

Alliances and American Leadership Project Launch Remarks

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Following the catastrophe of the Second World War, farsighted American statesmen worked with counterparts around the world to build and maintain a global network of regional and bilateral alliances unsurpassed in human history.

Starting with NATO in Europe, rimming the Western Pacific, and encompassing the most powerful Arab states in the Middle East, for 70 years these alliances have supported the liberal international order, made possible an unprecedented period of stability and prosperity, and contributed immeasurably to U.S. security.

Over time, America's treaty alliances have been augmented by a web of informal security partnerships around the world.

None of this was preordained.

Isolationism and the urge to withdraw from conflict and commitments abroad have been a strand in American foreign policy since the earliest days of the Republic, coming to the surface in the 1930s, the early 1950s, and the mid-1970s after the Vietnam War.

And of course at different times over this period it was domestic politics in allied countries rather than America that roiled alliances across Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Despite these periods of contention and the significant costs alliances entail, they have enjoyed bipartisan political support in the United States, and solid public backing, for decades.

Notwithstanding a bitterly contested election campaign in which President-elect Trump openly questioned the value of NATO and the United States' most important alliances in Asia – and sitting President Barack Obama publicly criticized some allies for free riding – a recent survey by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs shows that the American public overwhelmingly support alliances and American leadership in the world.

Overall 90 per cent – including many Trump supporters – consider maintaining existing alliances an effective way of achieving U.S. foreign policy goals; nearly as many support building new alliances with other countries.

Nurturing and renewing this support is vital, because today the United States and its allies face an unprecedented range of threats, including:

- Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and adventurism in the Middle East;
- North Korea's rapidly-developing nuclear and ballistic missile programs;
- China's increasing assertiveness in the Western Pacific;
- Iran's missile development, continuing support for terrorism and spreading influence; and
- the metastasizing threat posed by ISIL and other Islamist terror networks.

Yet the United States and its allies are neither psychologically nor materially prepared for these threats.

There is an element of complacency in our societies about the threats we face and a loss of perspective about the real underpinnings of our freedom of choice and of our prosperity.

Alliances require sustained hard work, investment, and “give and take” on both sides; what former U.S. Secretary of State George Schulz called “tending the alliance garden”.

Today, however, our alliances are not keeping pace owing to inertia, resource constraints (such as the sequester here in the United States), and internal challenges.

In Europe the disintegrative populist forces that unleashed Brexit are present in many other NATO countries.

In Asia the U.S. alliance with Thailand remains in the deep freeze following that country’s most recent military takeover, while President Duterte has declared The Philippines’ “separation” from the United States, and the implications of the political crisis engulfing President Park’s administration in South Korea are unclear.

The future alignment of Turkey – long a critical partner at the crossroads between Europe, the Middle East and Asia – is unclear, while Israel and traditional Arab allies in the Middle East are alienated by the U.S. nuclear deal with Iran.

America’s credibility as a security guarantor has been damaged by the failure to enforce President Obama’s Syria red line and President-elect Trump’s threat not to protect allies in Europe and Asia unless they pay more for defense.

Everywhere there is a sense that the West is in retreat and that the liberal international order is fraying.

This is the project’s jumping off point: to go back to first principles and examine the role and relevance of alliances that date back to the early days of the Cold War, whether their costs still offset the benefits, and how they can adapt to meet the very different challenges we face today.

The key to alliances is that the sum is more than the parts.

Alliances enhance security by combining allies’ military power and increasing cooperation – and hence deterrence.

They also play an important role in supporting the international order and restraining allies – in both directions. Alliances build interoperability, relationships, and mutual trust over time that ad hoc coalitions cannot replicate.

The incoming Trump administration's senior foreign policy team and policy direction are a work in progress, but allies should welcome some of the early signs.

The President-elect has spoken with many allied leaders. His administration is likely to work with Congress to restore U.S. defense spending, build a larger navy and proceed with an overdue update of the nuclear arsenal – all important steps that will increase deterrence and should reassure allies.

Yet, for the first time in decades, America's alliance commitments and the future of the alliance system are at issue.

For decades the United States was so dominant globally that allies - and sometimes even American policymakers – tended to see the alliance system as a form of “free” international public good; to an extent it was.

Today things are different. The United States is still the world's dominant military power, but rivals such as China are closing the economic gap and pose profound regional military challenges.

In this environment the United States will be instinctively tempted to flirt with unilateralism or deals of convenience with regional great powers and a more transactional approach to alliances.

But for all the costs and challenges posed by alliances, America needs to think hard about how attractive a world without allies would be.

After all, there is nothing Russia, China and Iran would like to see more than the dismantling of U.S. alliances in Europe, Asia and the Middle East. That reality alone should give pause for thought.

Sir Percy Spender, former Australian foreign minister and, along with John Foster Dulles, architect of the ANZUS Treaty, observed that “it is difficult, and at times exceedingly so, to understand precisely what United States thinking is”. No doubt the many diplomatic representatives from allied countries here today will agree this is certainly one of those times!

The purpose of the project is to provide answers, based around three research themes:

1. *Alliance institutions and leadership*: What role do alliances play today in deterring threats, supporting the international order, and restraining allies? Is there still a viable concept of “the West”, and – if so – what part do alliances play in upholding it? How do alliances advance U.S. interests today? Do alliance institutions need to be overhauled? How can informal security partnerships contribute? What is the role of U.S. leadership, at home and abroad, in building support for alliances?
2. *Alliances in operation*: How should we think about “burdensharing” today? Which allies are pulling their weight, and in which areas do allies need to lift their game? How can allies build military interoperability and address capability gaps? How can they boost extended

deterrence in a world where nuclear weapons are making a comeback? What approaches should alliances take to combating coercion, hybrid threats, and cyber attacks, exchanging intelligence, and increasing defense-industrial collaboration? What major alliance management challenges are we likely to confront, and how can we overcome them?

3. *Understanding and engaging public opinion*: Notwithstanding the positive polling I cited earlier, we cannot take continuing public support for alliances for granted, in the United States or allied countries. In a recent interview with *The Atlantic* Henry Kissinger pointed to a gap in foreign policy perceptions between the American public and elites, and polls in a number of countries – including Australia – suggest a degree of anxiety about the future direction of U.S. policies and of alliances. We have to do a better job of understanding public opinion and of making the case for alliances – and not just here in Washington, DC. In short it is time we rediscover what former Secretary of State Dean Acheson used to call “our duty to explain” – which of course brings us full circle, back to the crucial importance of leadership.

This is the first in a program of public events, policy roundtables, and publications that will examine these important questions to stimulate discussion and seek to provide answers to guide American and allied policymakers as they navigate the challenging international environment that confronts us.