

Alliances and American Leadership Address

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Thank you to CSIS for the opportunity to share some thoughts on alliances and American leadership throughout the world. I look forward to the follow-on discussions this afternoon, because I think that it is going to be a great discussion.

My interest in this topic is not simply because of recent campaign rhetoric that has raised questions regarding the relevance and efficacy of our alliance relationships. Nor is it about all the speculation that continues to swirl as our new administration begins to take form.

Like so many others here, I served in our military that was shaped by alliance relationships and objectives for my entire time in uniform. I cut my teeth on very large NATO naval exercises and operations and I continued to operate throughout my career to operate in our alliances in the East and West, and had the privilege of commanding large allied commands.

But those consequential alliances were forged decades ago, and time has moved on. The geopolitical and geo-economic landscapes are changing rapidly – particularly in Europe, the Middle East, and in Asia. The order in those regions that was grounded in our alliances is slipping away. And our decade-plus war in the Middle East has generated an intervention weariness and wariness in much of our population and a move toward isolationism by some.

In a way, it's ironic that America's most globally-connected generations in history appear to want to step away from the hard work and the costs that global influence and responsibilities demand – and that is across the political spectrum. I find this is an uncomfortable, regrettable, and even perilous trend.

Whether in uniform or in civilian policy positions, those of us that have been there, we have seen the strength and mutual benefit that comes from alliance relationships. We have experienced the necessary attention that is needed and, at times, the frustration that is experienced in nurturing those relationships along.

As we ponder the state of our alliances and their future, those of us who have been in the arena and in the policy community bear responsibility for the alliance questioning taking place today.

Most here value our alliances, whether NATO or those with our Asian allies, yet we have not caused an informed national conversation on broader security interests to occur and how alliances enhance those interests.

Within our circles, within our policy circles in the U.S., we have a vibrant, thoughtful conversation going on and that is a good. But in many ways, it is very closed self-talk that can be drowned out or negated by a handful of tweets and posts that provide a different point of view to thousands and even millions.

The public's field of view regarding national security has narrowed. It is about ISIS, the violence in the Middle East and avoiding another 9/11. And that is understandable, the trauma was great and for over a decade that has been America's fixation.

The view of security is also formed by events, not trends; we think about the Ukraine, maybe some saber-rattling up in the Baltics, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and North Korea. Or it is often about people, leaders; it's about Putin or Assad or Kim Jong-un. It's not about the values that bind alliances together.

And we have also been cavalier. We have blurred the distinction of the word ally and what it means. We have allowed it to be applied to others who perhaps are aligned with us, who fortunately fight with us, and they are all seemingly equal in our security lexicon.

We have not made clear that there are allies, with the associated commitments/obligations that come with it. And there are others – valued, to be sure – but without the status of ally.

We have not articulated the common cause based on interests, values, and qualities that benefit us. The coverage and discussion is too often about what allies are not doing rather than what they are doing. And what we do to help allies, as opposed to how our relationships with them enable and facilitate shaping the environment consistent with our interests and to our advantage.

In a wider context, we fail to address the broad dimension of national security and fixate on the military, neglecting economics, important trade relationships and arrangements, and the technological and industrial benefits that can accrue to those that are in this special alliance relationship.

Even the terms we use skew the discussion. We talk of burden sharing, rather than beneficial, obligatory contributions that are fundamental to collective capability, capacity and credibility.

In a pure military sense, we are simple in our math, highlighting how much or how little a host nation is spending - neglecting the costs avoided in force structure by being able to maintain American forces forward. In the case of the Navy, just calculate the capital and personnel costs of a rotational force to replace our forward deployed forces in Japan. My rule of thumb is that 4 or 5 to make 1 in a rotational model. So if you consider that cost as something that needs to be factored in, it changes the entire equation – that cost is staggering.

We prefer to focus on and grade aggregate budget numbers and percentages, and are not exact or critical enough in defining the real contribution to military capability and capacity.

We have not thoughtfully adjusted command and control structures for increased integration in this fast paced world we live in. The operational command and control model is essentially the same as when I was an ensign in the Navy.

Related to that we have been neglectful in emphasizing deeper personnel integration and embedding among allies. It too is largely the same exchange system that I experienced when I was a young officer.

We have not optimized our foreign area officer programs to our alliance interests. How many Chinese foreign area officers are produced compared to foreign area officers focused on Japan, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines and Turkey – could they have made a difference in the case of the latter three countries that are drifting a bit?

While recognizing respective national interests, we have not made our alliance structures the nuclei around which others can operate easily. Such integration is challenging because of the information space in which we live and operate. There are rational concerns in protecting sensitive national information. There are complexities regarding the security of integrated networks. All this becomes more complex as other nations join in, but we must be able to do this to reshape our alliances for a new time.

There are personnel factors, the cost of posting more service men and women and their families in other countries, the cultural adjustments that may be initially awkward in those assignments, but overwhelmingly lead to greater respect, affinity and indeed affection. There are realities in the numbers, where do you get people if you want to have more robust interactions and where are they to be drawn from? I believe this is a good opportunity to bleed some of the excessive people out of over-inflated headquarters - that would be a good place to start.

Now, those are some details but it is in the details that the gardens of alliances are tended and reshaped. We must not forget that alliances are really about the fundamental values and interests like-minded nations hold collectively and the shared obligations and commitments that those particular nations undertake together to ensure those values define our future.

I applaud CSIS, Mike Green and Andrew Shearer for enabling the needed and broader discussion of alliances for the future

But as Andrew mentioned, above all, we must keep in mind that we in the policy world, are not really the audience – it is far broader, more diverse and it is a conversation that must be continuous.

Thank you very much.