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Why America Needs New Alliances

The international order of the Cold War era no longer makes sense. But the world can't do without U.S. leadership. Here's a better approach.

By Yoram Hazony and Ofir Haivry

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A joint U.S.-Indian army exercise in India, April 6, 2004. PHOTO: RAVEENDRAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

President Trump is often accused of creating a needless rift with America's European allies. The secretary-general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Jens Stoltenberg, expressed a different view

Thursday when he told a joint session of Congress: "Allies must spend more on defense—this has been the clear message from President Trump, and this message is having a real impact."

Mr. Stoltenberg's remarks reflect a growing recognition that strategic and economic realities demand a drastic change in the way the U.S. conducts foreign policy. The unwanted cracks in the Atlantic alliance are primarily a consequence of European leaders, especially in Germany and France, wishing to continue living in a world that no longer exists. The U.S. cannot serve as the enforcer for the Europeans' beloved "rules-based international order" any more. Even in the 1990s, it was doubtful the U.S. could indefinitely guarantee the security of all nations, paying for George H.W. Bush's "new world order" principally with American soldiers' lives and American taxpayers' dollars.

Today a \$22 trillion national debt and the voting public's indifference to the dreams of world-wide liberal empire have depleted Washington's ability to wage pricey foreign wars. At a time of escalating troubles at home, America's estimated 800 overseas bases in 80 countries are coming to look like a bizarre misallocation of resources. And the U.S. is politically fragmented to an extent unseen in living memory, with uncertain implications in the event of a major war.

This explains why the U.S. has not sent massive, Iraq-style expeditionary forces to defend Ukraine's integrity or impose order in Syria. If there's trouble on Estonia's border with Russia, would the U.S. have the will to deploy tens of thousands of soldiers on an indefinite mission 85 miles from St. Petersburg? Although Estonia joined NATO in 2004, the certainties of 15 years ago have broken down.

On paper, America has defense alliances with dozens of countries. But these are the ghosts of a rivalry with the Soviet Union that ended three decades ago, or the result of often reckless policies adopted after 9/11. These so-called allies include Turkey and Pakistan, which share neither America's values nor its interests, and cooperate with the U.S. only when it serves their purposes. Other "allies" refuse to develop a significant capacity for self-defense, and are thus more accurately regarded as American dependencies or protectorates.

Liberal internationalists are right about one thing, however: America cannot simply turn its back on the world. Pearl Harbor and 9/11 demonstrated that the U.S. can and will be targeted on its own soil. An American strategic posture aimed at minimizing the danger from rival powers needs to focus on deterring Russia and China from wars of expansion; weakening China relative to the U.S. and thereby preventing it from attaining dominance over the world economy; and keeping smaller hostile powers such as North Korea and Iran from obtaining the capacity to attack America or other democracies.

To attain these goals, the U.S. will need a new strategy that is far less costly than anything previous administrations contemplated. Mr. Trump has taken a step in the right direction by insisting that NATO allies "pay their fair share" of the budget for defending Europe, increasing defense spending to 2% of gross domestic product in accordance with NATO treaty obligations.

But this framing of the issue doesn't convey the problem's true nature or its severity. The real issue is that the U.S. can no longer afford to assume responsibility for defending entire regions if the people living in them aren't willing and able to build up their own credible military

deterrent.

The U.S. has a genuine interest, for example, in preventing the democratic nations of Eastern Europe from being absorbed into an aggressive Russian imperial state. But the principal interested parties aren't Americans. The members of the Visegrád Group—the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovakia—have a combined population of 64 million and a 2017 GDP of \$2 trillion (about 50% of Russia's, according to CIA estimates). The principal strategic question is therefore whether these countries are willing to do what is necessary to maintain their own national independence. If they are—at a cost that could well exceed the 2% figure devised by NATO planners—then they could eventually shed their dependent status and come to the table as allies of the kind the U.S. could actually use: strong frontline partners in deterring Russian expansion.

The same is true in other regions. Rather than carelessly accumulate dependencies, the U.S. must ask where it can develop real allies—countries that share its commitment to a world of independent nations, pursue democratic self-determination (although not necessarily liberalism) at home, and are willing to pay the price for freedom by taking primary responsibility for their own defense and shouldering the human and economic costs involved.

Nations that demonstrate a commitment to these shared values and a willingness to fight when necessary should benefit from relations that may include the supply of advanced armaments and technologies, diplomatic cover in dealing with shared enemies, preferred partnership in trade, scientific and academic cooperation, and the joint development of new technologies. Fair-weather friends and free-riding dependencies should not.

Perhaps the most important candidate for such a strategic alliance is India. Long a dormant power afflicted by poverty, socialism and an ideology of “nonalignment,” India has become one of the world's largest and fastest-expanding economies. In contrast to the political oppression of the Chinese communist model, India has succeeded in retaining much of its religious conservatism while becoming an open and diverse country—by far the world's most populous democracy—with a solid parliamentary system at both the federal and state levels. India is threatened by Islamist terrorism, aided by neighboring Pakistan; as well as by rapidly increasing Chinese influence, emanating from the South China Sea, the Pakistani port of Gwadar, and Djibouti, in the Horn of Africa, where the Chinese navy has established its first overseas base.

India's values, interests and growing wealth could establish an Indo-American alliance as the central pillar of a new alignment of democratic national states in Asia, including a strengthened Japan and Australia. But New Delhi remains suspicious of American intentions,

and with good reason: Rather than unequivocally bet on an Indian partnership, the U.S. continues to play all sides, haphazardly switching from confrontation to cooperation with China, and competing with Beijing for influence in fanaticism-ridden Pakistan. The rationalizations for these counterproductive policies tend to focus on Pakistan's supposed logistical contributions to the U.S. war in Afghanistan—an example of how tactical considerations and the demands of bogus allies can stand in the way of meeting even the most pressing strategic needs.

A similar confusion characterizes America's relationship with Turkey. A U.S. ally during the Cold War, Turkey is now an expansionist Islamist power that has assisted the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, al Qaeda and even ISIS; threatened Greece and Cyprus; sought Russian weapons; and recently expressed its willingness to attack U.S. forces in Syria. In reality, Turkey is no more an ally than Russia or China. Yet its formal status as the second-largest military in NATO guarantees that the alliance will continue to be preoccupied with pretense and make-believe, rather than the interests of democratic nations. Meanwhile, America's most reliable Muslim allies, the Kurds, live under constant threat of Turkish invasion and massacre.

The Middle East is a difficult region, in which few players share American values and interests, although all of them—including Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and even Iran—are willing to benefit from U.S. arms, protection or cash. Here too Washington should seek alliances with national states that share at least some key values and are willing to shoulder most of the burden of defending themselves while fighting to contain Islamist radicalism. Such natural regional allies include Greece, Israel, Ethiopia and the Kurds.

A central question for a revitalized alliance of democratic nations is which way the winds will blow in Western Europe. For a generation after the Berlin Wall's fall in 1989, U.S. administrations seemed willing to take responsibility for Europe's security indefinitely. European elites grew accustomed to the idea that perpetual peace was at hand, devoting themselves to turning the EU into a borderless utopia with generous benefits for all.

But Europe has been corrupted by its dependence on the U.S. Germany, the world's fifth-largest economic power (with a GDP larger than Russia's), cannot field more than a handful of operational combat aircraft, tanks or submarines. Yet German leaders steadfastly resist American pressure for substantial increases in their country's defense capabilities, telling interlocutors that the U.S. is ruining a beautiful friendship.

None of this is in America's interest—and not only because the U.S. is stuck with the bill. When people live detached from reality, they develop all sorts of fanciful theories about how the world works. For decades, Europeans have been devising “transnationalist” fantasies to

explain how their own supposed moral virtues, such as their rejection of borders, have brought them peace and prosperity. These ideas are then exported to the U.S. and the rest of the democratic world via international bodies, universities, nongovernmental organizations, multinational corporations and other channels. Having subsidized the creation of a dependent socialist paradise in Europe, the U.S. now has to watch as the EU's influence washes over America and other nations.

For the moment, it is hard to see Germany or Spain becoming American allies in the new, more realistic sense of the term we have proposed. France is a different case, maintaining significant military capabilities and a willingness to deploy them at times. But the governments of these and other Western European countries remain ideologically committed to transferring ever-greater powers to international bodies and to the concomitant degradation of national independence. That doesn't make them America's enemies, but neither are they partners in defending values such as national self-determination. It is difficult to foresee circumstances under which they would be willing or able to arm themselves in keeping with the actual security needs of an emerging alliance of independent democratic nations.

The prospects are better with respect to Britain, whose defense spending is already significantly higher, and whose public asserted a desire to regain independence in the Brexit referendum of 2016. With a population of more than 65 million and a GDP of \$3 trillion (75% of Russia's), the U.K. may yet become a principal partner in a leaner but more effective security architecture for the democratic world.

Isolationists are also right about one thing: The U.S. cannot be, and should not try to be, the world's policeman. Yet it does have a role to play in awakening democratic nations from their dependence-induced torpor, and assisting those that are willing to make the transition to a new security architecture based on self-determination and self-reliance. An alliance including the U.S., the U.K. and the frontline Eastern European nations, as well as India, Israel, Japan and Australia, among others, would be strong enough to exert sustained pressure on China, Russia and hostile Islamist groups.

Helping these democratic nations become self-reliant regional actors would reduce America's security burden, permitting it to close far-flung military installations and making American military intervention the exception rather than the rule. At the same time, it would free American resources for the long struggle to deny China technological superiority, as well as for unforeseen emergencies that are certain to arise.

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