



WHITE PAPER

SEPTEMBER 2022

# Toward a Phenomenology of the U.S. Alliance System:

## Boon or a Scourge on America's National Interest?

ARTA MOEINI, DAVID POLANSKY, COLEMAN HOPKINS



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	1
Introduction.....	3
Alliances As Tools for Statecraft: A Historical Overview .....	5
History of America’s Security Alliances as Products of the Cold War .....	9
Typology of Alliances: Reviewing Inter-alliance Dynamics .....	15
Putting Alliances Back in Regions: Regional Balancers and the Rise of Trojan Alliances.....	19
The Paradox of Alliance Permanence in U.S. Grand Strategy .....	25
Beyond Alliance Fixation: Lessons for Future U.S. Grand Strategy .....	30



## Executive Summary

Maintaining the extensive and global network of U.S. alliances is a sacred cow of American national security strategy. For many decades now, the foreign policy establishment has viewed America's overseas commitments as inseparable from the national interest, such that a true cost-benefit analysis is rarely undertaken.

While the existing multi-regional alliance complex could be traced back to the bipolar structure of the Cold War and its certain militarization with the Korean War, the utopian quest for liberal hegemony under unipolarity provided a rationale for maintaining these arrangements, even absent a global hegemonic foe (as was the Soviet Union). The upshot is Washington continues to reflexively celebrate America's alliances (most of which it has inherited) as vectors for U.S. power, international prestige, and global primacy—regularly overlooking or downplaying their risks, such as entrapment in foreign conflicts or a nuclear confrontation.

The end of America's unipolar moment, characterized by superpower decay and the rise of multiple regional powers, poses challenges to the status quo and creates opportunities to re-examine the logic of maintaining the existing alliance structure. Despite many realist critiques of U.S. global alliance system, what has been needed is a holistic and phenomenological account of its development.

To this end, this study conducts a genealogy of our existing alliances in order to disclose the particular history that produced them and to probe the conditions that led to the dominant perception of *alliances* as entities of intrinsic value to be maintained in perpetuity. We thus show how the U.S. policymaking establishment—wedded to its professional and institutional interests—transformed America's conception of alliances from regional, temporary, flexible, and pragmatic arrangements (as employed by classic statecraft) into global, permanent, performative, and ideological fixtures.

This situation has left the United States increasingly unable to manage its alliances in a manner that serves its national interests. For, in a multipolar world, in which civilizational middle powers are becoming central actors, America's alliances are more likely to serve the interest of a group of smaller, peripheral states called 'regional balancers' (e.g., Ukraine, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Taiwan, among others) rather than outside great powers. Even so, U.S. policymakers cling to outdated concepts to uphold these security partnerships out of a combination of sociological, psychological, and material factors—such as path dependency, sentimentality, class solidarity, the pursuit of phantom prestige, and ideology. Such attitudes are especially unwise as Washington has a much lower threshold for strategic error under multipolarity.

## Key Takeaways

- An impartial review of America's globe-wide alliances is the starting point for a realist grand strategy that foregoes primacy and its idealist, globalist, and imperial pre-conceptions.
- Building on Marco Cesa's useful typological model of alliances, we identify a new category of the "Trojan" alliance, which increasingly typifies contemporary U.S. alliance relationships.
- Trojan Alliances are the prevailing form in the U.S.' global alliance complex. Like the Trojan Horse of fame in Greek history, the true purpose of alliances of this kind is initially disguised and misleading—for the interests and the power of the stronger ally (i.e., the U.S.) end up serving the weaker partner.



- Free-riding and buck-passing are inherent and unavoidable features of these asymmetric alliances, given the preponderance of power enjoyed by the United States and the stark, and even existential, stakes for the peripheral regional state which regularly pushes for a more active U.S. presence.
- The consequence of these alliances is routinization of moral hazard, threat inflation and zero-sum framings of local conflicts, U.S. global interventionism, and constraints on U.S. strategic autonomy.
- The durability of America’s global alliances and their luring effect have more to do with the internalization of the idea of *primacy* by the transatlantic elites and the conviction that such alliances advance U.S. global primacy by default rather than with any proven material contribution of these alliances to America’s core geopolitical interests.
- Seeking interest-based alternatives to alliance formation is not a call for “isolationism” but for developing a more common-sensical, prudent, and realist approach to America’s alliances that judges them based on how they align with and serve a narrower and more concrete definition of American security.

The study is produced as part of the International System 2050 program at the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy.



## Introduction

America's alliances are often uncritically championed as an unequivocal good. Among the foreign-policy establishment in Washington (and the rest of the Anglosphere), they seem to have acquired an almost mythical hold, celebrated as the veritable instrument of the United States' power and prestige around the globe as well as the cornerstone of the U.S.-led liberal international order.

Yet, the United States' military alliance networks are relics of the Cold War. Despite the advent of multipolarity and the rise of middle powers since the decline of *Pax Americana*, these old structures have been kept largely intact.<sup>1</sup> In the process, these alliance systems calcify an outdated maximalist mindset (in a feedback loop spiral), impeding the strategic flexibility that Washington needs to operate within the new geopolitical realities shaped by the rise of China and the (re-) emergence of key world regions as loci of conflict.

What then explains the remarkable durability and staying power of these alliances from a bygone era? The answer to this question requires one to consider the winners and the losers of such arrangements, and ask who ultimately benefits from them. Is the main beneficiary the United States; its existing clients, partners, and allies; or perhaps influential sub-national actors like the foreign-policy establishment in Washington or the Military Industrial Congressional Complex? Do the conditions and arrangements which might advantage these entities also serve the American national interest, concretely defined?

Many criticize the U.S. alliance system for its pro-

---

1 Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, David Polansky, *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World* (Institute for Peace & Diplomacy, 2022): <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/03/26/middle-powers-in-the-multipolar-world/>

pensity to allow allies to buck-pass<sup>2</sup> and free-ride on U.S. largesse.<sup>3</sup> This is not a novel observation. It has been a long-standing reality of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).<sup>4</sup> It now increasingly applies to other U.S.-centric alliance structures outside of Europe, too.

And yet, it is true that, at least on the surface, the United States also receives certain real-world benefits that, in the mind of the advocates of primacy, justify sustaining (and when possible expanding) these alliances: the U.S. foreign policy establishment can often leverage the alliance—and Washington's principal role in them—to impact and shape the policies of the many countries dependent on U.S. guarantees, not to mention America's many military bases in the world's various regional strategic theaters. In other words, as global networks, America's international alliances institutionalize U.S. primacy around the world, which makes them attractive to most factions (primacists, liberal internationalists, and institutionalists) in the national security establishment and forming a general consensus about their value.

Nevertheless, this hard—if broad—material calculus often masks what Washington actually gains from these arrangements, sidestepping the question of whether maintaining these security arrangements in faraway regions of the world meaningfully contributes to making America safer at home. Put differently, it overshadows the largely symbolic and ceremonial role the alliances play for the American foreign-policy establishment as

---

2 Justin Logan, "NATO Is a Luxury Good the United States Doesn't Need," *Foreign Policy*, Jul. 23, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/07/23/nato-europe-defense-russia-ukraine-war/>

3 The Editorial Board, "Trump confronts NATO's free riders," *The Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 17, 2017, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/editorials/ct-nato-trump-russia-edit-20170217-story.html>

4 Charlemagne (Duncan Robinson), "Europe is the Free-Rider Continent," *The Economist*, Feb. 26, 2022: <https://archive.ph/Gtnw5>



a psychological (and in many cases institutional) reinforcer of American leadership or hegemonic position.

It also occludes the role of the permanent, globalized professional class of technocratic experts, whose task it is to maintain (and extend) these networks around the lucrative vines of which their very livelihoods take root and their social status blooms. In view of both the material and the psycho-sociological factors, the United States is, therefore, not a random security provider for its allies, nor one doing so out of sheer goodwill; it does so to reinforce (and often institutionalize) its global primacy and—perhaps more significantly—sustain what can be deemed the elites’ “hegemonic prestige”.

At the same time, these psychological, thymotic, and often ritualistic and class-based gains entail huge, asymmetrical costs for America and her people: *economically* (growing national debt and spiraling inflation), *politically* (rise of populism at home and anti-Americanism abroad), and in terms of America’s *strategic autonomy* (vicious cycle of endless wars and intervention) as the U.S. establishment risks entanglement in distant lands that are not core to American security or national interest, even broadly defined.

As such, advocates of restraint who traditionally focus on the *material* costs of the U.S. alliances must provide an etiology for the remarkable continuity of these alliances and dispel the foundational myths that impart on these arrangements an illusion of inherent value: namely, the idea that American indispensability and global clout of leadership (cf. primacy) is an end in itself—and one which is sublimated into maintaining global alliances as a *summum bonum* for U.S. foreign policy.

There is an immense power gap between the United States and its allies and partners. Prac-

tically all of America’s security alliances today are *asymmetrical* arrangements between the United States and regional balancers—a class of smaller, more peripheral regional states seeking to balance against the dominant middle powers in their respective regions. As a great power, America possesses an inherent capacity to encroach on other regional security complexes (RSCs). In this context, it is reasonable for regional balancers to attempt to coax and exploit American power in the service of their particular regional security interests.

It is debatable, however, what tangible security benefits Washington gets from propping up these states. Is containing (revisionist) middle powers—such as Russia,<sup>5</sup> Iran, and Turkey, *inter alia*—in their designated regions a sensible objective (especially in the context of China’s emergence as a peer competitor), let alone an achievable one given the multiple number of such theaters? Is it worth the heavy burden Washington must inevitably assume in serving as the principal guarantor, even possibly being forced to repeatedly intercede (or even inject itself militarily) in distant RSCs at the risk of possible strategic entanglement and overreach?

While this study mostly concerns America’s conception of alliances and their place in U.S. grand strategy, the general security posture of peripheral or *faultline* states that are the fulcras of U.S. alliance systems also demands further scrutiny. Posed as a question, is it always advantageous to the security of these smaller, sub-regional actors to try to balance their more powerful neighbor(s) in their respective regions and to do so by deepening their dependence on the support and goodwill of an external great power such as the United States?

---

5 Arta Moeini and Coleman Hopkins, “America Needs Strategic Empathy in the Multipolar World”, *The National Interest*, May, 2022: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/america-needs-strategic-empathy-multipolar-world-202160>



To answer these questions and sketch a phenomenology of U.S. alliances, two things are needed. The first is a genealogy of our current alliance structures, tracing both their origins and their present form. Second, and relatedly, is conducting a typological analysis of America's alliance network. Using Marco Cesa's model, set out in his book *Allies Yet Rivals* (2010), as a conceptual framework, we will examine the different types of asymmetric alliances prevalent in the Free World today.<sup>6</sup>

The United States essentially navigates two types of asymmetric alliances characterized by lower compatibility of interest (in the Middle East & Asia) and—for now—higher congruency in Europe owing to the Russo-Ukrainian War (NATO). Restraint scholarship must come to terms with the theoretical underpinnings and actual drivers of extant U.S. alliances to understand how some of the systemic obstacles to establishing the grand strategy of restraint<sup>7</sup> in U.S. foreign policy originate from established allies and their influence with the U.S. foreign policy Blob<sup>8</sup>, and how this phenomenon contributes to and compounds the institutional rigidity of primacy in Washington.

For while there is no shortage of critiques of any number of bilateral relationships the United States maintains today, only a schematic and holistic treatment of our established system of alliances will allow us to see what they share in common and how they serve—or fail to serve—America's national interests.

---

6 It must be conceded at the outset that all models possess a reified quality: they are to be consulted as a helpful theoretical tool rather than a perfect empirical match for the real world.

7 Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Cornell University Press, 2014).

8 Hal Brands, et al., "In Defense of the Blob", *Foreign Affairs*, April 29, 2020: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-04-29/defense-blob>

## Alliances As Tools for Statecraft: A Historical Overview

Alliances as a tool of statecraft are as old as complex human societies.<sup>9</sup> Since their inception, they have served to advance the geopolitical goals of states (and sometimes the political aims of the leaders) by creating partnerships for heightened communication and coordination to meet common objectives—especially security ones—that the individual states could not meet alone, or at a reasonable cost. Members of an alliance pledge military support to one another in times of war or military confrontation; in some cases, they have also served as an offensive instrument to multiply force and enhance the capacity to wage war. Importantly, they were *local*, *regional*, and *temporary* arrangements and partnerships designed to create a united bloc for confronting stronger neighboring powers in the event of a regional conflict.

Historically, these partnerships of common defense or offense tended to be practical, shifting arrangements that *lacked* a global dimension—let alone ideological fervor. This was typically the case at least until the Crusades and the universalism it spawned. Their aim was limited to maximizing military and/or economic power to mobilize against (or to threaten) a proximal rival power or alliance bloc. What's more, the use of force, or the activation of the alliance's security guarantee to support members in war, is not a precondition for a functioning alliance: successful deterrence of an opposing power or alliance (i.e., preventing kinetic campaigns) meets the objective. The upshot is that alliances have a dual nature in that they are valuable instruments of statecraft in both prosecuting and preventing war.

The Classical Period offers a clear picture of some of the earliest formal alliances and their local

---

9 Cf. Genesis 14:13, 21:22-32; Joshua 9:3-27; 1 Kings 5:12-18, 9:11-14, 9:16; Herodotus 1.125-126, 8.142-144; Thucydides 1.95-99, 1.119-124.



and regional character, with city-states across the Mediterranean banding together at different times to unite against both proximate foreign threats (e.g., the Persian Empire to the East) and expansionist local powers (e.g., the Spartans and Athenians). In all cases, states formed these alliances to combine their power and capabilities—economic, human, and material resources—to better confront what they mutually perceived as a common enemy.

In the former case, numerous Greek city-states, led by Athens and Sparta, created a massive coalition, the Hellenic League, to fight the Persians; in later wars, another collection of states—known as the Delian League—aligned themselves against the returning Persian threat. They represent a quintessential example of *balancing*: the Greeks joined together to achieve comparable military strength *vis-à-vis* the great power of the era, the Persian Empire. The Greeks eventually defeated the Persians in the Greco-Persian Wars after many confrontations, thus preserving the independence of their city-states within their autochthonous multipolar system—while ending the dream of Persian dominance in the Mediterranean. That said, the Delian League alliance would, in time, become a source of instability and undermine Greek security.

In the latter case, which follows chronologically and causally from the previous example, two sets of alliances in the Mediterranean—the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League—emerged as the dominant forces in the region after the Greco-Persian Wars. While the Delian League evolved into the Athenian Empire, the structure of the Peloponnesian League was more complex and had a more symmetrical distribution of power: members of that alliance included autonomous states and competing powers, but operated under the general leadership of the Spartans who enjoyed certain privileges within the confeder-

tion.

Ultimately, the Peloponnesian League emerged victorious and—with Persian backing—unraveled Athen's power and alliance network in the protracted, internecine conflict that was the Peloponnesian War. Decades later, some of the Peloponnesian League's more prominent members, led by Thebes, would exit the League and form their own confederacy to oppose Sparta and preserve their autonomy. Changing circumstances and regional power differentials necessitated new local partnerships to respond to novel challenges in a never-ending cycle of conflict and power politics.

Similarly, Rome's use of alliance politics on the Italian peninsula was critical to its rise as an imperial power in the Mediterranean and beyond.<sup>10</sup> As Machiavelli astutely observes,

*Having created for herself many associates throughout Italy, Rome granted to them in many respects an almost entire equality, always, however, reserving to herself the seat of empire and the right of command; so that these associates (without being themselves aware of it) devoted their own efforts and blood to their own subjugation. For so soon as the Romans began to lead their armies beyond the limits of Italy, they reduced other kingdoms to provinces, and made subjects of those who, having been accustomed to live under kings, were indifferent to becoming subjects of another; and from having Roman governors, and having been conquered by Roman arms, they recognized no superior to the Romans. Thus the associates of Rome in Italy found themselves all at once surrounded by Roman subjects, and at the same time pressed by a powerful city like*

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur M. Eckstein, *Mediterranean Anarchy, Interstate War, and the Rise of Rome* (University of California Press, 2006).



*Rome; and when they became aware of the trap into which they had been led, it was too late to remedy the evil, for Rome had become too powerful by the acquisition of foreign provinces, as also within herself by the increased population which she had armed. And although these associates conspired together to revenge the wrongs inflicted upon them by Rome, yet they were quickly subdued, and their condition made even worse; for from associates, they were degraded to subjects.<sup>11</sup>*

History is replete, as well, with examples of alliances outside the West that are clearly rooted in specific situational and geographic contexts. Concurrent with Alexander’s conquests, a host of states proliferated in classical India. The most successful of these states was the Mauryan Empire, which would ascend to become the regional hegemon of South Asia for a period. Under the aegis of its foremost political philosopher Chanakya, the Maurya—much like Rome—would outgrow its humble beginnings as a small city-state and rise to become an imperial state.

In terms of its alliance networks, Chanakya led the Mauryas to develop a realist—that is a specifically territorial and relational—conception of interstate relations. The polymath recognized a positive relationship between the relative proximity of a state and the likelihood of conflict. The Mauryan state, hence, cultivated partnerships with the more distant—albeit still regionally proximate—states to countervail the more immediate neighbors it considered strategic rivals.<sup>12</sup> In the process, the Maurya successfully leveraged its regional alliances to form the first pan-Indian empire in the Subcontinent.

11 Niccolò Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, II.4; see also *Discourse* II.32.

12 Chanakya, *The Arthashastra*, Book VII (English translation), Penguin Classics, 2000.

In the multipolar eras of Chinese history—the Warring States period (475-221 BCE), the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 CE), or in the 10th and 11th Centuries—situational and regionally focused alliances were the norm, and like the Indian example, they often culminated in consolidation of power in a regional hegemon.<sup>13</sup> Writing at the tail end of the Warring States period, the legalist (Chinese realist) scholar Han Fei remarked that ever-changing local circumstances dictate politics, suggesting that successful states owe their success to adapting to these factors rather than adhering to the assumption of a permanent situation.<sup>14</sup>

While in the nascent early modern European state system, which formed against the backdrop of the European Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries, ideology was clearly a factor,<sup>15</sup> here also alliances were often marriages of convenience and tools of interest aggregation in a tug-of-war of princes and houses vying for regional hegemony in Europe. For instance, shared Protestantism played an elemental role in an Anglo-Dutch alliance that was largely framed as countering the Catholic Habsburg and French kingdoms. Nevertheless, by the early 17th century, the decline of the Spanish empire and competition over trade routes and colonial possessions would foment a series of wars between the Dutch and the British

13 Victoria Tin-bor Hui, “The Triumph of Domination in the Ancient Chinese System,” chapter 6 in *The Balance of Power in World History* (Kaufman, Little and Wohlforth, editors), Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

14 Peter R. Moody, Jr, “Rational Choice Analysis in Classical Chinese Political Thought: The Han Feizi,” *Polity*, Vol. 40 No. 1, University of Chicago Press, 2008: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40213462>

15 The Peace of Westphalia (1648) that marked the end of the Thirty Years War also signaled a turn away from the politics of medieval empires and houses in the direction of provincialization and ushering in the politics of the modern nation-state privileging national sovereignty, which could also be interpreted as an attempt (fleeting as it turned out to be) to reject ideological universalism and religious and political homogenization in Europe in the wake of the destruction of the Thirty Years War.



that would shift the balance of power in Britain's favor.

Perhaps the best example of the Westphalian emphasis on national interest and regional flexibility is the British attitude towards the European continent as their naval power grew: one which in modern terms could be described as recurring and often non-ideological offshore balancing with little regard for permanent arrangements or ideological absolutism. And as William of Orange would make explicit upon his accession to the throne in London in 1689, his alliance with the Habsburgs against France was purely pragmatic—conditional on his belief that Paris, rather than Vienna, posed a greater threat to the fragile European balance of power. It follows that he could have just as easily allied with the French had the situation been reversed.<sup>16</sup>

This penchant toward pragmatic statecraft became the norm throughout most of the 18th century with the 'stately quadrille'. While the ideological upheaval of the French Revolution temporarily disrupted diplomatic norms, the Napoleonic Wars would soon see the various wars of the (royalist) coalitions against France pivot from stopping revolutionary fervor to simply containing and rolling back French military expansionism. The Concert of Europe (1814-1914) that followed would regionalize the European security order around the five great powers of Russia, Austria, Prussia, United Kingdom, and France—re-affirming the great power status quo and balancing against revisionist claims as fundamental to keeping the peace in the Continent.

This budding golden age of European diplomacy would hold Russia in check in the Crimean War of 1853-6 (with the Ottoman Empire admitted into the Concert as the sixth member in the Paris Congress) and only truly collapse with the rise of

a unified Germany and its unsustainable globe-wide ambitions after the dismissal of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck in 1890. A major catalyst in the unraveling of the post-Napoleonic order in Europe would be the creation of world-spanning alliance networks by the European states, with the Triple Entente and Central Powers attempting to outflank each other by making various pacts that guaranteed any regional crisis could spiral into a global war, as would happen in 1914.

The regionalist nature of alliances largely endured and intensified in the age of modern nation-states and empires in Europe—a phenomenon duly captured by Marco Cesa in his historical discussion of alliances in 18th-century Europe. In both their pre- and early modern form (preceding the globalist turn of the late 19th century), alliances were wholly rooted in geographical and situational contexts which can not be universalized or assumed to be permanent from a genuinely realist perspective.

Our historical account captures some vital truths about alliances that extend through the centuries and provide (as we will see) a welcome contrast to alliances as they are conceived in the present age. In assessing these examples, one clearly observes the utility of the classical alliance (in countering or overpowering a more formidable regional rival) as well as the transitory nature of these pacts: they often form in response to a common strategic objective proximate enough to be deemed concrete, and they disappear once the aims are achieved or circumstances on the ground change.

Moreover, these classical forms of alliances are essentially limited and pragmatic ventures, both as they are conceived and in praxis—established out of shared concerns about limited, specific, and nearby challenges and seeking to respond to them in kind. The corollary is that historically speaking, alliances were not generally constructed around abstract, ideological goals to be achieved with

---

16 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon and Schuster, 1995).



global (and institutional) partners.

The next section shows how, in contemporary times, the purpose—in fact, the very conception—of alliances was transformed and globalized, with alliances becoming more permanent and rigid fixtures in the globalized, ideologized world that followed the Second World War. As noted, a general globalist shift in geopolitics was already evident in the 19th century as great Western powers (partly owing to the unraveling of the Concert) attempted to exploit and mobilize their colonial possessions around the world for competitive strategic advantage in security competition with one another, ultimately resulting in the globalization of war and conflict.

From the American perspective, however, the adoption of a globalist and ideological conception of alliances was fully realized and inculcated in the Postwar years once the United States was established as a certain superpower in a nuclear arms race and a Cold War with the Soviet Union. It is to this paramount change, its etiology, and ramifications that we shall now turn.

## History of America's Security Alliances as Products of the Cold War

The tumult of the Second World War and its aftermath transformed and globalized the security dilemmas and dynamics of Europe, producing a new bipolar structure that ramified throughout the world: the result was the division of the world into the U.S.-led capitalist and Soviet-led communist blocs.

The new, globalized strategic situation—an *international* system wherein power concentrated in two poles—marked a clear end to the long-standing era of (European) multipolarity, and heralded the decline of proximal, dynamic, transitory, and localized alliances that were previously typical—

to be succeeded by rigid and relatively permanent global ones built around two opposing powers professing different ways of life.

The ensuing Cold War replaced the older system of local and international competition between various imperial great powers, reconfiguring it around the two postwar superpowers. In the coming decades and with the advent of decolonization, this structural shift would entail profound political and security implications across the world, with conflicts from Asia to Africa and Latin America becoming proxies in the global rivalries between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Given the aggressive universalism of Leninist ideology and the militarism of the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin's reign (especially in Eastern Europe), America's foremost strategists were quick to make the case for *containing* the USSR and thwarting its perceived quest for world domination. As George Kennan, often called the architect of the U.S. Containment strategy, put it in his pseudonymous 1947 *Foreign Affairs* article,

*It is clear that the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. It is important to note, however, that such a policy has nothing to do with outward histrionics: with threats or blustering or superfluous gestures of outward "toughness"...the Soviet pressure against the free institutions of the Western world is something that can be contained by the adroit and vigilant application of counterforce at a series of constantly shifting geographical and political points, corresponding to the shifts and maneuvers of Soviet policy, but which cannot be charmed or talked out of*



*existence.*<sup>17</sup>

Not only was Kennan's approach realist and pragmatic rather than ideological, but it was also ostensibly defensive—premised on the compatibility of interest among those major geopolitical zones, that in Kennan's estimation at the time, housed four of the world's five major industrial centers or heartlands outside of Russia itself (i.e., the U.S., the UK, Japan and Western Europe) against the expansionism of a maximalist, ideological, and imperial state of near-peer power and geographic/regional advantage based in Russia.

The success of Containment would, therefore, hinge on bolstering the strategic unity of those core nations and regions (as well as the various minor satellite nations in their orbit) primarily threatened by Soviet global militarism or (domestically) vulnerable to the lure of Leninist revolutionary ideology. It further demanded the re-conceptualization of alliances as a multi-nodal multi-regional network: one which would not simply encircle the Soviet sphere in the periphery (this would come later) but rather create defensive belts around key regions in Europe, East Asia, and perhaps the Persian Gulf, while helping to sustain a community of aims across advanced industrial nations through which to meet and resist both the USSR's "military intimidation" and its "political force".

Meeting the challenge of Soviet "military intimidation" in those parts of the world that were deemed central led to the creation of the "Hub and Spokes" alliance system (beginning with the 1951 San Francisco Peace Treaty with Japan)—a series of mutual (bilateral) and collective defense arrangements as part of a globe-spanning asymmetric alliance network against the USSR, with the United States as the hub and its various allies and security arrangements as the spokes. The most

17 "X" (George F. Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

important of such arrangements and the precursor to America's alliance strategy was created in Europe in what is perhaps the most consequential development of the Cold War era: the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949.

Amounting to the institutionalization of the Western alliance, NATO was the amalgamation of several smaller existing treaties, and its purpose was to guarantee the collective security of members (i.e., a commitment to mutual defense in the event of Soviet attack), the vast majority of them European.<sup>18</sup> The signatories believed Soviet expansionism from the East to be the single greatest threat to their peace and security and pledged that an attack on one member would be viewed as an attack on them all.

In short, then, the NATO alliance was intended to act as a deterrent and a safeguard against the perceived military threat of the Soviet Union in Europe. Dominated by Washington and extended (by 1955) to West Germany, Greece, and Turkey, NATO was a powerful and clearly confined organization with an explicit strategic directive.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, despite its explicit structure and implicit design being oriented towards European collective defense, the full implications of the NATO treaty did not really take effect until 1950, when the Korean War broke out in East Asia—a "watershed" event that made the military containment of the Soviets globally (now extending to the peripheral regions) the bipartisan position of U.S. foreign policy, leading to the militarization of the Cold War.<sup>20</sup>

18 Lawrence A. Kaplan, "The United States and the Origins of NATO 1946-1949", *The Review of Politics*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1969, pp. 210-22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1406020>.

19 Lorne Cook, "NATO, the world's biggest military alliance, explained", *The Military Times*, May 25, 2017. <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2017/05/25/nato-the-world-s-biggest-military-alliance-explained/>

20 Walter Lafeber, "NATO and the Korean War: A Context", *Diplo-*



This new posture clashed with Kennan's more confined conception of *containment*, which in his mind was neither inherently military-based nor global in scope but rather consciously aimed at muting the "political force" of the Soviet Union, specifically in and around the world's leading economic and industrial powerhouses (The U.S., the UK, Japan, and Western Europe). Kennan's original iteration had a substantive and robust political dimension meant to neutralize the root cause of the Soviet threat to the West: the socio-political challenge of Marxism-Leninism for advanced industrial societies.

The nature of this threat, as Kennan understood it, was primarily a political and psychological challenge to the free (i.e., non-Soviet) regions of the world posed by Moscow's universalist Leninist eschatology. In contrast to the more hawkish Paul Nitze, who advanced a militarized view of containment,<sup>21</sup> and John Foster Dulles, who (together with the first generation of neoconservatives like James Burnham<sup>22</sup> and Irving Kristol) favored the complete "roll-back" and dismantling of the Iron Curtain by force of arms, Kennan was far more moderate and a "textbook realist[,]" who recognized the limitations of a force-based approach and worried about overly-broad and militaristic definitions of U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup> As if to shed any doubt for posterity, Kennan would later comment that in calling for USSR's containment he had in

---

*matic History*, vol. 13, no. 4, Oxford University Press, Fall 1989: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24911792>

21 "United States Objectives and Programs for National Security", *U.S. National Security Council Report, NSC 68*, April, 1950: <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nsc-hst/nsc-68.htm>

22 Binoy Kampmark, "The first neo-conservative: James Burnham and the origins of a movement", *Review of International Studies*. 37 (4): 1885–1902, 2011.

23 Paul Heer, "Mr. X and the Pacific: George F. Kennan and American Policy in East Asia", Talk given at Center for East Asia Policy Studies, Brookings Institution, September 18, 2018: [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP-09182018-Kennan\\_Asia-Transcript-corrected.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/FP-09182018-Kennan_Asia-Transcript-corrected.pdf)

mind *not* the containment of a global military threat by military means, "but the political containment of a political threat."<sup>24</sup>

A pragmatic realist and a seasoned diplomat, Kennan knew that soft power, ideology, and propaganda were the true drivers of the Soviet Union's expansionist agenda, which—absent the deliberate strengthening of the social and cultural bases of power in the free regions—would likely succeed in enhancing Moscow's global influence. Domestic and inter-state solidarity in and among advanced industrial regions were of paramount importance in this struggle over hearts and minds. External security objectives, while important, were secondary to the internal security imperatives of minimizing the risk of domestic discontent and rebellion—the latter necessitating targeted, localized, and highly contextualized policy programs corresponding to the particular realities of the country or region in question so as to make the local population less inclined to Leninism.

The Economic Cooperation Act of 1948, the systematic program of aiding Europe's economic recovery that would become known as the Marshall Plan, was instrumental in realizing the socio-political imperatives of the containment strategy. Indeed, during its ratification in Washington, American lawmakers were adamant that countries receiving aid would become bulwarks against the expansion of communist ideology.<sup>25</sup> As Kennan observed in his Long Telegram (the precursor to the famous article),

*World communism is like [a] malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue. This is [the] point at which domestic and foreign policies meet. Every courage-*

---

24 George F. Kennan, *Memoirs 1925-1950*, Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967, p.358.

25 John C. Campbell, *The United States in World affairs: 1947-1948* (New York: Harper, 1948).



*ous and incisive measure to solve internal problems of our own society, to improve self-confidence, discipline, morale and community spirit of our own people, is a diplomatic victory over Moscow worth a thousand diplomatic notes and joint communiqués...We must formulate and put forward for other nations a much more positive and constructive picture of [the] sort of world we would like to see than we have put forward in past. It is not enough to urge people to develop political processes similar to our own. Many foreign peoples, in Europe at least, are tired and frightened by experiences of [the] past, and are less interested in abstract freedom than in security.<sup>26</sup>*

Advancing security and stability then, and not “abstract freedom” and political or cultural homogeneity, was the original objective of U.S. foreign policy during the Cold War. Despite the highly charged, idealistic, and Wilsonian language of the Truman Doctrine,<sup>27</sup> the non-ideological character of U.S. policy in the early Cold War years is borne out by history: to name a few examples, the corporatist regime of Portugal (Estado Novo) under its dictator Salazar was a founding member of NATO; non-Christian Turkey was welcomed into the alliance in 1952 (alongside Greece); and the United States quietly normalized relations with Francoist Spain, agreeing to a bilateral defense pact and establishing air and naval bases in that country.<sup>28</sup>

26 George F. Kennan, “The Long Telegram”, US National Security Archives: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

27 Harry S. Truman, “Truman Doctrine” (‘Recommendation for Assistance to Greece and Turkey’), March 1947: <https://iowaculture.gov/history/education/educator-resources/primary-source-sets/cold-war-vietnam/truman-doctrine-march-12>

28 Miguel Gonzalez, “America’s Shameful Rapprochement to the Franco Dictatorship”, *EL PAIS*, 2018: [https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/10/22/inenglish/1540219578\\_899934.html](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2018/10/22/inenglish/1540219578_899934.html)

As such, Kennan had conceived of a highly flexible, locally-responsive, and politically-conscious defensive strategy against the Soviet Union centered on bringing together in common interest the various regions and industrial centers of the world outside the Soviet sphere of control. He was convinced that Soviet global military ambition (and capability) was much more limited than generally presumed, arguing that it was the specter of Soviet influence and appeal in other major industrial centers (not the “world” in its entirety) that would ultimately pose the greatest challenge to the West. Even compared to the likes of Dean Acheson (who replaced George C. Marshall as Secretary of State in the Truman administration), Kennan had a far less internationalist and militarized and a more focused and country-based notion of the “perimeter defense” than the subsequent evolution of the concept under the influence of the “domino theory” might suggest.

The Korean War changed perceptions in Washington and empowered the more hawkish elements. Coming on the heels of the Maoist victory in the Chinese Civil War (1949), the conflict facilitated a militarized and globalized interpretation of Containment to become the standard view. The adoption of the militarized approach also impacted America’s conception of its alliances, undercutting the balance of power premises of traditional alliances (and their shifting regional nature) and reconceiving them as permanent organizations within a global security architecture that would institutionalize (and internationalize) “collective security”.

Despite President Nixon’s embrace of détente<sup>29</sup> and adoption of a more pragmatic and flexible approach in dealing with the world’s various so-

29 Raymond Gartoff, “Détente and confrontation: American-Soviet relations from Nixon to Reagan”, *The Brookings Institution*, 1985. <https://archive.org/details/detenteconfronta00raym/page/n3/mode/2up>



cialist regimes instead of grouping them all as one<sup>30</sup> (e.g., the “China Card”), the militarization and globalization of U.S. containment policy and its associated alliances and proxy conflicts in the ’50s and ’60s created the underlying structures that justified (covert) international action, military intervention, and war, paving the way for the ideologization of the Cold War in the Reagan era in tandem with the rise of neo-conservatives in U.S. government.<sup>31</sup> Liberalism would now be touted as *the* alternative to Leninism in a Manichean clash of Good and Evil that American evangelism and gargantuan military spending would win for the West; self-righteousness and moralism would supplant realpolitik; and U.S. global alliance network would be projected as a bulwark for liberal democracy against totalitarianism. In short, even before the dawn of the unipolar moment with the collapse of the USSR, “liberal hegemony” had already become America’s foreign policy of choice.

“The greatest danger that can befall us in coping with this problem of Soviet communism,” Kennan had astutely warned, “is that we shall allow ourselves to become like those with whom we are coping.”<sup>32</sup> Jubilant about American exceptionalism,

---

30 Murray Rothbard. “The Myth of Monolithic Communism,” *Libertarian Review*, Vol. 8., No. 1 (February 1979). <https://www.libertarianism.org/publications/essays/myth-monolithic-communism>

31 It is worth noting that the formation of the politically and ideologically pluralistic Non-Aligned Movement—a massive forum of over 100 mostly developing countries, some on the far left (Tito’s Yugoslavia) and others on the far right (Suharto’s Indonesia)—in the wake of the militarization and internationalization of the Cold War that justified foreign intervention with the pretext of the domino theory signaled that many parts of the world had anticipated the eventual ideological framing of the Soviet-American relations, intuiting and rejecting the ‘all or nothing’ political situation this clash of ideologies was creating. Seeking autonomy and neutrality, their perspective reflected an alternate model for international relations premised on the absolute recognition by all of the unconditional sovereignty of states. See Lorenz Lüthi, “The Non-Aligned Movement and the Cold War, 1961-1973.” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, 18(4), 98-147. DOI:10.1162/JCWS\_a\_00682

32 George Kennan. *The Long Telegram*. US National Security Archives: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

Washington did not heed this prescient advice. This pathological development toward ideologization of U.S. foreign policy ensured that America’s alliances would acquire a hallowed zeal in the eyes of the U.S. elites managing them: as structures to be maintained regardless of any change in circumstance and international geopolitics, for their value now far exceeded real-world security gains but stretched to totemism and (expert class) lore—as emblems for permanent U.S. global hegemony. They reinforced the myth of American indispensability as well as prolonging the allies’ security dependence, which provided the illusion of control and global leadership for an American foreign policy class desperate to cling to familiar tropes in the post-Cold War era.<sup>33</sup>

During the Reagan years and since, America’s stance on international relations has increasingly turned on whether it approves of the social institutions of and political practices within foreign countries.<sup>34</sup> The rhetoric of ‘American Exceptionalism’ changed the discourse around international politics, and it soon came to be invoked to push countries to adopt the U.S. model.<sup>35</sup> In practice, this means that Washington demands global adherence to liberal social conventions (many of which remain frightfully contested by Americans domestically), democratic political processes, and, at a minimum, verbal commitments to certain policies attractive to U.S. elites such as environmentalism and affirmative action-adjacent

---

33 Micah Zenko, “The Myth of the Indispensable Nation,” *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/06/the-myth-of-the-indispensable-nation/>

34 Christopher Mott, “Woke Imperium: The Coming Confluence Between Social Justice and Neoconservatism,” *The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy*, June 27, 2022. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/06/27/woke-imperium-the-coming-confluence-between-social-justice-and-neoconservatism/>

35 That it was interwar American communists who had originally coined the phrase “American Exceptionalism” in debating the universal power and historical determinism of Marxism is one of those ironic facts of history that is utterly lost on the notion’s proponents.



policies for women and minorities, etc.

This posture has had the practical effect of transforming America into an ideological empire (a designation reserved for only a handful of modern imperial states, including the now-defunct USSR).<sup>36</sup> Instead of behaving as a normal nation-state with interests, the U.S. believes its mission is to resist structural change in the international system while insisting on its permanent global hegemony and right to military quests. In the unipolar era, America's existing alliances, especially NATO, would become the pathways by which these demands are pushed, with threats (military intervention or economic sanctions) and promised benefits the levers by which Washington seeks to nudge foreign countries towards acquiescing to its ideology.

It should have come as no surprise then that as Americans celebrated their victory in the Cold War wishfully thinking their leaders would wind down Washington's activism and militarism overseas, the United States would slide towards a new period of military interventionism that it could never conclude out of its own volition given its maximalist, unrealistic, and Manichaeian goals. Instead, Washington sought to use its powers and its Cold War alliances to police the world and remake it in the image of its ideals—this would be its exceptional destiny of task: America stood for freedom, and all those who opposed its globalism had to be compelled at gunpoint to become free and democratic. Liberalism too, it seems, grows out of the barrel of a gun.<sup>37</sup>

36 Arta Moeini, "America: The Last Ideological Empire," *Compact Magazine*, July 9, 2022. <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/07/09/arta-moeini-in-compact-magazine-america-the-last-ideological-empire/>

37 The original reference attributed to a 1938 speech by Mao states: "Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun...All things grow out of the barrel of a gun. According to the Marxist theory of the state, the army is the chief component of state power. Whoever wants to seize and retain state power must have a strong army. Some people ridicule

"It is an undeniable privilege of every man to prove himself right in the thesis that the world is his enemy," Kennan had observed, "for if he reiterates it frequently enough and makes it the background of his conduct he is bound eventually to be right."<sup>38</sup> So too would the United States soon succeed in alienating the world it had saved from Soviet expansionism, uniting various states, not in sympathy for each other, but in antipathy toward American liberal interventionism and moral imperialism. The more Washington pushed countries to mirror it, the more they resisted.

Such sanctimonious globalism and ideological calcification were not the original *raison d'être* of the Cold War (which was predicated on the peaceful containment of a mostly political threat of a virulent ideology) but a gradual perversion of it. The pathology is similarly reflected in how Washington sees its alliances today—as a global patchwork of bulwarks weaponized for an abstract war against *tyranny* itself.

After all, in the early years of the Cold War, American statesmen still adhered to the more practical and local alliance strategy of preserving the balance of power by aiding states to oppose Soviet expansionism. America and its allies had a single, realizable goal, namely containing the spread of Marxism-Leninism. To achieve it, American policymakers were less starry-eyed idealists and more sober-minded realists: their approach was

---

us as advocates of the "omnipotence of war". Yes, we are advocates of the omnipotence of revolutionary war; that is good, not bad, it is Marxist. The guns of the Russian Communist Party created socialism. We shall create a democratic republic. Experience in the class struggle in the era of imperialism teaches us that it is only by the power of the gun that the working class and the labouring masses can defeat the armed bourgeoisie and landlords; in this sense we may say that only with guns can the whole world be transformed."—"Problems of War and Strategy", *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Vol. II, pp. 224-225: [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2\\_12.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-2/mswv2_12.htm)

38 X (George Kennan), "The Sources of Soviet Conduct", *Foreign Affairs*, 1947.



strategic in the broadest sense of the term—prioritizing military, strategic, economic, and political considerations over ideological posturing and moral brinkmanship.

America's alliances were conceived as a defensive parameter to peacefully deter Soviet expansion. As the Cold War matured and came to a close, however, that narrow strategic focus would be supplanted by a more globalist outlook committed to proxy warfare and covert regime change in distant lands (under the spell of a flawed domino theory) and later to spreading the ideology of liberalism using America's alliance networks (and their expansion) as both a means to furthering that hegemonic outcome and a testament of its success.

The Cold War alliance situation outlined above breaks with the historical nature of alliances, i.e., dynamic agreements between a shifting alignment of countries in specific geographic regions to achieve particular strategic goals in a relatively limited time. In contrast to the emphasis on *change* in the history of alliances, the paradigm shift toward adopting a globalist and perennialist view of alliances during the latter phase of the Cold War—which saw the rise of the rigid, dichotomous structure of states that eventually crystallized into ideological blocs to justify their existence over long periods of time—meant that alliances in the contemporary era would be defined through a bias toward continuity.

With this history of U.S. alliances and their evolution during the Cold War era in mind and before moving on to analyze the current structure and trajectory of America's alliance networks, it is necessary to consider and evaluate alliance formation with special attention paid to the inter-alliance dynamics and how the relationship of power and interest among the allies impacts the structure and functioning of an alliance—producing alliances of different types.

## Typology of Alliances: Reviewing Inter-alliance Dynamics

The literature on alliances has traditionally advanced a defensive (or external) view of these arrangements, focusing on how they bring countries together to counter, balance, or overpower a common foe. That is, *X* and *Y* unite because of their shared fear of *Z*, a country with sufficient power to frustrate their goals and threaten their security. Alternatively, *X* and *Y* could also join forces and bandwagon against *Z* (cf. power aggregation).

This conventional account is eminently realist: it is concerned only with anarchy and power, two factors that are illuminating, but selectively applied. That is, there is little discussion about the ways in which power struggles might play out between states within an alliance. In other words, the conventional picture of a partnership built around overarching and shared goals does not exhaustively capture the dynamics of alliances, while also largely underestimating the particular conditions that give rise to them.

Marco Cesa's *Allies Yet Rivals* takes a major step towards filling this gap by focusing on the reality of internal state competition within alliances, as well as the different forms they can take and various ends they may serve.<sup>39</sup> To this end, Cesa develops a typology based on how the interaction between *interest* and *power* could impact and illuminate the nature and dynamics of alliance systems. The result is a *conformity*-based model offering a novel perspective for studying alliances.

The classical view, Cesa contends in his seminal study, is facile in that it fails to account for both the (internal) complexity of alliances as well as the varying interests of the allies. He argues that the predominant explanation—that of similarly inter-

<sup>39</sup> Marco Cesa, *Allies Yet Rivals: International Politics in 18th Century Europe* (Stanford University Press, 2010).



ested states balancing against a common threat—is insufficient. In Cesa’s view, states join alliances not only to confront an external security threat but also to use the structure of the alliance itself to limit the actions of the ally—where and when it serves the state’s strategic interests. When all is said and done, Cesa observes, “alliances are...a means by which one ally tries to obtain the other’s conformity.”<sup>40</sup> The upshot is that the level of *congruence*, or the alignment (or not) of interests, is one critical factor in the study of alliances.

Alliances, thereby, have two dimensions: 1) *vis-à-vis the enemy* or toward its external goal; and, 2) *vis-à-vis the ally* revolving around the internal dynamics of the alliance. Emphasis on power aggregation, security, and threat is certainly fundamental to analyzing an alliance’s functioning *vis-à-vis* the enemy. Concentrating on the enemy alone, however, privileges the *external* facet of alliances while ignoring the internal dimension of the alliance. In explaining the origin of an alliance and the relationship among the allies, one must also look inside: the aspiration to manage and control one’s allies is a central driver of alliance formation.

Concentrating on the internal facet of alliances, that is how allies—in reciprocity—attempt to control and manage one another, shines a light on the way alliances actually function as instruments for securing conformity. The equilibrium in any alliance is thus determined by recognizing the drivers of external and internal dynamics of an alliance by examining the unique configuration within that alliance between “compatibility of interests” (homogeneity/heterogeneity) and “power parity” (symmetry/asymmetry). This context determines how the alliance balances strategic cooperation (against the perceived enemy or for some collective gain) versus strategic competition (for influence and positional advantage between the members).

---

40 *Ibid.*, p.212

Cesa offers many examples of alliances between states in 18th century Europe wherein the members maneuvered to limit their partners as often as they did so to block their rivals. Indeed, he highlights cases where the more powerful partner hindered its supposed ally as much as it did the adversary the alliance was designed to counter. In light of this observation, the entire alliance structure could be seen as a more multifaceted and flexible tool in the foreign policy arsenal than one might expect.

To draw attention to the underlying reality of alliances and their purposes, Cesa’s model is designed along two fundamental vectors. The first is the ‘symmetry-asymmetry’ divide. Determining the degree of symmetry (or asymmetry) of power in a particular alliance could be resolved with a basic question: “Is the strategic force of the allies [within the alliance] equal or unequal?”<sup>41</sup> Here, an actor’s ‘strategic force’ represents “the combination of the degree of *control* over certain resources, and the *importance* that other actors attribute to such resources.”<sup>42</sup> An unequal power distribution typically suggests disparity in material capability, where one partner is the main provider of some crucial resource to the weaker partner. The question of power (and its distribution among the allies) is thus a central preoccupation of the Cesa model.

In general, materially-handicapped states that depend on key resources from other states possessing them (the resource provider) have three options: to get them from that provider, to get them from somewhere else, or to go without them altogether.<sup>43</sup> And within the specific context of an alliance system, these needs take on added significance insofar as they grant the resource provider greater influence over the dependent partner (or

---

41 *Ibid.*, p.56

42 *Ibid.*

43 *Ibid.*, p.128



future partner), allowing the more powerful ally to set the agenda—especially when the resource in question is limited and obtainable only from a partner state.

In practice, the provider ally is able to coerce the dependent partner with the threat of withheld or lost benefits. Cesa's account shows the extent to which this phenomenon of "asymmetrical dependence" can lead to stark, systemic imbalances that favor the resource provider, which, in turn, could secure greater and greater degrees of compliance from the weaker members.<sup>44</sup>

In theory then, higher levels of asymmetry largely benefit the more powerful partner, because such relative advantage provides the stronger state with greater leverage over the weaker partner, meaning the relationship becomes one of "dominion and dependence" as the leading ally sets the agenda and the partner follows.<sup>45</sup> This raises an interesting question as to whether there might be circumstances where the weaker party is able to constrain or channel the actions of its more powerful partner and to set the alliance agenda in a way that protects its own strategic autonomy and serves its geopolitical interests. Although these are *usually* rare and marginal cases, it is hard to overestimate their importance, for (as we will see later) they are prevalent in the contemporary U.S. alliance networks.

The second determining factor in alliance typology is the 'compatibility of interests' among allies. According to Cesa, the 'homogeneity-heterogeneity' dichotomy denotes the degree to which the states in a partnership perceive themselves as responding to shared (or disparate) opportunities and challenges. "Homogenous alliances," he writes, "are those in which the states comply with convergent constraints or respond to compatible

opportunities."<sup>46</sup> In these situations, the partners benefit from cooperation as the alliance reveals a high degree of congruence. The flipside is a "heterogeneous" alliance, characterized by low compatibility of interests among allies and resulting in the condition of diverging strategic interests and perceptions.

The perception of common and/or competing primary interests and motivations adds another important dimension to studying alliance frameworks by helping to explain confounding state behavior in certain situations *vis-à-vis* their nominal partners (where the adopted course of action appears to clash with or undermine core interests). Here, as Cesa posits, behaviors are often motivated by two principal fears: weaker members look to minimize the risk of *abandonment*, while the more powerful partners worry about *entrapment*. In short, determining whether an alliance is homogeneous or heterogeneous is perhaps even more important to explicating inter-alliance dynamics as this fact illuminates not only the varied conceptions of interests among allies, but also their relative value to the different parties, and how strategic objectives are ultimately prioritized (or not) within alliances. This is especially pertinent for analyzing current U.S. alliance networks, which on the whole, are asymmetrical to Washington's favor.

Taken together, these dual clines—the 'symmetrical-asymmetrical' and 'homogeneous-heterogeneous'—represent the two key constituents of Cesa's typology. The interaction between them produces four distinct types of alliances, as follows: 1) The *aggregation* alliance (homogenous-symmetrical); 2) The *guarantee* alliance (homogeneous-asymmetrical); 3) The *deadlocked* alliance (heterogenous-symmetrical); and, 4) The *hegemonic* alliance (heterogeneous-asymmetrical).

---

44 *Ibid.*, p.59

45 *Ibid.*

---

46 *Ibid.*, p.61



Alliance	Symmetrical	Asymmetrical
Homogenous	<i>Aggregation</i> (Equal power with shared goals)	<i>Guarantee</i> (common aims with unequal power)
Heterogeneous	<i>Deadlocked</i> (relatively incongruent interests but equal power)	<i>Hegemonic</i> (relatively incongruent interests & unequal power)

This study draws on the above theoretical framework established by Cesa to ascertain the phenomenology of U.S. alliances as they exist today. In so doing, it also expands the model by emphasizing an implicit point in the Cesa study. Namely, that contrary to what most observers would expect, even in the asymmetrical alliances (i.e., ‘guarantee’ and ‘hegemonic’ types that, as legacies of unipolarity, are predominant in U.S. alliance networks today), the weaker party—while appearing dependent and subordinate in terms of economic and military force—holds certain leverage or influence within the alliance that are usually overlooked in exclusively materialist analyses of alliances. Specifically, we argue that under certain conditions, the weaker partner has the ability to maneuver the established alliances to obtain desired benefits from its dominant partner (i.e., the U.S.) *that cut against that partner’s core strategic interests.*

Cesa alludes to this fact. For instance, in discussing the alliance between the Netherlands and Great Britain, Cesa shows that the former was able to extract all manner of benefits from the latter while providing little strategic value to Great Britain, the stronger partner. Especially in the final phase of this relationship, the Netherlands engaged in egregious free-riding, rarely made its

military commitments, and even manipulated its ally to advance its own position within the international trading system.<sup>47</sup> By manipulating the British into unhelpful positions that benefitted the Netherlands, the Dutch got nearly everything they wanted out of an asymmetrical alliance that, on paper, should have favored Great Britain.

Cesa’s account reveals how shrewd diplomacy, statesmanship, as well as a confluence of other contextual factors could allow weaker partners to outmaneuver their more powerful (i.e., hegemonic) allies at certain points over the course of their inter-alliance relationship. Although an underdeveloped theme in the book, this is a significant finding that warrants further attention as it challenges the classical assumption that power differentials are most indicative of an alliance’s nature within the context of an unbalanced, asymmetrical alliance (i.e., that the stronger party will determine the course of the security partnership *to its advantage*). Indeed, this shows that when it comes to a full assessment of the nature of an alliance and its dynamics, the materialist lens—resources, weapons, etc.—is often insufficient or misleading, particularly in terms of deciding the strategic value of an alliance and the question of leadership within it.

Moreover, by revisiting alliance theory from the neo-classical realist perspective, Cesa persuasively argues that to make sense of the dynamics of an alliance, understanding *inter-allied* relations is often as significant as scrutinizing the relationship between the allies and their adversaries. A more comprehensive account of alliances and inter-allied relations must, as Cesa writes, come to terms with the:

*rather ambiguous nature of conflicting and cooperative relations among states,*

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.87-91



*[whose drivers include] the position held by one state in relation to the other states... the struggle for conformity among allies... [the] role played by a common enemy; and the conceptualization of alliances not so much as unions of forces [but] as instruments of control, by means of which each state tries to render another state's behavior foreseeable, thus circumscribing the uncertainty permeating such an anarchical context as the international system.<sup>48</sup>*

We can complicate this picture further by noting that an exclusive focus on state-to-state relationships (first-level analysis) does not tell the whole story. A more exhaustive account must also consider the constellation of factors that impact state strategy—elite power and interests, presence of ideology, securitization, implicit political and psychological motives, and access to information (or lack thereof), *inter alia*—and their interactions with each other in a multi-level or ‘complex’ approach.

Such an approach would view a country's alliances as reflecting a state's broader conceptions of grand strategy and put a premium on deciphering the mindset and the strategic culture that both contrives them and works to sustain and implement them as ‘vital’ for the national security goals of the state. Before delving into a discussion of how the weaker partner could possibly influence the policies and strategic choices of a more dominant partner such as the United States, however, we shall investigate how the shifting tides of the international system away from unipolarity and globalism might impact contemporary alliances (particularly those established under the imperatives of previously bipolar and unipolar orders), in order to determine which class of states would benefit from their continued preservation.

48 Ibid., p.228

## Putting Alliances Back in Regions: Regional Balancers and the Rise of Trojan Alliances

Any sound discussion of the utility or futility of the United States' contemporary alliance networks must start with putting them in the context of the structural realities—the so-called international system—wherein they operate. What is the current state and trajectory of that structure? As Moeini et al. posit in a recent Institute for Peace & Diplomacy study titled *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*, in the wake of ebbing unipolarity and the decline of American global hegemony, the international system is undergoing a fundamental transformation, reverting to a less globalized condition characterized by multiplicity and regionalism.<sup>49</sup>

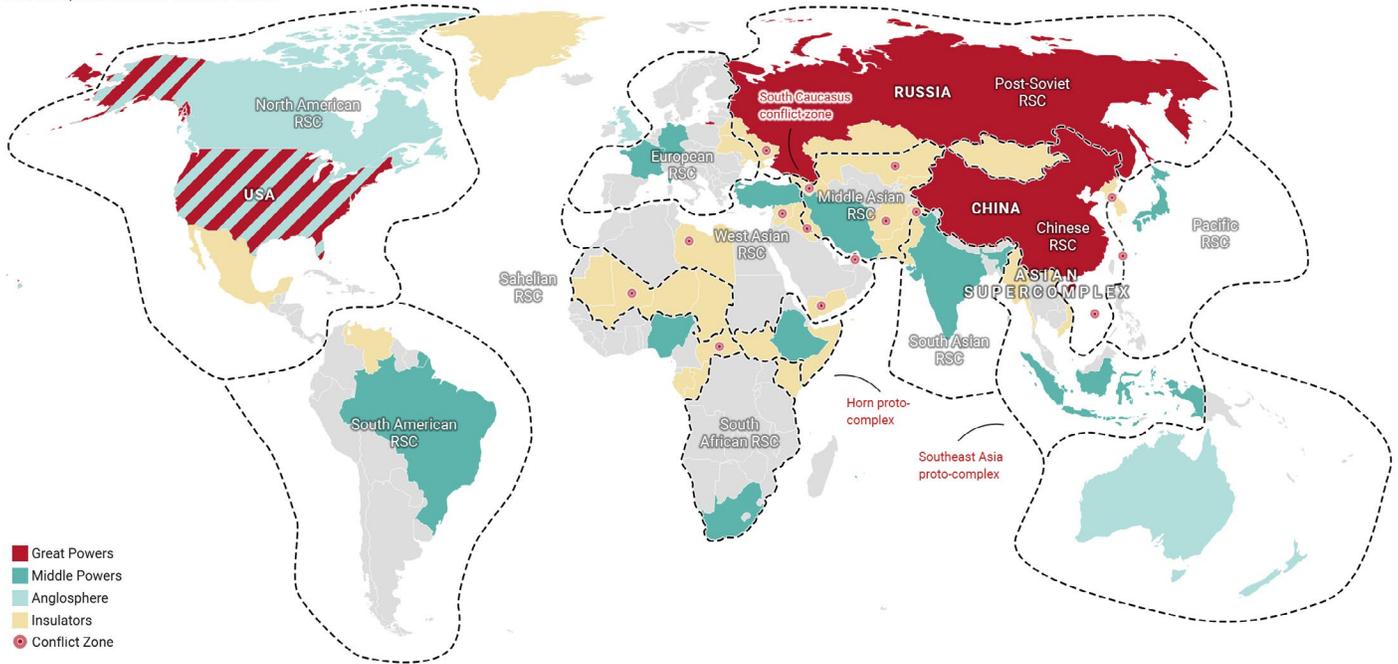
This post-global and regional shift in geopolitics re-focuses security around core civilizational states in multiple world regions: this grouping of states—labeled ‘middle powers’—are juxtaposed with great powers (with the latter differentiated by their capacity for trans-regional action owing to their global force projection capability). Each middle power anchors a regional security complex (RSC). These systemic trends highlight the local nature of conflict and security imperatives. That is, in the post-global era defined by increasing multipolarity, regions become fundamental, and security challenges and arrangements will consequently be adjudicated by proximal actors in local settings at the fault lines between civilizations. In effect, what many conceive as a unitary international system is increasingly revealed to be an open multi-system, with various systemic complexes working independently but not in a vacuum. To determine their value and efficacy,

49 Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky, *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World* (The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy 2022): <https://peacediplomacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Middle-Powers-in-the-Multipolar-World.pdf>



## Regional Security Complexes

Reconceptualized with Middle Powers



Note: This map marks Russia as a great power. Moscow's relative power status, however, is in a state of flux and far more ambiguous. A compelling case could be made that Russia is the world's strongest (revisionist) middle power as evidenced by its recent behavior in Ukraine and Syria.

Figure 1. Arta Moeini, Christopher Mott, Zachary Paikin, and David Polansky, *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World* (The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy 2022)

therefore, America's global alliances must be reconciled with the increasingly regional character of security centered on the resurgence of middle powers in various RSCs.

In short, current security dynamics are such that middle powers—states that are “better defined by their 1) enduring regional presence and geographic rootedness, 2) considerable economic and military capacity relative to neighbors, 3) historical and cultural pedigree as civilizational states, and 4) the regionally-focused, limited extent of their ambitions”—are on the rise.<sup>50</sup> Driven by *realpolitik* considerations to consolidate power in their regions, these rooted powers are likely to become formative agents in global geopolitics, able to instigate, mediate, and resolve security dilemmas within their respective RSCs. As such, the auth-

ors contend, any potential instability and conflict owing to the ascent of (revisionist) middle powers are likely to remain regionally confined—the important caveat being interference from rivaling outside powers.

As middle powers (especially revisionist ones dissatisfied with the status quo established by the so-called liberal international order<sup>51</sup>) attempt to consolidate power over their RSCs and establish a regional sphere of influence or perhaps suzerainty in their geographic vicinity matching their civilizational expanse, smaller neighboring states within an RSC as well as those cleft states inhabiting the fault lines between civilizations are con-

51 Arta Moeini and Christopher Mott, “The ‘Liberal International Order’ Is Neither Universal nor Exceptional”, *The National Interest*, June 20, 2021: <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/%E2%80%98liberal-international-order%E2%80%99-neither-universal-nor-exceptional-188026>

50 Ibid., Abstract.



fronted with a pivotal choice: namely, whether to balance their proximal middle power for the sake of their sovereignty? Since the regional balance of power in a closed system (i.e., RSC) clearly favors the anchoring middle power, the real dilemma for peripheral states is whether protecting their strategic autonomy is worth the often huge costs and consequences that balancing the regional power in their RSC entails.

Their unique strategic situation presents these peripheral states with three options.

First, they could *bandwagon* with their respective middle power to guarantee state survival and domestic autonomy (even if this means sacrificing their freedom of action abroad). Such is the tack adopted by Belarus in relation to Russia, for example. Protection does not come cheap.

Second, they can choose to profess neutrality and combine prudent policy with wise statesmanship to *buffer* between two or more middle powers, working carefully not to provoke or antagonize the middle power most proximal to them. Although an age-old tactic generally associated with Switzerland, this approach has more recently been called Finlandization after the way in which Finland successfully managed to avert the risk of Soviet invasion during the Cold War.<sup>52</sup> The successful implementation of this policy requires strong and effective domestic leadership as evidenced by how countries such as Azerbaijan (caught between Iran, Turkey, and Russia) under President Ilham Aliiev, or Hungary (between Russia and Europe) under Prime Minister Victor Orban have managed to placate all parties by creatively engaging with all sides while playing them off one another with-

52 Finland's impressive resistance during the Winter War, i.e., the failed Soviet invasion of Finland also contributed to the Soviet ambivalence from pursuing further conflict with Finland. Nevertheless, Finland also displayed savvy statecraft not to unnecessarily antagonize Moscow. For more on the context around this case, see Ronald Suny & Valerie Kivelson, *Russia's Empires* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

out granting undue privilege and influence to any one side.

The third and final approach, which also happens to be the riskiest, is that of *balancing* the most proximal middle power. This occurs when "peripheral states band together with (outside) middle or great powers (through security partnerships or formal alliances like NATO) to act as 'regional balancers' to the autochthonous or core middle power."<sup>53</sup> Due to their unique geostrategic position, regional balancers are the most likely candidates in distal regional theaters for security partnerships with external powers like the United States. In fact, the symbiotic and synergistic relationship between this class of states and the U.S. is what sustains Washington's multi-regional global alliances in the current era (even absent Soviet globalism).

This is the prevailing condition behind America's multilateral and bilateral security relationships in Central and Eastern Europe (with Ukraine and most of the Three Seas<sup>54</sup> countries in the Inter-marium Corridor led by Poland banding against Moscow), in East and South East Asia (with Taiwan, South Korea and others historically banding against China), and in the Middle East (with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE banding against Iran and more recently Turkey). As Moeini et al. concluded in the earlier *Middle Power* study,

*Understanding the role of the middle powers and regional balancers also has significant repercussions for alliances, particularly in the case of the U.S. given its extensive alliance networks. Middle powers are the dominant actors in RSCs, and their primacy in their respective re-*

53 Moeini et al., *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*, p. 6.

54 David A. Wemer, "The Three Seas Initiative Explained", *Atlantic Council*, February, 2019: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-three-seas-initiative-explained-2/>



*gions is largely and structurally secure. As such, weaker powers within RSCs that wish to challenge that primacy often do so by aligning with great powers in order to bring them into their spheres to disrupt the natural balance of power and achieve a stronger position in relation to the neighboring middle powers: in Eastern Europe, Poland and Lithuania are heavily dependent on NATO to balance against Russia, and want the great power guarantor of the alliance, the U.S., to be actively involved in European affairs; yet, even [status quo middle powers] like France and Germany are far more reluctant about this fact, for it will be mostly their autonomy that will have to be ceded. Alternatively, in the Middle East, Israel and Saudi Arabia attempt regularly to entice the United States into the region, exploiting U.S. presence in the region to challenge Iranian regional primacy. It is obviously in the interest of the smaller powers to spur a distant great power to be engaged in their regions—the latter's active involvement allows these peripheral states to coordinate their strategy and act as 'regional balancers' against one or more proximate middle powers. It is debatable, however, whether it is actually in the interest of great powers to interpose themselves into distant RSCs or if such commitments would overextend, tie down, and weaken them over time.<sup>55</sup>*

The colossal power gap between Washington and regional balancers makes these arrangements profoundly asymmetric. Because these partnerships antagonize the regional powers and increase the risk of military action against the regional balancers—unless active deterrence is provided through the forward posture and the threat of

<sup>55</sup> Moeini et al., *Middle Powers in the Multipolar World*, p.29.

use of force by the external great power (i.e., the United States)—the alliance becomes existential to the regional balancers which fear abandonment, creating severe dependencies. As such, the regional balancers are heavily incentivized to try to obtain or keep American troop presence in place. No external great power, meanwhile, wishes to risk an all-out war with the middle power. The United States might happily encroach upon other RSCs, but it is not willing to risk entrapment.

Accordingly, due to structural reasons, there is a very low degree of congruence (cf. interest homogeneity) between the great power and the regional balancer(s). The latter relies on these arrangements out of a perception of existential threat, the former sees them collectively as a useful lever to exploit (often politically) toward maintaining global primacy.<sup>56</sup> In other words, these alliances are of marginal benefit for Washington, while they are zero-sum, strategic, and totalistic ventures for the regional balancers which stand to lose their very statehood and territorial integrity in the process (as seen most recently in Ukraine). The cumulative result is a hegemonic alliance seemingly led by the United States, but one which the regional balancers—having triggered the revisionist middle powers—are viscerally driven to preserve.

The lopsidedness of incentives and risks toward the regional balancers implies that they have the most to gain from embroiling the United States into conflict so as to establish and amplify the threat of force as active deterrence against their proximal middle power. Moreover, the very existence of the alliance allows peripheral states in a

<sup>56</sup> An Important caveat here is that it is not obvious that all great powers will by definition seek global hegemony and value international primacy as their core grand strategy objective. For specific reasons, some of which have already been discussed, however, the U.S. foreign-policy establishment is particularly prone to mistake primacy as identical with national interest and to therefore regard it (and so as well the multi-regional network of global alliances that are its embodiment) as an end-in-itself.



region to bask in a great power's aura of invincibility, with the resulting over-confidence encouraging reckless behavior beyond their own means and limits. Regional balancers are thus primed to overreach and provoke their neighboring middle power: and if this occasions war, to subsequently try to escalate and internationalize what are essentially local, territorial, and regionally-based conflicts in and around their RSCs to ensure great power involvement.

The severe imbalance caused by the concentration of material capability on the side of the outside interloping power(s) but with those of resolve and determination weighing heavily on the regional balancers' side creates an untenable situation conducive to geopolitical arbitrage and moral blackmail.<sup>57</sup> Given that conflicts between regional balancers and middle powers (should they ignite) are—at least initially—oceans away from the borders of the external great power, the perception of risk and conflict spiral is minimized and discounted by the foreign-policy establishment in the great power nation.

In the process, what originally appears as a hegemonic alliance led and managed by the United States is revealed as something else altogether. The tangible security benefits from such alliances go to the peripheral states, while the material costs of maintaining the alliance (and the added risk of global confrontation) remain the great power's burden—with the alliance at best peripheral to advancing the great power's national interests concretely defined.<sup>58</sup> While this form of an alliance is decoupled from the national interests of the great power, it is

---

57 Here 'moral blackmail' means the act or the threat of redirecting onto the great power the ultimate responsibility (or guilt) for the breakdown or destruction of the peripheral state, painting that outcome as a direct consequence of inaction or unserious action on the part of the great power rather than the peripheral state's individual overreach. This is a classic form of buck-passing.

58 Samuel Huntington, *The Lonely Superpower*, *Foreign Affairs*, March - April 1999, Vol. 78, No. 2, pp. 35-49.

nevertheless defended and maintained by the U.S. ruling class. Irrespective of the real and normative rationales the Blob concocts to cocoon and justify them, their presence advances the domestic status quo and further empowers the transatlantic foreign-policy establishment. We might call this confounding variant of the hegemonic alliance, the "Trojan" alliance—for it operates as a Trojan Horse to goad the external great power and its people (here, the United States) into never-ending and open-ended commitments abroad.

This sort of Trojan alliance has emerged as typical of contemporary U.S. alliances in the post-global and multipolar world.<sup>59</sup> We must thus reformulate and expand Cesa's model to include this fifth category. In structural terms, the Trojan alliance has most of the material asymmetries and relative incompatibility of interests characteristic of the hegemonic alliance, but the alliance's priorities and objectives are mostly driven, not from the top down, but from the bottom-up by the regional balancers.

While the hegemonic great power remains mostly desirous of the outcome in those regions due to

---

59 One notable exception is that of NATO in the direct aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 reverting into a "guarantee" alliance, but this is an aberration and unlikely to last as Western and Central European interests over Ukraine continue to diverge. In fact, NATO expansion has created an institutional chimera spanning thirty members, which threatens the long-term viability of the alliance as such. Although outside the scope of this paper, if current trends toward hardening internal cleavages in NATO over the Ukraine question and the future role of Turkey in the alliance continue, one could expect future fragmentation of that alliance into multiple security blocs chiefly organized along two axes: the Western axis led by France, Germany, and arguably Italy has historically betrayed a tendency toward the "hegemonic" alliance type in relation with the U.S., while the Intermarium axis could transform to become a textbook "Trojan" alliance vis-à-vis the U.S. Also noteworthy here is the fact that almost all Western European countries developed excellent relations with Moscow after 1989—looking to integrate Russia into Europe proper via trade, energy, and economic collaboration even in the face of U.S. objections. The case of North Stream 2 is particularly illuminating in this regard.



its own ideological and psychological biases, the regional balancers assume much of the agency and initiative in an alliance of this type, and they also stand to gain substantial strategic/security benefits with little concrete gains for the outside great power. The non-strategic impetus (from the perspective of the external great power) and the counterintuitive power dynamics of this alliance produce the quixotic circumstances wherein the tail essentially wags the dog.

The hegemonic great power risks not only being embroiled in cataclysmic conflict but also incurs the overwhelming share of the economic and military costs. In the context of multipolarity, where great power competition looms large once more, these burdens are imprudent and potentially unsustainable in the long run.<sup>60</sup> Not only do they siphon resources away from necessary domestic investments, but they also leave the hegemonic great power over-encumbered, over-extended, and over-leveraged—hindering its strategic autonomy and flexibility.

Thus, while many critics of U.S. alliances view greater burden-sharing as a panacea to the current ills plaguing the U.S. security partnerships, such policies do not address the fundamental structural questions and the inherent strategic imbalances occasioned by the predominance of the Trojan alliance type in the U.S. global alliance system. For although *free-riding* and *buck-passing* could be regarded as merely auxiliary to asymmetric partnerships such as Hegemonic and Guarantee alliance types (i.e., a downside that could be resisted and counteracted), they are simply inherent and unavoidable features—rather than bugs—of the Trojan alliance. For while the security gains from

Trojan alliances could be regarded as pure public goods for the regional balancers, they essentially amount to private goods from the standpoint of the external great power's foreign-policy establishment.<sup>61</sup>

While Trojan Alliances are key instruments in the strategic toolkit of regional balancers hoping to establish deterrence against their neighboring middle power, this comes at great risk to the regional balancer and at great cost to the external great power: the arrangement requires the threat of the use of force and military intervention by that globe-spanning power, in the absence of which it is nearly impossible to imagine a scenario where the regional balancer could come out on top in the event of conflict with the proximal middle power. A new study published as part of the Military Intervention Project recently found that out of almost 400 U.S. military interventions abroad since America's founding about half occurred after 1950 and a mind-boggling 25% took place after the Cold War during the unipolar period.<sup>62</sup> The Trojan alliances—which rose as a natural consequence of Washington's adoption of “rollback” during the latter parts of bipolarity and were re-ordained as a formative part of U.S. strategy of liberal hegemony during unipolarity—could be seen as a major structural driver behind these operations and America's strong global footprint.

Great power retrenchment such as is advocated by many restrainers, therefore, poses existential risks to the regional balancers. Nevertheless, an exclusively materialist framework would suggest

---

60 George Beebe, “Managed Competition: A U.S. Grand Strategy for a Multipolar World”, *Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft*, Brief no. 30, September 2022: <https://quincyinst.org/report/managed-competition-a-u-s-grand-strategy-for-a-multipolar-world/>

---

61 For an introduction to the theory of free-riding where security gains are conceived as pure public goods, see Olson and Zeckhauser, *An Economic Theory of Alliances* (Rand Corporation 1966): [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_memoranda/2007/RM4297.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2007/RM4297.pdf)

62 Sidita Kushi and Monica Duffy Toft, “Introducing the Military Intervention Project: A New Dataset on US Military Interventions, 1776–2019”, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, August 2022: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/00220027221117546>



great power *disentanglement* from all such alliances. Yet, not only has this not happened, Trojan alliances continue to proliferate with the unequivocal blessing of the U.S. Blob. What explains this phenomenon?

## The Paradox of Alliance Permanence in U.S. Grand Strategy

*“Were the Soviet Union to sink tomorrow under the waters of the ocean, the American military-industrial establishment would have to go on, substantially unchanged, until some other adversary could be invented. Anything else would be an unacceptable shock to the American economy.”*

– George Kennan<sup>63</sup>

In the original story of the Trojan Horse, the Greek occupants did not enter the city of Troy on their own; it was Troy’s priestly class that brought them inside the walls. And though Americans may not worship Apollo or Poseidon, the United States nonetheless maintains its own priestly classes, whose members disproportionately support—and benefit personally from—the country’s maximalist and internationalist foreign policy.

It is the private interests and proclivities of America’s imperial caste rather than the compass of the national interest that have largely contributed to upholding the United States’ existing alliance structure.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, we identify multiple historical, sociological, psychological, ideological as well

as material causes, which, operating in tandem, work to uphold the global American alliance network.

The first and simplest is merely path dependency. As career diplomat William Burns said of post-Cold War NATO expansion in his memoir, the alliance “stayed on autopilot as a matter of U.S. policy, long after its fundamental assumptions should have been reassessed. Commitments originally meant to reflect interests morphed into interests themselves.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the deep entrenchment of these commitments requires ever-more radical responses if they are to be re-conceived or changed. Status-quo bias is certainly at work here. But it must be emphasized that adhering to the status quo—however extravagant, ambitious, or idealist it may be in practice—still offers the appearance of moderation, whereas any attempt to undo or even simply rethink our commitments appears revolutionary, even when the intended effect is comparatively restrained.

Consequently, defenses of our extensive foreign commitments today hardly require the kind of full-throated neoconservatism that one finds in, e.g., George W. Bush’s Second Inaugural Address.<sup>66</sup> Due to the maximalist nature of these global commitments, ordinary expressions of support that one routinely finds among conventional Washington establishment figures (such as evocation of the “rules-based” order) are functionally no different than more explicitly imperialist ones.<sup>67</sup> Our alliances must simply be preserved in perpetuity, because they are our inheritance, totems of our past triumphs, and legacy institutions to be

63 George F. Kennan, “Foreword,” in Norman Cousins, *The Pathology of Power* (Norton, 1987), p.11-12.

64 This admittedly does not obviate the possibility of sub-national interests being served, such as those of arms manufacturers, local politicians interested in attracting relevant industries, pro-war media outlets, and so on. Cf. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Cornell University Press, 1991).

65 William J. Burns, *The Back Channel: A Memoir of American Diplomacy and the Case for Its Renewal* (Random House, 2020), 413. We owe this reference to Justin Logan, “NATO Is a Luxury Good the United States Doesn’t Need,” *Foreign Policy* (July 23, 2022).

66 <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2005-01-20/pdf/CREC-2005-01-20-pt1-PgS101-5.pdf>

67 See, e.g., here: <https://www.cfr.org/defense-and-security/security-alliances>



passed down to the next generation of America's credentialist class to manage. No disruption to this lucrative extant order of things can be allowed so far as the U.S. foreign-policy establishment is concerned.

Second, and less prosaically, is the collective psychology associated with America's hegemonic status. Ever since the euphoric announcement of the "American century," our self-understanding has exceeded the bounds of the ordinary nation-state.<sup>68</sup> The United States' role as a superpower has become—in the mind of many in its ruling class—inseparable from American identity as such, and a central element of that role—and the associated hegemonic prestige it cultivates—lies with its patronage of alliances and client states around the globe.

Meanwhile, even though the United States' imperial shell may owe some of its durability to psychological commitments on the part of its partisans, it nonetheless acquires an independent set of interests, chief among them maintenance and expansion of America's constellation of alliances. To be clear, while the language of interests suffices to describe this state of affairs, the interests at stake are imperial rather than national.

That is to say, the expansive arrangement and globalist framing of the United States' military and diplomatic positioning is its own *raison d'être*, divorced from considerations of the security and prosperity of the modal American citizen. The idea of grandeur—not unlike de Gaulle's *idée de la France*—is not a mere abstraction, but a concrete apparatus of forward basing, diplomatic enmeshment, and various forms of foreign aid. Imperial grandeur, in other words, is not simply expressed as an abstract set of affective connections or poet-

ic symbols; it takes on a hard material content in the form of economic and military commitments to distant allies. And the interests associated with these commitments are only rarely coextensive with the declared preferences of a democratic electorate.

Related to this factor are the institutional and class-based sources of support for our hegemonic-style alliances. They form a symbiotic relationship between prestige and hegemony, in which a powerful sense of American primacy becomes a key wellspring of the establishment's prestige, and the desire to maintain that prestige encourages the maintenance of U.S. hegemony in turn.

In a famous passage, Tom Wolfe describes the prestige associated with even low-level channels of bureaucratic power as follows:

*There are those who may think that the bureaucrats and functionaries of City Hall are merely time servers, with no other lookout than filling out their forms, drawing their pay, keeping the boat from rocking and dreaming of their pension like the lid on an orderly life. But bureaucrats [...] have a hidden heart, a hidden well of joy, a low-dosage euphoria that courses through their bodies like thyroxine ... Because they have a secret: each, in his own way, is hooked into The Power. The Government is the Power, and they are the Government.<sup>69</sup>*

Less luridly, perhaps, James Q. Wilson points to the importance of institutional culture and organizational mission among officers of the State Department and the Foreign Service.<sup>70</sup> The prestige

68 <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1937-1945/internationalism>; See Jeane Kirkpatrick, "A Normal Country in a Normal Time", *The National Interest*, Vol. 21, Fall, 1990.

69 Tom Wolfe, "Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers," *New York Magazine* (June 1970).

70 James Q. Wilson, *Bureaucracy: What Government Agencies Do and Why They Do It* (Basic Books, 1989), 90 *passim*. See also, Morton H.



acquired through membership in these organizations derives not just from upholding exacting standards and fulfilling basic duties—it is inseparable from their guiding sense of mission. And its members will be especially resistant to policies that appear to deviate from or result in changes to that dominant mission.

Morton Halperin calls this the “organizational essence,” which shapes foreign policy practices in both peacetime and wartime as they are actually carried out by personnel on the ground. And that essence is by now inextricable from the vast and overlapping system of alliances that the United States has maintained since the end of the Second World War.

Consequently, that sense of mission is not simply reducible to nationalism or jingoism on the part of foreign service operatives and other personnel, but is frequently bound up with emotional and even strategic commitments to allies themselves. This is relatedly one of the reasons why area experts frequently end up becoming advocates for that region, even when they hold official diplomatic positions on behalf of the United States. Robert Kaplan mordantly recounts the case of one former U.S. ambassador: “Seelye’s cables to the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff—so seemingly understanding of Syria’s actions—would cause Francis Fukuyama to scrawl in the margins, ‘Talcott Seelye is the Syrian Ambassador to Washington, not the American Ambassador to Syria.’”<sup>71</sup> Such dynamics are all the more powerful when they pertain to formal allies of the United States, and not just countries with which it enjoys ordinary diplomatic relations.<sup>72</sup>

Halperin, *Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy* (Brookings Institution Press, 2006).

71 Robert D. Kaplan, “Tales From the Bazaar,” *The Atlantic Monthly* (August 1992).

72 This admittedly does not even mention the number of former U.S. soldiers and diplomats who have received—both legally and illegally—

Finally, and connected with the psychological and institutional causes of U.S. alliance behavior, there is the formative influence of ideology in U.S. grand strategic thinking.

The shared ideological belief in the indispensability of U.S. hegemony for maintaining global peace, the free flow of capital, numerous promises of defense for allies, and the ever-greater expansion of democratic and human rights is a mainstay of bipartisan foreign policy-making since the end of the Cold War.<sup>73</sup> U.S. alliances play a key role in this ideological landscape: as a vector for policies that keep the United States involved in different regions across the world, but also as a form of validation for the supposed universal appeal of America’s ideological commitments.

“Now it lies in the nature of the mental world of the Soviet leaders, as well as in the character of their ideology,” George Kennan remarked in 1947, “that no opposition to them can be officially recognized as having any merit or justification whatsoever.”<sup>74</sup> It is no small irony that a similarly absolutist ideology would come to permeate and condition the structures of thinking for the U.S. establishment in the post-Cold War era, only in the American rendition the original opposition between *socialism* and *capitalism* would be supplanted by a new one—*tyranny* vs. *democracy*. One can surmise that in engaging with that largely fatalistic and Manichaean Soviet mental world, America’s Cold warriors and their progeny (i.e., the Blob) imprinted

lobbying funds from foreign governments over the years, a subject that would warrant its own study.

73 The most comprehensive ideological statement of this global order remains Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992), though he does not insist upon the necessity of U.S. hegemony (and, interestingly, expresses reservations about its ultimate value). The locus classicus of this viewpoint for U.S. policymaking is probably the so-called “Wolfowitz Doctrine,” the informal name given to the Pentagon’s 1992 Defense Planning Guidance: <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/index.htm>

74 Kennan, “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July, 1947.



their enemy and became infected with the very trunculent universalism that they were originally fighting.

And as with any ideology, liberalism instills in its adherents the absolute commitment to modes and orders that are believed permanent and universal. This ideological framing shapes the preferences of policymakers such that their mental picture of *world* politics becomes indistinguishable from reality. The resulting globalist cognitive bias causes an understanding of alliances as ends in and of themselves in an increasingly globalized and democratic world—one that is incommensurable with the classical understanding of alliances as limited tools of statecraft. The effect is that critiques of our global alliance structure are reflexively dismissed, and in the absence of any conceptually available alternatives, America's maximalist system of global alliances is made to sound reasonable and defensible.

This way of thinking both retcons existing alliance networks (chiefly NATO) into an ideological—as opposed to a geopolitical—framework and applies to nascent alliances, which are viewed first and foremost through the lens of the United States' moralistic—if hegemonic—mission, rather than any concrete set of interests. Thus our existing military support for Taiwan is increasingly framed not by security interests in the Pacific, but around defending democracy; and our newly-established military support for Ukraine becomes less about bleeding a competitor but about saving liberal democracy as such.<sup>75</sup>

It is not that the United States utterly disregards consideration of interests in favor of ideological rhetoric; rather, that considerations of interests are nearly always perceived and presented in

---

75 Needless to say, these positions require the United States to consistently and favorably distort the actual record of its allies across a variety of political and economic metrics.

ideological terms. For example, arguments for the importance of providing economic and military support for Ukraine are framed less in terms of any specific geopolitical interests vis-à-vis Russia or Eastern Europe, but rather in terms of the more abstract interests of upholding U.S. “credibility” (usually with an eye to supposed observers in unrelated regions of the world, such as China).

Here it must be emphasized that the United States has not accrued obvious and evidentiary security benefits from some supposed surfeit of credibility conferred by the willingness to uphold its network of alliances.<sup>76</sup> They did not prevent the 9/11 attacks or Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine, nor did they prove efficacious during the disastrously costly and ineffectual occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, in which far weaker (and largely non-state) actors were able to stymie our political and military objectives.

The sum of these different causes—historic, institutional, ideological, etc.—for the United States' alliances produces a vast gulf between the real interests of the body politic and the behaviors of its elites—particularly with respect to building, maintaining, and deepening alliances around the world.<sup>77</sup> This mismatch between the basic material interests of ordinary citizens and the structural, thymotic, and ideological incentives of elites risks becoming a source of long-term national decline.

Of special salience here are social class and culture. One can imagine how the former might manifest itself within an alliance, e.g., if the lead-

---

76 On the limited uses of credibility, see Daryl G. Press, *Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats* (Cornell University Press, 2005).

77 For the argument that ordinary citizens are actually more realist in their outlook than their leaders, see Daniel W. Drezner, “The realist tradition in American public opinion,” *Perspectives on Politics* 6, no. 1 (March 2008): 51–70. See also Walter Russell Mead, “The Jacksonian Tradition and American Foreign Policy,” *The National Interest* 58 (Winter 1999/2000): 5–29.



ers of the member states are, say, of the same economic or social background, then they may wish to cooperate, and might do so more effectively (this happened many times over within Cesa’s book, as depicted by the machinations and coordination between elites of different religious sects in the 18th century) because doing so helps them in some specific way relative to their social standing and political influence.

Taken together and individually, culture and class are two powerful forces that can (and often do) shape the foreign policy decisions and strategies of technocratic elites—i.e., the people who actually make and maintain alliances. This is true within and across *all* alliance types. These forces have, under certain conditions and contingent on particular domestic political situations, the ability to shift the balance within alliances, meaning that the more dependent partners could also possess agency in shaping the course of the alliance. Taken to the extreme, one could imagine how such a situation would or could be manipulated by a weaker partner, particularly the more dependent one.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to thinking clearly about the real value of our present alliances is the tendency to describe them in realist terms—even when they have no such warrant. As William Ruger pointed out with respect to President Biden’s controversial recent visit to Saudi Arabia, defenders of the diplomatic initiative were quick to make recourse to the language of *realpolitik*, without, however, being able to say in concrete terms which national interests were served by it.<sup>78</sup>

Many—perhaps most—realist scholars tend to conceive of international politics primarily in terms of great power competition. For thinkers from E.H. Carr to Hans Morgenthau to Henry

78 See David Polansky, “The Janus of ‘National Interest’: On the Realist’s Gambit in Foreign Policy,” *The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy* (February 16, 2022): <https://peacediplomacy.org/2022/02/16/the-janus-of-national-interest-on-the-realists-gambit-in-foreign-policy/>

Kissinger to Kenneth Waltz to John Mearsheimer, the history of international political life is essentially the history of disputes among great powers—above all the attempt to acquire or deny territory on the largest possible stage.<sup>79</sup>

This model, however, more or less assumes a single, global theater in which alliance dynamics play out; and the dynamics themselves are shaped by the goals of the great powers, who wield the greatest capabilities and thus exert the greatest influence across the broadest area. But regionalism fractures this sort of generic realist logic; middle powers are ultimately not operating on some notional world stage (nor could they) but rather seek to pursue their concrete interests within the regional geography that defines their real capabilities.

To the extent that the United States (or some other great power) engages therein, it is these regional interests that are most likely to shape the character of the alliance. The realist emphasis on power politics often provides a fig leaf for the role of ideology and globalist bias in contemporary understanding of international politics. It is rather naive to assume that great powers cannot do but act out of rational self-interest. Indeed, by now it should be clear that great powers have little real interest in being party to global alliances which undermine their flexibility in exchange for marginal security gains.<sup>80</sup>

79 Cf. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years’ Crisis, 1919-1939: An Introduction to the Study of International Relations* (Palgrave, 2001); Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Peace and Power* (McGraw-Hill, 1958); Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Touchstone, 1994); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (McGraw-Hill, 1979); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001).

80 For many years, both after and even during the Cold War, the image of the United States as Gulliver tied down by Lilliputians was a commonly-employed trope—e.g., Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver’s Troubles: Or, the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (McGraw-Hill, 1968); John O’Sullivan, “Gulliver’s travails: The U.S. in the post-Cold-War world,” *The New Criterion* (October 2004).



The mere existence of various alliances is presumed to have intrinsic value, and whatever serves to maintain them is *ipso facto* supposed to benefit the United States. The consequence has been a massive, 30-year exercise in question-begging. And in light of our genealogical analysis above, it is worth stating plainly what a truly prudent and considered strategy would look like when it comes to maintaining alliances in an increasingly multi-polar world.

In the end, however, the paradox of America's enduring alliance commitments is perhaps not a paradox at all. A changing international system sends ambiguous signals to the states that comprise it, and they are received differently by those states. The United States' overweening wealth and power have allowed it to ignore the costs of propping up cleft states against their more powerful regional rivals for ideological and other reasons, even as the various individuals and institutions of its military-industrial and national security complexes have prospered.

The presumption of relative inoculation from catastrophic security risk coupled with the globalist outlook and ideological fervor typical of the U.S. Blob's strategic culture (shaped in the Cold War and trapped in its outdated context) means that Washington is vulnerable to self-deception and entanglement in distant, regional conflicts. In the short term, these interventions are justified by arguments—convinced that over the long-term and with enough iteration across various theaters, the logic of economies of scale would prevail and such interventions and permanent alliances will pay for themselves, while securing what the Blob sees as the real prize: *prolonging American primacy and hegemonic prestige*. The reality that these foreign entanglements do very little to protect or advance America's vital national interests, risk globe-wide wars and strategic quagmires that waste American blood and treasure, and col-

lectively debilitate the real sources of American strength and power is thus systematically and conveniently overlooked.

It nonetheless remains the case that the United States cannot indefinitely disregard the real material costs imposed by its excessive alliance commitments, forever prioritizing private interests over the overarching public good of national security. As the economist Herbert Stein famously put it: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop."

## Beyond Alliance Fixation: Lessons for Future U.S. Grand Strategy

The great 19th-century British statesman, Lord Palmerston, famously said in a speech before the House of Commons: "We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."<sup>81</sup>

America's founders and prudent statesmen, chief among them George Washington, certainly understood this sentiment in warning against permanent alliances and never-ending entanglements in distant corners of the old world that were then and remain today, by definition, peripheral to vital interests of our commonwealth and detrimental to its long-term health.<sup>82</sup> Weary of the Jacobin spirit infiltrating America, John Quincy Adams called on America to not go "abroad in search of monsters to destroy" but remain "the champion and vindicator only of her own"—for even if America were to "become the dictatress of the world: she would

---

81 Henry Temple, 3rd Viscount Palmerston, "Treaty Of Adrianople—Charges Against Viscount Palmerston," Transcript of Speech Before House of Commons (March 1, 1948): <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1848/mar/01/treaty-of-adrianople-charges-against>

82 George Washington, "Farewell Address" (1796): [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th\\_century/washing.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp)



be no longer the ruler of her own spirit.”<sup>83</sup> These vanguards of America recognized how a globalist, internationalist, and activist mindset could irreparably damage a republic by transforming it into an empire that routinely disregards the interests of its own citizenry for the aggrandizement of its courtier class.

What were wise aphorisms then are wise still, and those who will accuse this ethos as one of heartless cynicism need to consider the morality of our standing engagements with clients in Central Asia, the Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere. Indeed our present alliance structure can claim even less on moral grounds, given that the humanitarian catastrophes in places such as Yemen and Libya to which we have directly or indirectly contributed can hardly be justified by an appeal to our interests or necessity, but rather owe their occurrence to path dependency and our permanent entanglements in these regions.

Though the structure of world politics that emerged at the end of the Cold War is changing daily, the United States continues to enjoy a preponderance of power and influence across many metrics. Yet, the alliances Washington presently maintains largely disempower America, because its allies have clear, regional purposes, and the United States does not. The dawn of multipolarity demands a paradigm shift in our strategic thinking, a course correction toward habituating a culture of realism that heeds the importance of strategic flexibility and sheds the scales of idealism, passions, and ideology.

Much of the existing discussions of alliances in international politics—whether of a realist, liberal, institutional, or another bent—offer insufficient guidance for evaluating the significance of

alliances, because they fail to grasp the essentially regional nature of alliance mechanisms in today’s world. For in a world increasingly characterized by regional middle powers, alliances almost always disproportionately serve the interests of local and regional stakeholders—both the states themselves and their respective elites.

Ultimately, the real value of the United States’ alliances will not be improved without a recovery of our ability to think geopolitically and evaluate our interests critically. We must learn again to see the spaces in which our specific interests take shape and form. For reasons of circumstance and necessity, many of our allies have proven able to do so. Our longstanding—but not infinite—good fortune along with our favorable geographical position has engendered a certain complacency on our part when it comes to thinking concretely about world politics but America will have a much lower margin for strategic error in a multipolar order.

At the same time, taking up the question of regional alliances in a world of increasingly consequential middle powers should serve as an object lesson for thinking geopolitically. And this is not a one-time operation: as middle powers ascend, they will resist or court the United States and other impactful outside powers, requiring consistent flexibility on the part of Washington, as well as careful attention to harmonizing means and ends in light of a consideration of concrete interests in a given region. Finally, diplomatic and military relationships will need to be undertaken in the absence of the kind of ideological or sentimental attachments that currently prevail in our foreign policy.<sup>84</sup>

Those who cling to ideas of prestige or grandeur will surely protest at this cold-eyed view of U.S. alliances the origins of which could be traced back

---

83 John Quincy Adams, “An Address delivered ... upon the occasion of reading the Declaration of Independence”, 1821. P. 31-32: [https://www.google.com/books/edition/An\\_Address\\_delivered\\_on\\_the\\_occasion\\_of/wZtcAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0](https://www.google.com/books/edition/An_Address_delivered_on_the_occasion_of/wZtcAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=0)

---

84 This [photoshoot](#), for example, while a diplomatic coup for Ukraine, does little to advance American interests in the ongoing Russo-Ukraine conflict.



nearly a century now. To this, one might respond: there is little honor—and certainly little benefit—to be had in allowing ourselves to be subject to manipulation by our auxiliaries. For decades now, they have done as countries should in maintaining and orchestrating their own alliances according to their nations’ best interests. Is it not past time for the United States to do the same? In this reckoning, the prescient words of George Washington should guide us: “The nation which indulges toward another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave. It is a slave to its animosity or to its affection, either of which is sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest.”<sup>85</sup>

---

85 Washington’s Farewell Address (1796)

## About the Authors

**Dr. Arta Moeini** is the Research Director of the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy and an elected member of the Academy of Philosophy and Letters. Dr. Moeini is an international political theorist and a revisionist scholar of Nietzsche and Modernity. He holds a PhD (with distinction) and MA in Government from Georgetown University, an MA in International Relations from Johns Hopkins SAIS, and a BA in Political Science and Near Eastern Studies from UC Berkeley.

**Dr. David Polansky** is a Research Fellow at the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy and political theorist who writes on geopolitics, international orders, nationalism and state-formation, and the history of political thought. Outside of scholarly journals, his work has been featured in the *National Interest*, the *American Interest*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*. He holds an MA in international relations from the University of Chicago and a PhD in political science from the University of Toronto.

**Coleman Hopkins** is a Research Assistant at the Institute for Peace & Diplomacy. Before joining IPD, he worked in various capacities within the Federal government including at the White House. He has written for the *Realist Review* on Russian-American relations, Russia's foreign policy under Putin, and related topics. A graduate of the University of Michigan, he holds a B.A. in political science with a minor in philosophy—specializing in Russian politics and history.

## Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by a grant from the Stand Together Trust. The authors are grateful to IPD Senior Fellow Professor Marco Cesa for his continued guidance, helpful feedback, and characteristic generosity over the course of this project.

## About Us

**The Institute for Peace & Diplomacy (IPD)** is a non-profit and non-partisan North American international affairs think tank operating in the United States and Canada dedicated to promoting dialogue, diplomacy, prudent realism, and military restraint—principles which we believe are the four cornerstones of sustainable peace in an increasingly complex and dynamic international system.

Visit us at [peacediplomacy.org](https://peacediplomacy.org) to learn more.

Cover: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia

© 2022 Institute for Peace & Diplomacy

## Contact Us

For media inquiries and to arrange an interview with one of our experts, contact our communications team.

E: [info@peacediplomacy.org](mailto:info@peacediplomacy.org)

T: (647) 280-4983

W: [peacediplomacy.org](https://peacediplomacy.org)



THE INSTITUTE FOR  
PEACE & DIPLOMACY