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No More Situationships: Why Rethinking Foreign Partnerships is Essential to Right-Sizing U.S. Global Force Posture and Creating a Sustainable Defense Strategy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the end of the Cold War and onset of the "unipolar moment," U.S. strategic doctrine has remained relatively unchanged. U.S. global primacy has been largely uncontested, but fissures are beginning to show as American power enters relative decline, with rising global powers like China and other regional powers gaining influence. Criticisms of U.S. power and unipolarity coalesce around several distinct intellectual camps, which some scholars now classify as a community of "restraint." This community can be further broken down by their specific critiques of U.S. power, and by their analytical framework for conceptualizing global politics and security, with overlapping and complementary perspectives. The restraint community, writ large, is still a minority within policy-making circles, but is gaining influence over some policy areas, and there are few indicators that their presence and influence will diminish as the world enters a period of increasing multipolarity.

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To that end, U.S. strategy and policy formulations are inadequate to the current moment, particularly regarding military policy. Official publications that direct strategy, such as the *National Defense Strategy (NDS)* and *National Military Strategy (NMS)*, have become uncritical and sclerotic over the last three decades, with frameworks that are at odds with strategic realities and power dynamics. The United States military is overstretched globally, operating on every continent, reinforcing and training over 100 allies and partners, while simultaneously attempting to modernize equipment and doctrine. This scenario constitutes strategic myopia, wherein recruiting and retention of personnel within the all-volunteer force is insufficient to meet the demands of securing America's vast network of security relationships, nor is the doctrine, force structure, or fielded equipment guaranteed to prevail over declared adversaries in the advent of large-scale combat.

Key to U.S. assumptions of primacy and power projection is its globe-spanning array of allies and partners. This network both supports and is supported by the United States military but is part and parcel of the unsustainable overextension of American power abroad. To create a more stable security environment, the United States needs to take a hard look its vital interests, strategic priorities, and its security relationships.

This paper argues that the conflation of allies and partners, and the continual drive to acquire new ones, is detrimental to U.S. security and the security of America's closest allies, and that to "live within its means" in the medium term will require a reprioritization of resources to treaty allies at the expense of less formal partnerships. Doing so will provide strategic clarity, reorienting assets and resources away from regions of less strategic importance, such as the Middle East, and toward areas of increasing or consistent importance like Asia and Europe. It will also realign values with shared visions of security, since treaty allies are predominantly more democratic and stable nation-states, whereas mere partners constitute a wide range of political formations and ideologies.

The Central Problem: Overreach and Overextension

The central issue plaguing U.S. grand strategy is that it is based on a composite of Cold War analytical thinking and the institutionalized norms of liberal hegemony. A combination of nostalgia, bureaucratic inertia, and power politics have prevented U.S. policymakers from anticipating and reacting to the relative decline of American power, resulting in the "strategic overextension" elucidated by Christopher Layne in his 2006 book *The Peace of Illusions.* Layne writes of the "hegemon's temptation," wherein the hegemon, seeking to maintain the imbalance of power in its favor, is lured into overexpansion due to overwhelming military superiority and the absence of any restraining power.[1] While the United States may not have fallen for the "hegemon's temptation" *per se*, the logics of primacy pervade its strategic calculations, as demonstrated by an ever-increasing defense budget, an expansive global military presence, and a growing number of military-to-military relationships with over half of the world's nations.

The United States has largely maintained a consistent grand strategy since the end of the Cold War, cemented by power and habit into maintaining primacy within the world order.[2] Primacy, however, is difficult to maintain, and the historical record would seem to indicate that it is impossible. It is pervasive in Washington despite ample evidence that it is no longer sustainable, and that the American century as we understand it, has reached its twilight. As historian Daniel Bessner notes, epochal events have signaled the end of America's unipolar moment, most significantly due to the rise of China as "an economic and military powerhouse" that by some metrics has the globe's largest economy and military.[3] Bessner writes that while the American century is in its final days, the debate over what comes next has distilled into two discernible factions: liberal internationalists who are committed to maintaining America's armed primacy, and restrainers, who "urge a fundamental rethinking of the U.S. approach to foreign policy, away from militarism and toward peaceful forms of international engagement."[4] U.S. policymakers are enamored with the former, but the realities of the current world are inescapably proving the restrainers to have a clearer view of the way ahead for both sustaining American power in a pragmatic way and for envisioning a more stable world order. U.S. military policy must embrace

the restraint community's critiques and incorporate them into strategy or face a deteriorating global security regime it is ill-equipped to confront.

The grand strategy of the United States relies on a preponderance of military might that both purportedly reassures allies and deters potential rivals. The strategy has four core components: military preponderance, the reassurance and containment of allies, the integration of other states into U.S. institutions and markets, and nonproliferation of nuclear weapons.[5] These four aspects have proven exceptionally resistant to change or modification over the last three decades. Of those aspects, military preponderance, and the reassurance of allies, are perhaps the most symbiotic of the four, and are central to U.S. military policy. To accomplish this, the United States maintains a vast global footprint, consisting of a network of military bases and forward-stationed personnel unmatched by any other power. This network is ubiquitous for its longevity and continuous growth, and the United States by some estimates now maintains a presence at 750 locations across 85 countries and territories.[6]

The all-volunteer U.S. military is spread thinly but widely, at great expense. The ever-increasing budget of the Department of Defense reflects this reality. As the Stimson Center notes, U.S. defense spending has increased by more than 48% since 2000 when adjusted for inflation, and this trend is paradoxically both unsustainable and yet likely to continue.[7] U.S. policymakers continue to invest in new technologies while restructuring the military's force structure to compete with near-peer adversaries such as Russia, and its sole peer adversary in China, but logistical and manpower issues abound and continue to hamper credible deterrence. Shortfalls in military recruiting are a consistently recurring norm, rather than an occasional phenomenon, and this trend shows no indicators of abating.[8] Retention of existing personnel is also an area of concern, particularly for the Army (the largest service branch by far), which has seen a quarter of recruits since 2022 fail to complete their first enlistment.[9] Yet despite a decreasing share of global GDP (50% at the end of the Second World War compared to 15% in 2023), the United States accounts for 40% of global military spending and continues to add allies and partners to its security umbrella.[10]

U.S. policymakers and the defense establishment treats acquiring and maintaining allies and partners as an end in and of itself, rather than a means of securing American interests. Those interests need restating in the current moment, and America's footprint and engagement abroad should be re-tailored accordingly. A more restrained foreign policy, if not retrenchment, is sorely needed to ensure the viability of U.S. alliances and their continued relevance to protecting vital national interests.

Toward a Policy of Restraint:

The restraint community is a growth industry in intellectual and policy circles compared to the early days of the unipolar moment when it exerted only marginal influence. Characterized by a skepticism of America's ability to manage global affairs and various critiques of liberal hegemony, those who advocate for restraint appear to have been vindicated by global events. These critiques, and their downstream policy implications, offer the clearest conceptual path forward for a sustainable American foreign policy.

Arguments in favor of restraint align with at least one of three central arguments. First, the United States "faces limited threats to its national security due to its geographic, economic, and military advantages," second, it would benefit from "fewer military engagements and commitments," and lastly, restraint better aligns with purported values.[11] Restraint asserts that the United States occupies a favorable security environment, is optimistic about the stability of balances of power in a way that proponents of primacy are not, and believes that military force is a poor tool for many of the problems it is asked to solve.[12] The seeming contradiction of optimism regarding balances of power and skepticism of the utility of military force is resolved by increasing state reliance on other tools, particularly diplomacy. Restraint does not presuppose that security dilemmas are only resolvable by force or the threat of force, nor does it assume that trends must remain on a set trajectory. There is space for nuance and contingency.

Restraint is a big tent, however, encompassing diverse fields of thought and inquiry across multiple distinct ideological camps. For purposes of consistency and comparison, this paper utilizes the general typologies identified in "Competing Visions of Restraint," authored by Miranda Priebe, John Schuessler, Bryan

Rooney, and Jasen Castillo in a 2024 article for *International Security,* to frame the discussion and serve as a foundation for exploring areas of policy overlap. The authors identify three distinct, if broad, ideological categories advocating for restraint in foreign policy: realist, conservative, and progressive.[13] Priebe et al consider restrainers to be those that "call for substantially reducing U.S. military engagement" in at least one region, combined with the belief that the United States should be "at most, the security provider of last resort in one or more of these regions."[14] Restraint then, as a set of coherent policy goals, has at its heart a critique of defense and military policy, specifically tied to whom the United States grants security guarantees and where. It is a concept inseparable from an understanding of what constitutes vital interests, necessary alliances or partners, and the force posture needed to secure them.

The three main tendencies of restraint have their differences, but all have valid critiques regarding current mainstream conceptions of vital interests, the necessity of entangling alliances, and the mass forward presence of U.S. troops and military hardware. To compare their overlapping policy prescriptions, it is useful to first identify the differences in the three camps, and how they approach the problem.

Realist and Conservative Theories of Restraint

Realists begin their analysis through the lens of balance of threat theory, assessing that the "deep engagement" grand strategy of the United States' has been counterproductive, driving states to balance against "perceived threats from U.S. military presence, security relationships, and uses of force."[15] They take a narrow view of the state's vital interests, which they identify as the sovereignty and physical security of the United States, specifically preventing attacks on the homeland, maintaining American territorial integrity, limiting foreign interference domestically, with some analysts adding prosperity and military preponderance.[16] Conservative visions of restraint fall into two discrete tendencies: nationalism and classical liberalism. While nationalist views, centered on traditionalism and society, focus on cultural signifiers, classical liberals have a robust critique of deep engagement that concerns how it reinforces the security or "garrison state" and threatens individual liberties.[17] Some analysts view these two views as separate tendencies entirely, highlighting their diametrically opposed views on militarism and the power of the executive branch.[18] Classical liberals define U.S. vital interests even more narrowly than realists, identifying only physical security of the homeland and "the American way of life."[19] Nationalist views, conversely, take a more expansive view of the national interest, prioritizing traditional norms of American culture and society, while having a somewhat less jaundiced view toward using military force.[20]

Progressive Theories of Restraint

The progressive strain has marked differences with the other tendencies, drawing on a diverse range of perspectives to pinpoint a unique set of threats. For progressives, "authoritarianism, economic inequality, and climate change are particularly pernicious" and directly affect a more expansive set of vital interests, to include democracy, human rights protections, economic inequality, and environmental sustainability."[21] Van Jackson, in his *Grand Strategies of the Left*, identifies three progressive or left tendencies that form distinct grand strategies: progressive pragmatism, anti-hegemonism, and peacemaking. Progressives address root causes of insecurity in their analysis, and progressive pragmatists identify political economy as the essential lens through which to view the world while de-emphasizing, but not ignoring, military power.[22] Anti-hegemonists focus almost solely on the United States, viewing its militarized foreign policy as imperial and undemocratic, inflating the threat posed by external actors.[23] Anti-hegemonists are non-interventionists and view the United States as a uniquely destabilizing hegemon fixated on maintaining favorable imbalances of power. Peacemakers have a less negative view of intervention, but do view the military as a poor instrument of policy to secure "democratic political ends" and prioritize cooperative security arrangements that emphasize human security and policies that address structural causes of insecurity.[24]

What Theories of Restraint Mean for Alliances and Partnerships

Taken holistically, the three ideological cliques of restraint offer the most coherent and viable policy alternatives to current U.S. policy. While the restraint community is diverse in its policy offerings and prescriptions, areas of overlap have emerged that can form the basis for a unified pressure group. All are opposed to deep engagement, the overarching policy that commits the United States to remain committed to allies and partners as the security guarantor in East Asia, Europe, and the Middle East, through a robust forward military presence.[25] Restrainers are united in calling for reduced military engagement in the Middle East, or even outright retrenchment, reducing or downgrading U.S. security obligations, and setting higher thresholds for the use of force.[26] Practically, the question becomes how to unite messaging amongst the ideological camps in such a way that these policies have a clear and definable framework for implementation. Any course of action must be clearly defined and explained to policymakers and citizenry alike and communicated in planning guidance like the *National Security Strategy*. Re-centering alliances as the functional vehicle for military engagement abroad connects these policies in a cohesive, communicable framework that the restraint community can use as a messaging focus aimed at short to medium term policy changes. Strategists and planners from the National Security Council down to the combatant commands can readily implement this reprioritization in policy guidance and weight resources accordingly.

Allies versus Partners: Definitions and Differences

The United States has too many allies and partners, and too few in Washington recognize the difference. These security arrangements are byzantine, partly by design, but mission creep has overextended U.S. military commitments without clear purpose and direction. Alliances and partnerships are sacrosanct in the Beltway, and in the policy lexicon are treated as assumptions undergirding national security policy.

But allies and partners are not the same thing. For too long they have been conflated, obfuscating the nature of U.S. military commitments, blurring who America's true friends are, and obscuring the difference between vital interests and peripheral ones. The United States has military alliances or partnerships with at least 132 countries (it is most certainly higher), or almost seventy percent of the 193 United Nations member states. The U.S. military trains in every hemisphere, with everyone from Poland to Palau. If one considers certain multinational humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) exercises the U.S. military participates in, it even trains alongside (although perhaps at arm's length) their Chinese counterparts.[27]

While most U.S. allies possess that relationship due to shared adversaries, interests, or values, the same cannot be said for Washington's ever-increasing web of partners. The purpose of this article is not to malign allies, nor to deny their utility to American foreign policy and security, but rather to call for greater scrutiny of military relationships, particularly ill-defined and questionable "partnerships."

What are U.S. Allies?

So, what makes an ally an ally? Put simply, allies are allies because the United States has a binding agreement with them, a mutually agreed upon treaty ratified by the United States Congress and holding force of law. At the time of writing, the United States is obliged by treaty or compact to defend the sovereignty of 58 nations across the globe. Of these, 18 are signatories of the 1947 Rio Treaty, 31 are North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, three (Palau, Micronesia, and the Marshall Islands) are governed under the provisions of the Compact of Free Association, four (Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand) are due to bilateral agreements or the remnants of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and two (Australia and New Zealand) were born from the 1951 ANZUS treaty (although due to its nationwide nuclear-free zone, New Zealand is not technically a member in good standing).[28]

In defense-speak, these countries are often referred to as "treaty allies" to distinguish them from yet another category of defense relationship: Major Non-NATO Allies (MNNA). MNNA status is a congressionally defined designation for any country that the White House wants closer ties with but is ineligible for NATO membership or for whom other formal collective defense arrangements are not feasible. MNNAs are distinct from other partners or allies under federal law and are provided with "certain benefits in the areas of defense trade and security cooperation,"

including prioritization for training agreements and arms purchases, and being permitted to purchase depleted uranium munitions.[29]

Examples of U.S. Partnerships

Partnerships are an entirely different matter, a spectrum of relations that run the gamut of weapons and equipment sales, military-to-military training exercises, key leader exchanges, basing privileges, and intelligence sharing. Financially, it includes everything from the U.S.-Israel relationship (admittedly a MNNA nation), which includes approximately $3.8 billion annually in military aid, to the U.S.-Benin relationship, which nets the African country about $7.5 million per annum.[30] [31] Financing of partner militaries is largely facilitated by the State Department with the assistance of the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), which oversees the sale and transfer of "defense articles and services." In 2024 DSCA oversaw the sale or transfer of defense articles and services to the tune of $117.9 billion through Foreign Military Sales, a 45.7% increase from 2023, with at least a quarter of transactions going to non-allies.[32] Any military-to-military training conducted by the Department of Defense with countries other than treaty allies is a partnership of some sort, from the State Partnership Program managed by the National Guard Bureau, which pairs U.S. states with an internation partner nation, to the suite of exercises conducted annually by the combatant commands and their components with non-allies.

The Centrality of Allies and Partners in U.S. Policy

U.S. strategic policy documents like the National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy and National Military Strategy place heavy emphasis on allies and partners, and it is evident that they are essential to current U.S. defense policy. The logics of primacy that undergird U.S. military policy rely on forward presence, basing, overflight, prepositioned supply stocks, and other material concerns that cannot be done without the support and permission of other states. These concerns are stable across presidential administrations, and the reliance or dependency on partners and allies is consistent.

The "Coalition of the Willing" and the Wolfowitz Doctrine

In late 1990, the George H.W. Bush Administration gave shape to the viability of extended alliance and partnership networks when it cobbled together the original "coalition of the willing" in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. That coalition, when it came time to commit forces, consisted of 34 nations largely drawn from NATO members and states in the Persian Gulf.[33] Some gave manpower and resources in abundance, like France with its contingent of 20,000 troop, 350 tanks, and 75 aircraft.[34] Others, lacking either the political capital, resources, or manpower, gave more modestly, as in the case of New Zealand, which provided two C-130 transport aircraft to the effort.[35] That range of commitments would inform strategic planning to the present, by demonstrating both the political imperative of some form of international consensus combined with the practical application of partner militaries as a force multiplier, with the United States military as the linchpin binding the whole apparatus together.

The first major post-Cold War military policy document, the 1992 "Defense Planning Guidance," spelled out what would become the Wolfowitz Doctrine, defining hegemony and preeminence in military power as essential to U.S. strategy.[36] There was a documented recognition amongst defense strategists that the United States must maintain "overwhelming military superiority to prevent the reemergence of rivals."[37] This stated goal of primacy or at least military hegemony, was more muted in subsequent documents, particularly those published under the Clinton Administration.

Democratic Enlargement

Clinton's first Secretary of Defense, Les Aspin, published the "Bottom-Up Review" in 1993, a somewhat "reformist" vision for national defense.[38] Aspin's 109-page document mentions allies or partners less than current documents, but includes a robust section titled "A Strategy of Engagement, Prevention, and Partnership," that lays out the necessity of maintain global engagement following the Cold War, and emphasizes that allies, specifically democratic ones, are essential to the task.[39] Subsequent Clinton-era policy documents expanded the engagement

concept into a load-bearing beam of the grand strategic vision of "Democratic Enlargement," which Clinton laid out in his 1994 State of the Union.

"Democratic Enlargement," sometimes known as the Clinton Doctrine, presupposed that promoting and expanding democracy was critical to U.S. national security and prosperity, and that the two were mutually reinforcing.[40] Part and parcel of democratic enlargement was the expansion of both free markets and NATO eastward toward the borders of the nascent Russian Federation. The year 1999 saw years of diplomacy and negotiations with former Warsaw Pact-states bear fruit, with NATO membership extended to the Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary. Parallel to NATO expansion was a separate but related effort, the U.S. National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP). Established in 1993, the SPP partners a state National Guard force with an international partner to facilitate military-to-military training and exchange programs. Originally directed at post-Soviet states, many of the initial classes of SPP nations were eventually offered NATO membership, with the SPP essentially serving as a preparatory course that preceded NATO matriculation. The ideological extension of liberal democracy eastward was therefore intertwined with NATO's eastward expansion, and both were underwritten by American military power, exemplified in the Balkan conflicts of the 1990s.

The 1999 NSS, high-mindedly titled "A National Security Strategy for a New Century," was remarkable in that it represented simultaneously both a restatement of orthodoxy and a radical expansion. Attesting to the Clinton Administration's commitment to primacy, the document is rife with assertions of America's right to resort to unilateral action if deemed necessary, while professing a desire to "act in alliance or partnership when others share our interests."[41] In many ways the document reified the Clinton era's ideological tendencies into concrete policy that would outlive the administration. High-minded entreaties on the responsibility to protect (R2P) in humanitarian crises with multilateral approval and support were grafted onto the right of unilateral action if such approval and support was not forthcoming. In essence, allies and partners were desired, even essential, to the legitimacy of U.S. foreign policy, and expanding U.S. security commitments into the former Soviet republics was the practical outgrowth.

The War on Terror Accelerates the Growth of Security Partnerships

Such relationships, however, would not preclude unilateral action or the employment of force. This was never clearer than in the administration's unilateral actions against a debilitated Iraqi regime throughout the 1990s, reaching its zenith with the 1998 airstrike campaign. Both the fixation with Iraq and the penchant for unilateral action continued into the George W. Bush Administration, with the return of neoconservatives, like Paul Wolfowitz (of the eponymous doctrine), to positions of prominence within the federal government. The first Bush NSS, published a year after the 9/11 attacks, was notable for what became known as the Bush Doctrine, which combined idealistic paeans to spreading democratic values with a stated right to unilateral military action, including preemptive action. Notably, the document takes an even more expansive view of security "partners," driven by the advent of the Global War on Terror. Countries now considered adversaries were treated as co-belligerents, with even Russia described as a "partner in the war on terror."[42] Security cooperation in the Bush-era was as opaque and nebulous as the War on Terror itself, with the ability to prosecute the conflict on a global scale necessitating far-ranging and diverse military relationships, often with countries whose stated commitments to counterterror efforts went hand-in-glove with U.S. foreign aid. Bush set a record for admitting new MNNAs, designating seven over the course of his two terms, while the SPP and other programs similarly expanded.

It should be noted that the expansion of MNNAs and other military partnerships are emblematic of congressional abdication of its role in making defense policy. MNNAs, the sale of excess defense articles, and other programs largely do not require active Congressional involvement, simply requiring notification from the executive. This lack of debate and active oversight has the effect of passively allowing informal security commitments to be issued by the White House in a manner that congressional ratification processes demanded by formal security treaties would not permit.

The emphasis on "allies and partners" further

ballooned in the 2010s under the Obama Administration and continued in a more muted fashion under the first Trump administration. Both Trump and Obama notably added only one MNNA each in their respective administrations, while the Biden administration added three. Reading through the various policy documents of the past two decades is to witness an almost exponential increase in the usage of "partner" or "partnership" in policy documents. The most recent National Defense Strategy used the phrase "allies and partners" 117 times (note that the document is only 23 pages in length).[43] This is the logical result of the fixation on expanding partnerships, and exemplifies the current bipartisan policy of "integrated deterrence."[44] This strategy, as described by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS), "integrat[es] all tools of national power with the robust network of allies and partners that the U.S. has to credibly deter aggression."[45] The U.S. defense establishment's very conception of national security strategy, and military policy specifically, is now inseparable from partnership networks. The threat of unilateral action remains present, but the ability of the United States to project power abroad is both dependent and reinforced by that same network.

The Problem with Friends

Alliances and partnerships may be central to common understandings of U.S. primacy and its maintenance, as well as the military policy that undergirds it, but these relationships are rife with negative externalities. The most severe of these stems from differing visions of security from state to state, and differing views on the nature of commitment. U.S. alliances are plagued by free-riding or "cheap-riding" friends that pass on their security burden and by "reckless drivers" that pull the United States into unstable or volatile situations. These negative externalities can apply to allies or partners, with the significant caveat that the obligation owed by a partner with no mutual security arrangement with the United States is significantly less than an ally with specific and long-standing commitments. Partners may assume all the benefits of a one-sided relationship with none of its responsibilities. As Christopher Preble of the Stimson Center describes the contemporary situation, "preserving U.S. alliances has become the object of U.S. foreign policy" rather than a "means for advancing American security."[46] Alliances must be scrutinized and evaluated routinely, and partnerships even more so. Alliances have the benefit of instilling a restraining effect on their members, leading to stability and a tendency toward de-escalation in the wake of crises.[47] Partnerships do not necessarily advance stability, and may often have the opposite effect, while not replicating the deterring effect of an alliance. To avoid undermining U.S. support of the rules-based international order, the United States must define its interests more narrowly and avoid over-committing to non-treaty allies.[48]

Free and Cheap Riding

The United States derives far less gain from its alliances relative to its costs, which drives the United States to overspend on defense and support institutionalized military relationships with allies and partners alike.[49] Free riding or "cheap riding" as Barry Posen writes, relates to those "allies who contribute a far smaller share of GDP to military purposes than does the United States" with the result that U.S alliances are in fact more akin to one-sided guarantees.[50] Posen uses the wealthy nations of NATO as the prime example, but wealthy partners such as Saudi Arabia are equally applicable, and perhaps even more egregious, as the security benefits reciprocated to the United States are less clear.

Other partners work against U.S. interests in ways that directly support named U.S. adversaries. For instance, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are SPP nations that routinely engage in military training and exchanges with the U.S. National Guard, and receive or have received different forms of military aid. They are also treaty allies of Russia via the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The CSTO, often treated as moribund by policymakers and scholars, has experienced friction in recent years, but shows no sign of disbanding.[51] Russia maintains a military presence in each state, and the organization has served as a backstop for unstable regimes, even deploying troops to suppress riots in Kazakhstan in 2022.[52] U.S. financial and military ties to these countries likely influence decision-making and prevent some overt military support to Russia, but the U.S. will never have the physical proximity of Russia, and unlike Russia it is unlikely to deploy troops to support faltering Central Asian regimes with a tenuous

respect for democracy. States have an incentive to play both sides for as long as possible so long as it suits their goals, which may be opposed to U.S. interests. Relationships like these deserve scrutiny if not outright hostility from policymakers and strategists.

Blowback

Relationships with less prosperous partners with less developed militaries are further complicated by fragile democratic institutions largely dependent on U.S. or western aid. Militaries in these regimes are often buttressed or legitimized as a political force by U.S. military aid and training, a phenomenon that has often had catastrophic outcomes for democratic institutions and regional stability. The SPP, like many military relationships with foreign militaries, is fraught with narrative confusion and moral hazard. The state of Niger, which until its military overthrew its democratic government on July 26th, 2023, was the cornerstone of U.S. counterterror efforts in the African Sahel region and the SPP partner of Indiana since 2017.[53] The coup was led in large part by Niger's chief of special operations, Brig. Gen. Moussa Salaou Barmou, who spent time the month prior with the then commander of U.S. Special Operations Command.[54] A week before the coup, Barmou was in National Harbor, Maryland, attending the SPP 30th Anniversary Conference. There he was interviewed about the partnership with Indiana, which he praised as "formative" and highlighted exchanges and training in the special operations field.[55]

This case is not particularly unique. SPP relationships and other military partnerships exist with a bevy of countries with questionable commitments to democracy and human rights, from Uzbekistan and its abysmal freedom scores, to the United Arab Emirates, which bankrolled rebels in Sudan while being rewarded by the U.S. with a more intimate and lucrative defense partnership agreement.[56] To be clear, the SPP offers great value for money, costing taxpayers a little over $51 million in FY2025, while accounting for 20-30 percent of the military's foreign engagements.[57] The question is what the United States is getting for its efforts, and what moral hazards are implicit in such engagement.

Reckless Driving

There is also a tendency amongst some partners to behave recklessly under the security umbrella America provides, confident that the U.S. commitment can withstand significant strain.[58] Reckless drivers often take bold actions detrimental to U.S. interests and regional stability, which for one reason or another is incapable of disciplining these states, despite their dependence on the U.S. government[59] If the United States cannot discipline the allies that depend upon it for their security, despite the clear obligations of collective or mutual security pacts, its ability to discipline less formalized partners is even more limited.

Israel since October 7th, 2023, offers a clear example, having conducted unilateral military operations against five sovereign countries within the Middle East.[60] These attacks, whether conducted with or without U.S. concurrence, have increased regional instability, deteriorated the security situation, and sowed doubt between the U.S and other regional partners.[61] Similarly, the failure of the United States to discipline Saudi Arabia in its military conduct in Yemen, or the U.A.E. in Sudan have set precedents for unilateral action throughout the region that will affect regional security and stability for years to come while actively harming vital U.S. interests in the Red Sea region. The fact that many of our partners on average have far less secure democracies than our treaty allies mean the risk of reckless behavior is increased, and the tendency toward instability is heightened. The United States should take a more serious and aggressive approach to disciplining reckless drivers by conditioning arms sales, technology and intelligence sharing, and military-to-military training. Failure to rein in or curtail reckless behavior only encourages the state in question to push the boundaries of acceptable policy, while also setting conditions to embolden other partners to do the same.

Policy Proposals: The Big Picture

A more restrained military policy could take many forms, from large scale retrenchment to more incremental changes like restructuring the combatant commands, but policy reform requires a sustainable constituency, both amongst policy advocates and policymakers. The only significant constituency with a viable alternative to primacy and global integrated deterrence is the restrainers, however tenuous the détente between its ideological factions and how loose

their affiliation may be. Actionable and measurable policy changes can best be achieved in the near-term by targeting those policy areas in which the restraint community is largely in agreement and lobbying toward and within the executive branch to draft strategic publications such as the *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* accordingly. Those areas of overlap include retrenchment or realignment away from the Middle East, selective drawdowns of U.S. military forces stationed abroad, to include base realignment and closure, and a "right-sizing" of military commitments with respect to allies and partners. Reducing commitments to an opaque network of partners will also provide clarity of goals and intentions to allies and adversaries alike and provide the United States with strategic clarity sorely lacking in current policy while realigning America's professed values with vital interests. Reducing commitments to partners in favor of a general realignment toward treaty allies is a concrete step toward these lines of effort.

To reduce overextension politically and militarily, the current administration and future administrations will need a sustainable military policy, one that reduces U.S. commitments, beginning with the informal ones. Future policy will require elucidation in specific near-term policy proposals (by 2030) for inclusion in future NDS and NMS publications, which should move away from integrated deterrence and regional balancing, the outward expression of U.S. military primacy, to a restrained posture that both centers treaty allies in policy development and reduces or scrutinizes partnerships.

Back to Basics: The Benefits of Prioritizing Allies

The United States needs to realign defense and security priorities around existing allies, specifically parties to mutual defense treaties via NATO, ANZUS, the Rio Treaty, and bilateral agreements with Thailand, Japan, and the Philippines. Existing treaty allies are largely found in Europe, East Asia, and the Western Hemisphere, which both aligns with progressive and libertarian ideological principles of democratic engagement, and with the general restraint consensus that it is time to draw down from the Middle East. Prioritizing allies over partners for bilateral training, capacity-building, and resourcing allows for realignment of restraint-oriented policy prescriptions in a manner that narrows the scope of military engagement abroad while managing resources more efficiently in areas of interest (Europe, East Asia, the Americas).[62] Ending or reducing rotational force deployments in countries with which the United States has no collective security agreement will reduce regional tension, increase troop morale and time at home, increase home-station training, and lower costs.[63] Rotational deployments are far costlier than simply stationing forces abroad, inadvertently reduce the "readiness" of deployed units, and are shown to reduce unit morale and career satisfaction in a force already struggling with recruiting and retention woes.[64] The United States has a vast apparatus of overseas bases, many of which are located in the territory of non-allies. Many of its most capable allies also possess overseas bases, often in areas of strategic value near U.S. installations. Reducing this redundancy through co-use or consolidation would empower allies while also introducing a form of burden sharing.

Long Overdue: Shifting Away from the Middle East

Successive administrations, beginning with Obama's, have sought to reorient the forward posture of the U.S. military away from the Middle East toward areas of emerging strategic importance, namely East Asia. Economic interests, policy inertia, and crises have conspired to delay and prevent this shift. Clarifying strategic goals around support to allies could provide the impetus needed to change this dynamic, signaling to regional partners and global allies that U.S. military resources must match priorities.

In material terms the United States possesses global reach in ways that do not necessitate its current basing architecture, and in no region is this illustrated more clearly than the Middle East. The United States currently maintains approximately 40,000 servicemembers stationed across at least 12 countries in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean.[65] This force posture is large and unnecessary for the maintenance of vital U.S. interests in the region, mainly counterterrorism efforts and the production of oil and free flow of goods through its major shipping lanes. The corresponding basing structure is a web

of overlapping redundancy, with multiple airbases, naval support facilities, and allied bases that should be consolidated. Frameworks for a restraint-oriented Middle Eastern strategy are well documented, and many adapt a form of offshore balancing, while maintaining a smaller forward military presence. The U.S. military could eliminate basing redundancy by reducing bases located in the territory of non-treaty allies in favor of those located within the territory of treaty allies, or co-use agreements with allied nations. Think Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) for an entire region, where treaty allies receive priority. Incirlik Airbase in NATO-ally Turkey, for instance, could accommodate air assets and aviation units, or the United Kingdom's facilities in Cyprus, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, could host an expanded U.S. presence as they have in the past. The U.S. naval base in Bahrain, a longstanding facility established in the 1970s, could be maintained to support naval operations in the Persian Gulf as an exception to the rule to provide naval support activities.[66]

Crucially, to answer critics of retrenchment, the United States would sacrifice very little in the way of power projection through rebasing and revitalizing offshore balancing. The Middle East may often be the oft-identified use-case, but it could also serve as an example of what a global force posture right-sizing could look like. As Emma Ashford writes about the U.S. presence in the Middle East, "a large forward-deployed military is in reality less helpful than commonly assumed in seeking to achieve US regional goals," and the track record of U.S. preponderance of force in the region is largely one of failure.[67] This phenomenon is not unique to the region, and if U.S. security interests can be met more affordably and with less risk by downsizing in the Middle East, such policies may be adaptable to other regions as well.

Conclusion

In sum, the United States must re-prioritize the importance and centrality of treaty allies over more tenuous partnerships in its military policy. Re-prioritizing allies over partners will generate strategic clarity in messaging, thereby clearly communicating U.S. interests and intentions to allies and adversaries alike. This clarity will facilitate the reallocation of military personnel and resources to key regions with a greater density of allies like Europe and East Asia and allow for the pivot away from areas of declining military importance like the Middle East where the U.S. has far fewer treaty allies. The U.S. global military posture should be consistent with protecting vital national interests based on a grand strategy of restraint, while shifting some burdens to allies.[68] This will streamline theater campaign planning, exercises, and training and provide greater predictability and consistency to allies and multinational planning efforts. Centering allies while scrutinizing partnerships prioritizes developed, pluralistic democracies in a manner more consistent with democratic values and stable regimes. A defense policy that scrutinizes partnerships is one that can take a pragmatic and concrete step in returning some control over security to Congress by reducing the power of the executive to make the hazy and ill-defined security commitments implied by an array of partnerships. This reorientation will serve as a robust step toward implementing a restrained foreign policy, providing a framework that appeals to diverse constituencies within the restraint community, and one that can unite messaging in and out of government.

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