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The U.S. Alliance Network Today:

A PERSISTENT OUTLIER

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Since World War II, the defining feature of the U.S. alliance system, be it in Europe or Asia or during wartime or peacetime, has been asymmetry. Specifically, U.S. alliances are marked by an asymmetry of power, with the United States long being the "patron" state and the other states being the "protégés." Those asymmetric relationships have, in turn, been backed by promises of mutual defense, even if the actual defense is, by and large, directed in just one direction.

A core feature of this asymmetric relationship is a reliance on U.S. allies for protection and tensions created by that reliance. For much of the post-war period, U.S. allies were simply not powerful enough to protect themselves and, consequently, the United States took on the responsibility of providing security to most of its allies. This has largely been done through the presence of forward deployment of troops, but also with the implied threat that the U.S. would use its nuclear arsenal to defend an ally from existential risk. While that reliance was necessary, it also produced tension, mostly in the form of U.S. Presidents complaining about "free-riding allies."

Notably, that tension has not run in one direction. It has also contributed from time to time to dissatisfaction by U.S. allies. From Charles De Gaulle removing France from the military structure of NATO (though not revoking France's signature to the treaty) to several states exiting the Rio Pact in the years after the Cold War, there have been times where states, grating at the perception that the alliance network enables U.S. "neo-imperialism," have exited the alliances. This has not happened at scale, however. By and large, the U.S. alliance system has been quite robust, largely because, from the perspective of these smaller states, the United States is the ultimate "off shore balancer": too far away to pose a geographic threat, but militarily advanced and large enough to offer support when needed (even if that support does not always come in a timely fashion—as in World Wars I and II).

This memo begins by situating the U.S. alliance system in historical perspective, helping to illustrate how it is unusual in structure and also persistence. It will then discuss why the alliance system is persistent by laying out, first and foremost, the benefits of the alliance system to the United States, and then the benefits of the alliance system for the U.S. allies themselves.

The U.S. Alliance System in a Comparative Perspective

One should consider both asymmetry and mutual defense provisions when comparing the U.S. alliance system historically and today. With respect to asymmetry, the only comparably asymmetric alliance system for most of history was that maintained by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, such as Soviet relations with the Warsaw Pact countries. But that system was more analogous to a direct imperial system, such as the one the United Kingdom maintained with other members of its empire for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The U.S. system is unique in scope and duration, as well as because the United States does not control the domestic policies of the network members, either through direct control or by holding an oversight and veto role.[1]

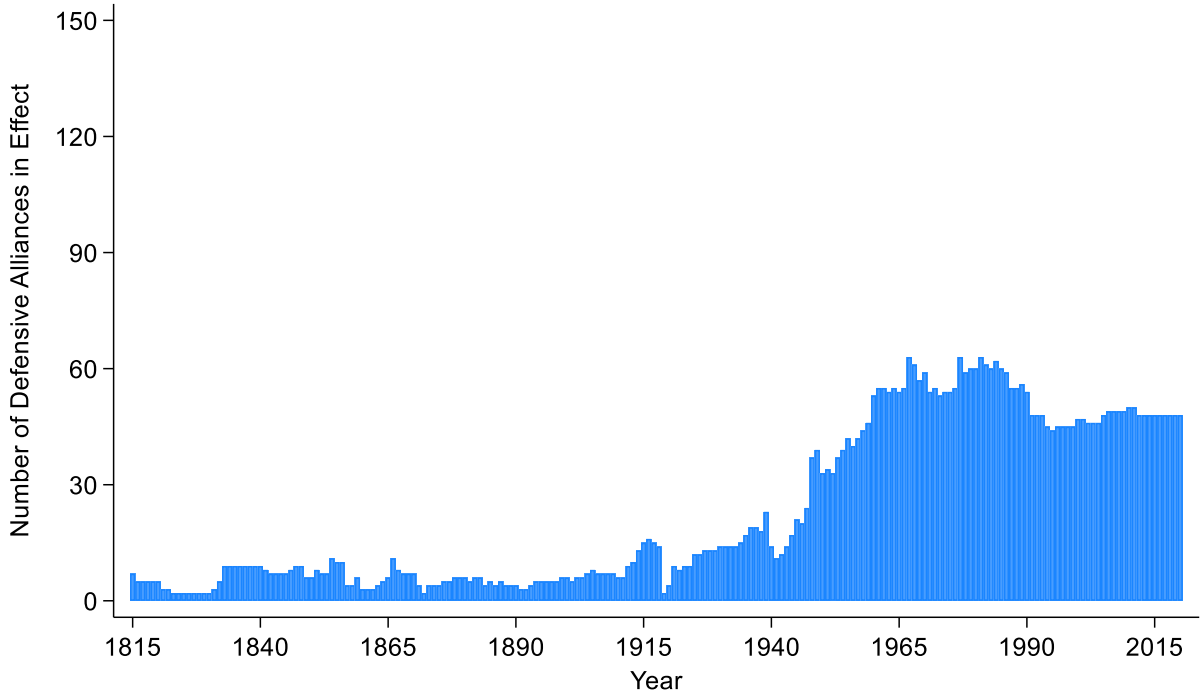
With respect to mutual defense promises, the epitome of this feature is Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty. The article treats an attack on one member of the alliance in Europe or North America as an attack on all members. Similar provisions are found in the 1947 Rio Pact (which served as the template for Article 5), the 1951/60 Treaty between the United States and Japan, the 1951 Treaty between the United States and the Philippines, the 1953 Treaty between the United States and South Korea, and the ANZUS treaty signed in 1951.

Such articles are not ironclad, as their language does allow for interpretation in how the individual member states implement their assistance. Nevertheless, the language is stronger than simple consultative clauses, which simply call on signatories to meet with or communicate with one another in case of a security crisis. This distinction between a mutual defense clause and a consultative clause is important, as it points to a critical difference between U.S. alliances and the recent trend of alliance treaties, namely the consultative-only pact has become the most common form of alliance commitment.

This can be seen by considering Figures 1 and 2 below. These figures are created using the "Alliance Treaty Obligation and Provision" (ATOP) database that was founded and is currently managed by Ashley Leeds at Rice University.[2] This project began in 2001 with version 1.0. Version 5.0 of the dataset, the latest version, codes characteristics of all known alliance treaties from 1815 to 2018. The data come in a spreadsheet format, where each alliance in the dataset is assigned an ATOPID number. For instance, the 2001 Sino-Russia Treaty is ATOPID 4980, while the North Atlantic Treaty is ATOPID 3180. The spreadsheet then has a series of variables that record different characteristics of each treaty in the dataset. These include the type of primary military cooperation provisions in the treaty (e.g., defensive provision), conditions on those provisions (e.g., that the defensive obligation only applies to

[1] Though it should be acknowledged that asymmetric alliance relationships lie on the same spectrum imperial as imperial relations.
[2] Database accessible at http://www.atopdata.org/.

an attack by a particular state), the date of the treaty signing, the members of the treaty, and other characteristics (e.g., if the treaty calls for the creation of a supranational body).



Note: Figure Produced using Stata 18 and ATOP version 5.1. Trend is based on agreements in the Alliance level dataset of ATOP in which the *defense* variable is coded with a 1.

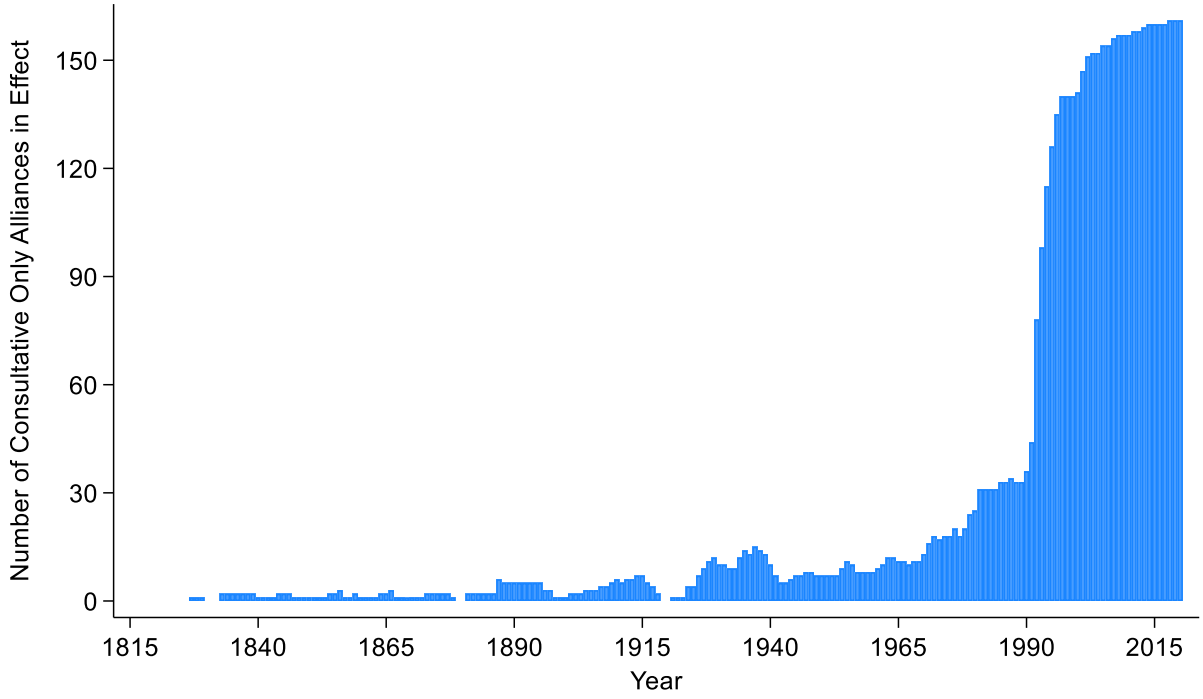
FIGURE 1: Trends in Defense Pacts (i.e. treaty contains mutual defense provision. E.g. 1949 North Atlantic Treaty)

Because these data are collected over such a long period, they are particularly useful for identifying trends in how states form alliances. These trends are shown in the below figures. Figure 1 shows the trend in pacts with defense obligations (e.g., the North Atlantic Treaty). The figure shows that the number of such pacts grew over time, reaching a peak level in the 1970s and 1980s. Since the end of the Cold War, the number of such agreements has declined, holding steady at just under 60 globally.

The trends shown in Figure 1 can then be compared to the trends shown in Figure 2, which shows pacts with consultative obligations but no defensive obligations (e.g., the 2001 Sino-Russia treaty). Figure 2 shows that in contrast to the decline in the number of defense pacts after the Cold War, the number of consultative pacts has surged, reaching nearly 150 globally.[3] This clearly demonstrates that

[3] A similar pattern is show if the analysis focuses in which the *consult* variable is coded with a 1, the *nonagg* variable is coded with a 1, and the *defense* variable is coded with a 0.

creating new pacts with explicit mutual defense provisions went largely "out of fashion" after the Cold War, with states instead opting for consultative pacts. Given the flexibility offered by a consultative provision, namely that states could ultimately decide through their consultations that they do wish to directly assist one another in a conflict, the surge in popularity of these treaty types is understandable.



Note: Figure Produced using Stata 18 and ATOP version 5.1. Trend is based on agreements in the Alliance level dataset of ATOP in which the *consul* variable is coded with a 1 and the *defense* variable is coded with a 0.

FIGURE 2: Trend in Consultative Pacts (i.e. treaty contains consultative provision, but no mutual defense provision. E.g. 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship)

This suggests an interesting counterfactual possibility: if the U.S. were to form its alliance commitments today, would they still contain mutual defense clauses? Stated differently, if NATO were formed today, would it have Article 4, the treaty's consultative clause, but not Article 5?

The Existence and Persistence of U.S. Alliance System: The U.S. Perspective

To understand the formation and persistence of the U.S. alliance network, one must start with the benefits it generates to the United States itself. It can be difficult to place an exact quantifiable figure on the precise extent to which U.S. alliances produce benefits. This is largely due to "selection bias,"

namely that we only ever know definitively that deterrence actions failed, not whether they fully explain the lack of an attack. This, in turn, makes it difficult to know the exact contribution of alliances to, say, the deterrence of threats.

Nevertheless, it is possible to see how the alliance system enables the United States to achieve two core interests: (1) preventing a revisionist state from closing off vital markets or disrupting global shipping, and (2) preventing states outside its home region (the Western Hemisphere) from gaining influence in the region in a manner that threatens U.S. territory or population. In other words, rather than sensing an obligation to support a "rules-based order" or to stop aggression in the world more generally, the United States has maintained an alliance network because it underpins its global economic interests and regionally defined security interests.

The alliance network enables these benefits through two attributes: access and asymmetry. Access refers to the U.S. being able to more easily station and deploy its military forces to stop states that could undermine the first interest. Moreover, by serving to deter and cordon off threats in other regions, the alliance system creates a buffer between those threats and the Western Hemisphere.

Asymmetry, as discussed above, refers to the power differential between the U.S. and its allies: the U.S. is not an equal partner, but the dominant player in its alliances. This grants the U.S. leverage over its allies, which enables it to make demands in both the security and non-security realm. While such demands led to what scholars would call "autonomy benefits," they essentially mean that asymmetric alliances, including those of the United States, can operate as a type of protection racket: the U.S. was in a position to demand certain benefits be "paid," such as holding U.S. dollars as a reserve currency, in exchange for protection.

The Existence and Persistence of U.S. Alliance System: The Allies' Perspective

Many are concerned that the administration of current U.S. President Donald Trump will either fully abandon U.S. allies or permanently undermine the U.S. alliance system. A host of actions by this administration—including belligerent rhetoric, aggressive threats (particularly of an economic nature), explicit prioritization of the security of the Western Hemisphere, and the pursuit of rapprochement with Russia—have raised concerns that the alliance network that has persisted since the end of World War II is over.

But there is another way to view the actions of the current U.S. administration: they are a difference of degree, not of kind. The U.S. alliance network has long exhibited traits of a protection racket, whereby U.S. allies, reliant on U.S. security, are coerced into payments. Those actions have, in turn, long generated tensions. Those tensions have, from time to time, bubbled over into intra-alliance crises. These include the above-mentioned decision by Charles de Gaulle to remove France from the military

infrastructure of NATO (though France remained a signatory to the North Atlantic Treaty). They have also become evident in public discontent in Japan over U.S. bases, many U.S. allies being openly critical of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, or the present crisis over U.S. allies refusing to assist the U.S. in its war against Iran.

But during each point of tension, the alliance held (and will do so now). And this is because the U.S. alliance system remains the best option for these states to guarantee their security. In a phrase that Robert Kelly and Paul Poast used in a 2022 article on the state of the U.S. alliance system following the first Trump administration, "the allies are alright." As we argued in that article, despite whatever imperfections might arise in the U.S.-ally relationship, "States around the world join and value alliances with the United States for two reasons: they face military threats on their borders, and they want access to U.S. markets." While it is the case that U.S. allies have from time to time made themselves vulnerable by U.S. bases being targets of attack, as was occurred to many Gulf states during the war with Iran, one must consider the counterfactual: these states were targeted by the state they already saw as a threat and may have been more vulnerable absent U.S. security presence. As the plight of Belgium in the two World Wars well illustrates, there are risks to going alone or attempting to remain neutral.

A diplomatic tone and a commitment to certain ideals of behavior may be preferable, but not essential. The United States is a core ally for many nations because, as Kelly and Poast wrote, it is "economically and militarily strong enough to act as an importer of last resort for smaller economies and to project power to defend weaker countries." In other words, the U.S. is an ally, meaning a security provider, not a necessarily a friend.