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A Fading Western Alliance System? Who Is to Blame and Why Should We Care

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Introduction

The traditional U.S. global system of formal alliances includes NATO, an historically unparalleled multilateral alliance, and multiple bilateral alliances, such as those with Japan and South Korea. Together, these alliances create for the United States both added costs and the risk of becoming involved in conflicts abroad, a so-called “commitment trap.” Added cost and risk are part and parcel of serious collective security agreements. However, collective security alliances can also provide unique security advantages to help meet threats and share costs. The U.S. global alliance structure, for example, provides advantages that are unavailable to current foes in terms of geographical access, power projection, shared intelligence, resources, and available military power.

Historically, alliances have proven, on occasion, to be both an ultimately disastrous commitment trap and, in contrast, an enormous advantage. With regard to the latter, for example, it is difficult to imagine that U.S. successes in World War II and the Cold War could have been achieved at tolerable costs in the absence of the concerted allied efforts. In the successful prosecution of World War II, for example, key allies together sustained financial



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costs comparable to those of the United States, and several suffered much greater levels of human loss and property destruction.

The constant calculation of added costs and risk vs. advantage is at the heart of estimating the net value of alliances; the fundamental question is: do the benefits outweigh the risks? There is no enduring objective answer to that question because it depends on the prevailing security context. In the United States, contending isolationist- and internationalist-oriented narratives have competed for policy priority for 250 years¹ – with the latter dominating U.S. defense policy since the end of World War II, after which, for the first time in its history, the United States remained deeply involved abroad militarily.

A Fading U.S. Political Consensus

The U.S. political consensus regarding the great net value of America's global military alliance system established after World War II and sustained throughout the Cold War has become increasingly frayed since the end of the Cold War. The initial questioning of its net value followed from the widespread Western expectation of a "New World Order" immediately after the end of the Cold War. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the confident expectation of a much more benign world order, the obvious issue was whether the United States continued to need the global collective security system established to contain the Soviet Union. Traditional isolationists, of course, answered no. In contrast, internationalists considered continuing U.S. involvement in international institutions to be the key to the emerging New World Order, but that the previous military requirements were wholly out of touch with reality because "Russia had repudiated Communism and become a democracy."²

The common denominator uniting the isolationist and internationalist narratives at the time was that great power war was a thing of the past and the United States could pull far back from its previous levels of forward-deployed (regional) nuclear and non-nuclear forces. These were the forces most associated with credible extended deterrence for allies.

President George H. W. Bush took these credulous expectations to their logical policy extreme. He announced that he was "moving to reshape the U.S. military" in accord with his expectation of a benign new world order: "The new base force will be smaller by half a million than today's military, with fewer Army divisions, Air Force wings, Navy ships, and strategic nuclear forces." He went much further and directed "...that the United States eliminate its entire worldwide inventory of ground-launched short-range, that is, theater nuclear weapons. We will bring home and destroy all of our nuclear artillery shells and short-range ballistic missile warheads... Recognizing further the major changes in the international military landscape, the United States will withdraw all tactical nuclear weapons from its surface ships and attack submarines, as well as those nuclear weapons associated with our land-based naval aircraft."³



A "New World Order"

The confident expectation at the time was that Moscow would follow the U.S. lead and engage in political liberalization and a comparable elimination of nuclear forces. After all, "Russia had repudiated Communism and become a democracy." President Bush explained that, "there is every reason for the Soviet Union to match our actions.... I urge them to do so." Why were Moscow's leaders expected to "go down this road with us"? Because, the President asserted, they "are now questioning the need for their huge nuclear arsenal. The Soviet nuclear stockpile now seems less an instrument of national security, and more of a burden."⁴ This view of nuclear weapons, predicated on the presumption of a more benign new world order, certainly was the dominant perspective in Washington—but was wrongly assumed to be shared by Moscow and elsewhere. Much of America's leadership enjoyed the convenience of unwarranted optimism about the future world order and "mirror-imaging" when imagining Moscow's and Beijing's future behavior. The fallacy of these expectations became apparent when America carefully implemented the nearly complete elimination of theater nuclear forces initiated by President Bush and continued by successors, while Moscow has moved in the opposite direction. Moscow clearly has continued to see great value—even increased value—in its nuclear forces for the purposes of deterrence and coercion.

Washington's post-Cold War narrative against maintaining forward-deployed forces for the defense of allies, ironically, has given way much more recently to a very different questioning of the traditional U.S. military commitment to its global alliances: given the great mounting dangers across the globe from an "axis of autocracies," many now view the costs and risks of previous U.S. alliance military commitments to be unacceptable—especially with most allies long accustomed to relying excessively on U.S. power and expenditure for their protection. Within the space of one generation, questioning of the net value of the U.S. global military power and alliance system shifted from the naively optimistic expectation that the world was moving toward an unprecedentedly peaceful order, so previous levels of military preparation to support global alliances were no longer necessary, to the view that the world is so dangerous that the traditional operation of the alliance system and its potential "commitment trap" are now too risky and unaffordable.

This profound transition in the underlying narratives arguing *against* the continuing net value of the established U.S. military alliance system and practices has taken place without much open debate here or abroad—until very recently when the consequences of the United States turning away from its traditional alliance roles are now looming for key allies, to their obvious disquiet. Allies are now compelled to come to grips with decades of convenient but inadequate defense spending in favor of relying excessively on American power and Washington's repeated pronouncements of "ironclad" guarantees. Washington's largesse created a comfortable dependency for allies that risked future U.S. reconsideration of the net value of alliances—now a serious problem for them, and us. Then Defense Secretary Robert Gates warned in 2011: "...if current trends in the decline of European defense capabilities are not halted and reversed, future U.S. political leaders—those for whom the Cold War was not



the formative experience that it was for me—may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.”⁵

Who and What Is to Blame?

The U.S. system of alliances is now confronting a crisis of confidence that appears to be more pronounced than the many past periodic intra-alliance problems. This contemporary crisis follows from four interrelated developments that have emerged over the course of the past two decades: 1) America’s post-Cold War narrative that the potential for great power war was a thing of the past and corresponding naïve arms control enthusiasms, and a related generation-long “holiday from history”;⁶ 2) the manifestly revisionist, aggressive geopolitical agendas of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, their threats, increasing cooperation, and their expansive nuclear and conventional forces aspirations; 3) increasingly blunt U.S. expressions of dissatisfaction with allies’ contributions to collective security and the costs and risks of being the ultimate provider of their security; and, 4) the allies’ generally inadequate investment in their own defense, their related over-reliance on U.S. support (which U.S. Presidents, dating back to Eisenhower, have warned against),⁷ and their corresponding deep concern with the rapid U.S. turnaround from its past commitments to their security.

The ramifications of the convergence of these four interrelated factors are profound. For example, it is leading several allies to increasing interest in their own national nuclear capabilities or a new multinational nuclear capability independent of Washington. This trend includes faint-but-growing indications of Berlin’s potential interest in national or (less unlikely) multinational nuclear deterrence capabilities independent of Washington.⁸ The same dynamic can be seen in Poland, Turkey, Japan, and South Korea.⁹ Sustained movement in this direction would undo decades of U.S. nuclear non-proliferation efforts as the emergence of new nuclear powers would likely inspire a “cascade” of further proliferation. The foreboding future combination of deeply frayed U.S. alliances, expansive nuclear proliferation, and worsening, unprecedented threats to Western security is not far-fetched given the contemporary trajectory of history.

It is convenient to blame the West’s current security dilemma on “free-riding” allies, and they certainly carry considerable responsibility. Allies have engaged, perhaps even more decidedly, in the same wishful post-Cold War thinking that captured Washington, and happily relied on the United States to pay heavily for their defense and thereby freed up their resources for more socially pleasing purposes. However, Washington also carries considerable culpability for its self-serving imagining of a new world order and related mirror imaging—adopted with an “ideological certitude bordering on geostrategic arrogance”¹⁰—its corresponding premature elimination of key military capabilities, and foolish arms control enthusiasms. These were not foisted on us by allies; they were of Washington’s own making, on a bipartisan basis. It is this combination of U.S. unwarranted idealism and its consequences, and allies’ self-inflicted weakness in the face of manifestly growing threats, that has led to the



current unprecedented challenges confronting Western security and the future of the Western alliance system itself.

Needed Now: A United Front with Power

Acknowledging the shared culpability for the current security dilemma is of value because it suggests where changes are needed, most importantly abandoning old thought patterns that have undermined Western security. The most important question at this point, however, is not how we got here. It is how the West can best respond to the very real, growing threat presented by the “axis of autocracies.” A united front to meet this emerging existential threat—with potentially incomparable Western power and resources—is needed. Indeed, the combined strength of a united West may be the *only way* to limit the aggressive aspirations of Russia, China, and North Korea. These revisionist powers will not moderate themselves and, in fact, will be encouraged in their aggressive agendas by Western division and weakness.

A new direction toward greater Western unity and collective power, however, will likely demand defense spending levels not seen since the 1960s, including by European allies, and a common willingness to set aside “beggar thy neighbor” approaches to intra-alliance relations. Continued intra-alliance griping and sniping would be passé were it not for the fact that we face common threats that now demand Herculean joint efforts. Germany, as the potentially most powerful continental ally, has a special responsibility to focus on the realities of countering real military threats—which it appears to have recognized recently.¹¹ The quip attributed to Benjamin Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 is now wholly apropos: “We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately.”

Conclusion

A new post-Cold War world order is emerging; unfortunately, it is far from the benign vision President Bush confidently predicted and most Western capitals embraced with gusto. This was a profound misreading of history, but there are multiple additional contributing factors to the West’s lack of preparedness to meet now-looming threats. It is true that America’s allies have been “free riding” for decades and are woefully ill-equipped. But both sides of the Atlantic have contributed to the West’s contemporary problematic capability to parry emerging existential threats and also to the desperate need to mend internal fissures in an alliance that was essential to the West’s Cold War triumph. If adapted as needed to meet the unprecedented threats of the 21st Century, that alliance system will have comparable great net value for the United States and allies. If not, the West’s collective security system could collapse—to the great satisfaction and further animation of a consortium of extremely hostile autocratic powers. This is not inevitable, but the choice is now ours.



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¹ See for example, Patrick Garrity, *In Search of Monsters to Destroy: American Foreign Policy, Revolution, and Regime Change 1776-1900* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2012).

² As claimed in a prominent article in *The New York Times Magazine*. See Brian Hall, "So You Think the Cold War is Over?," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 15, 1998, p. 42.

³ See, President George H. W. Bush's speech from the White House on September 27, 1991, C-SPAN, "U.S.-Soviet Nuclear Forces Reduction," <https://www.c-span.org/program/white-house-event/us-soviet-nuclear-forces-reduction/15727>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Robert Gates, "Text of Speech by Robert Gates on the Future of NATO," *The Atlantic Council*, June 10, 2011, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/natosource/text-of-speech-by-robert-gates-on-the-future-of-nato/>.

⁶ Robert Gates, "We Face Unprecedented Peril," *The Washington Post*, September 24, 2024.

⁷ See the discussion in, Morgan Phillips, "Why NATO's defense spending imbalance lasted for decades," *Fox News*, May 31, 2026, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/why-natos-defense-spending-imbalance-lasting-decades>.

⁸ See Keith B. Payne, "German Nuclear Independence From Washington," *Information Series*, No. 651, National Institute for Public Policy, February 17, 2026.

⁹ See the discussion in, W. J. Hennigan, "America's Allies Are Shaken, and Now They're Taking Action," *The New York Times*, March 12, 2025, p. 4.

¹⁰ Andrew A. Michta, "The Next U.S. National Security Strategy Risks Misreading History Again," *RealClearDefense*, September 22, 2025, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2025/09/22/the_next_us_national_security_strategy_risks_misreading_history_again_1136169.html.

¹¹ See for example, Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, *Gesamtkonzeption militärische Verteidigung: Militärstrategie und Plan für die Streitkräfte, Verantwortung für Europa*, April 2026, [di-gesamtkonzeption-der-militarischen-download-deu-data.pdf](https://www.bmvg.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/04-2026-gesamtkonzeption-der-militarischen-download-deu-data.pdf).

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