

The Role of Allies and Partners in U.S. Military Strategy and Operations

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The Role of Allies and Partners in U.S. Military Strategy and Operations

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United States House of Representatives

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As powerful as the United States is as a nation, its allies and partners around the world are critical elements of its national security strategy. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD)'s own 2018 National Defense Strategy states that “A more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, *combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners*, will sustain American influence and ensure favorable balances of power that safeguard the free and open international order.”³

U.S. Allies and Partners Provide Comparative Advantage

Particularly in an era of great-power competition with China and Russia, the network of alliances and partnerships the United States has developed over the past 75 years provides it with a unique comparative advantage. These networks, particularly in Europe and Asia, are the backbone of the international order that has ensured relative peace and security since the end of World War II and created the space for so much economic growth, not just in the United States but around the world. Allies and friends help share the burden of common defense in tangible and intangible ways. Day in and day out, the United States and its allies share intelligence, train and exercise together, and operate compatible weapon systems—coming together to create combined capabilities that far exceed what the United States could bring to bear on its own.

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

² The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest.

³ DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018, emphasis added.

One doesn't have to look far back into history to find examples of the importance of allies and partners to U.S. national security strategy and military operations. Allies and partners from around the world joined U.S. forces in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks and fought alongside them in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many joined U.S. forces again to fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria beginning in 2014. Without the basing and access agreements granted by U.S. allies and partners, without allied and partner trainers and special forces on the ground, and without the equipment these allies and friends provided to partner forces in Iraq and Syria, defeating the Islamic State and eliminating its physical caliphate would have been far more costly, and the fight would have taken much longer. In Europe, the United States is working closely with NATO allies to deter Russia while, at the same time, guarding against internal threats to freedom driven by ethno-nationalism and illiberalism. The United States is also working with its European allies and partners to find ways to address challenges posed by an increasingly powerful and assertive China. In Asia, U.S. allies and partners play an essential role in deterring aggression, maintaining stability, and ensuring free access to the global commons. U.S. alliances with Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea and partnerships with many other countries in the region strengthen the United States' ability to confront a variety of security threats, such as North Korea's growing nuclear weapon and long-range missile programs, China's military build-up and sweeping territorial claims in the South China Sea, and the continuing threat of violent extremism.

Changes Are Coming and More Change Is Needed

It has become almost a cliché to say that the United States is at a strategic inflection point, standing at a crossroads, or perhaps is even facing the end of the international world order as we know it. Whatever you call it, the period when the United States was the sole superpower is ending, and the country now faces significant challenges ahead—most prominently, competing successfully against a rising China while reducing the risks of war with Beijing. This is going to require the United States to change its national security approach—a challenging assignment under normal circumstances but one that will be even more difficult because national security institutions will almost inevitably face pressure to trim budgets and because many other important domestic problems will compete for policymakers' time and attention.

Allies and partners will remain critically important in this changing landscape, but the United States needs to adapt and strengthen its network of alliances and partnerships to better position itself for this era of great-power competition. The zero-based reviews of the regional combatant commands that Secretary of Defense Mark Esper commissioned a year ago and that are wrapping up at the end of this month will inform DoD's effort to adjust its overseas footprint and activities. To meet future challenges successfully in an era of finite resources, the United States needs to shore up deterrence in both Europe and Asia while carefully reducing its military footprint in the Middle East without creating more insecurity in that region. The Indo-Pacific Reassurance Initiative concept, included in both the House and Senate versions of the yet-to-be-finalized Fiscal Year 2021 National Defense Authorization Act, would be a valuable tool for DoD to shore up deterrence in Asia.

The United States also needs its allies and partners to do more for themselves and their own security, as well as more with the United States, in some cases, if all are to meet future challenges successfully. For instance, NATO allies need to continue to spend more on defense and make good on their pledges to do so by 2024, without the United States becoming myopically focused on percentage of gross domestic product as the sole metric of the health of the Alliance. U.S. allies and partners also need to continue working with the United States to share the burdens of providing peace and security around the world—for example, in the Middle East, where France and Australia participate in the maritime coalition interdicting weapon shipments to the Houthis, and in the South China Sea, where Australia and Japan have joined the United States to conduct freedom of navigation operations and hold naval exercises this year.

Developing a comprehensive plan to adapt and revitalize the U.S. network of alliances and rebalance the U.S. military footprint overseas is both an essential component of a broader strategy for great-power competition and a homework assignment that will take years to complete. Palau's recent offer to host U.S. military bases and airfields and the Philippines' decision to freeze its withdrawal from the Visiting Forces Agreements are positive developments but there is much more work to be done. This is also an area in which DoD needs help from Congress. To compete successfully against China, deter Russian aggression, and recalibrate the U.S. military footprint in an era of finite resources, DoD will need to make difficult decisions about the kinds of systems in which it invests, how it is postured in key regions around the world, and what kinds of capabilities it is willing to sell (or not sell) to its allies and friends. Congress is involved in all these decisions, and without support from Congress for the many tough calls that lie ahead, it will be much harder for DoD to make the strategic adjustments that are so clearly needed.

The Perils of a Neglected Garden

The United States' network of alliances and partnerships has served the country well for decades and remains a unique comparative advantage for it strategically, but it cannot take these relationships for granted. Any military officer stationed overseas or fighting in a coalition likely would say that working with allies can be the hardest and most painstaking politico-military work there is, but ultimately it pays critical dividends.

Alliances and partnerships are like gardens: They don't grow overnight, they must be tended carefully to flourish, and they can wither if they are neglected. Maintaining a network of alliances and partnerships takes sustained effort and reliable and consistent communications, and it rests on a foundation of shared objectives and trust. Both the 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy emphasize the importance of allies and partners for the security of the United States, but I am concerned that a widening gap has emerged between the rhetoric in these documents and the actions that U.S. leaders have taken involving many of the United States' closest allies and friends. The U.S. commitment to NATO's Article V security guarantee has repeatedly been called into question. U.S. leaders have accused our European allies publicly and privately of taking the United States for granted and have even appeared to contemplate withdrawing from the NATO alliance altogether. The decision to withdraw as many as 12,000 U.S. military personnel from Germany without any apparent advance consultation with

Berlin has been publicly messaged as punishment and makes little strategic sense given Russia's continuing aggressive actions in Europe and in the United States. Furthermore, the abrupt decision to withdraw U.S. troops from Syria cleared the way for Turkey's ensuing incursion into Syria, took U.S. allies and friends by surprise, and left them wondering when the United States could be counted on. Deriding Seoul as a free rider, the United States demanded that South Korea pay \$5 billion to host U.S. troops on the peninsula, a 400-percent increase over the previous year's bill, and has threatened multiple times to pull U.S. troops out of Korea entirely. Japan has also been threatened with a four-fold increase in payments to host U.S. bases.

Growing threats from China and Russia mean that the United States and its allies and friends need each other now more than ever. But growing points of friction and uncertainty in those alliance relationships can result in negative consequences. A 13-nation Pew Research Center survey released on September 15 showed that the share of the public with a favorable view of the United States was as low in several democratic countries as it has been since Pew began polling almost 20 years ago.⁴ Ultimately, shared concerns over common threats and shared security interests lie at the heart of strong alliances and are what binds them together. But nations and their leaders must balance many competing demands and pressures to govern; hence, it is rare that the United States and its allies will see each problem the same way or agree fully on how best to solve it. Building and sustaining alliances requires persuasion, persistence, consultation, an ability to listen, and a willingness to compromise. The chances are small that the United States' closest friends would leave their alliances outright, but if the United States does not do a better job tending its gardens around the world, it may find itself with friends who are far less willing to provide the support that is required to take on all of the hard work that lies ahead.

⁴ Richard Wike, Janell Fetterolf, and Mara Mordecai, "U.S. Image Plummets Internationally as Most Say Country Has Handled Coronavirus Badly," Pew Research Center, September 15, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/09/15/us-image-plummets-internationally-as-most-say-country-has-handled-coronavirus-badly/>.