can only go so far because, despite years of war, Europe's military capabilities and economic resources for Ukraine remain limited. In fact, European countries themselves are not unified regarding how much of a threat Russia is to their existence, which has the potential to further fracture alliance relations.



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Lastly, European NATO members are discussing options for complementing or replacing the U.S. nuclear deterrent. This is a proposition fraught with political, economic, and diplomatic difficulties.³⁹ France and the United Kingdom have independent nuclear forces, but their numbers are low relative to both Russia and China, and coming up with a politically workable alternative to the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent seems doubtful for the time being. Debates about independent nuclear capabilities are even more visible in Japan and South Korea.⁴⁰ South Korean public polls consistently show high levels of support for an independent nuclear weapons program.⁴¹

Recommendations

The U.S. Government can take several important steps to help mitigate the effects of polarization on U.S. alliance relations. At the forefront of these efforts, Washington must engage in consistent, unified communications to U.S. allies demonstrating its willingness to commit to their defense. Second, the U.S. Government should clearly demonstrate to the U.S. public why the United States benefits when it is engaged globally. Lessons of World War I, World War II, and the Cold War are being forgotten at the risk of peril to Western security. The president—who holds an exceptionally strong position as an actor in foreign and defense policy—has a unique role in communicating to Americans and to allies. For a policy to survive an administration, however, the other party's leaders' involvement and buy-in is necessary. The West's previous effective communicators were Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher who, as David Lonsdale, Senior Lecturer at the University of Hull, pointed out in an interview, "had principles and clear positions" and "were excellent communicators."⁴² Both made the case for strong globally engaged alliances at home and abroad. If U.S. allies see that the American public is supportive of U.S. global engagement and the capabilities such an engagement requires, their confidence in U.S. assurance will likely increase.

Making the case to the American people regarding the importance of benefits of U.S. global engagement and U.S. alliances, and what it takes to maintain them in today's adversarial environment, is the first order of (a rather urgent) business with regard to overcoming the effects of domestic polarization on foreign policy. A well-crafted communications strategy would also be valuable to make it harder for adversaries' influence operations and disinformation efforts to succeed. This communication strategy should be backed up by defense budget increases, including those of allies, given the unprecedented threats they face.

Lastly, politicians and decision-makers in allied countries ought to strengthen their understanding of the workings of the U.S. Government, specifically its policy formulation and implementation. This should make them less susceptible to believe sensationalist headlines and media-driven hyperbole that may otherwise skew perceptions and introduce a degree of unnecessary misunderstanding into already complex bilateral and multilateral relations. Minimizing this "noise" is a prerequisite toward more effective relations.



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Conclusion

The polarization of U.S. foreign and defense policy is a problem for how Washington's allies view U.S. willingness to come to their aid if needed. Polarization undermines their perception of U.S. credibility and willingness to intervene on their behalf, which then makes the U.S. goal of assuring them and managing the alliance structure more challenging. Excellent internal and external communication regarding the need for and benefits of U.S. global engagement can help to mitigate its effect on alliance relations, and is overdue.

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<https://armedservices.house.gov/sites/republicans.armedservices.house.gov/files/Strategic-Posture-Committee-Report-Final.pdf>.

⁵ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Washington Summit Declaration*, July 10, 2024, available at https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm.

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¹¹ For an example see, Gary Jacobson, "Party polarization in national politics: The electoral connection," in Jon Bond and Richard Fleisher (eds.), *Polarized politics: Congress and the president in a partisan era* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, January 2000), available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Gary-Jacobson-3/publication/247118625_Party_Polarization_in_National_Politics_The_Electoral_Connection/links/5c7596d4458515831f72944b/Party-Polarization-in-National-Politics-The-Electoral-Connection?_tp=eyJjb250ZXh0Ijp7ImZpcnN0UGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIiwicGFnZSI6InB1YmxpY2F0aW9uIn19.

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