

America's Alliance Structure And The New Isolationism By

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I welcome opportunities like this to take a step back from the welter of issues and details that demand attention and scan the overall strategic and international landscape that marks out the paths and policies open to us.

That is why I've chosen not to address the Persian Gulf issue, Panama, or any other of the many issues that are front-page stories every day. What I want to do is to move behind or beneath the issues and deal with some of the ideas that shape the way we think about defense and national security.

There are a great many ideas in the air these days that claim profound implications for our foreign policy and our defense posture. Many have as their common theme the United States' declining power and, as a consequence, its dwindling ability to affect world events. We are told that "The American Century" has run its course; we are warned about "imperial overstretch." Even self-professed realists are counseling us to reconsider our international obligations and prepare for a period of retrenchment.

These notions are advanced in many cases as established fact: America has been diagnosed, our condition is critical, and the only thing to do, according to this argument, is to acclimate ourselves to the realities of decline.

Well, I think it is time we get a second opinion. In my view, the demise of America is much exaggerated. Claims that we are in decline are not in fact diagnoses at all, but symptoms--symptoms of very serious change in the way we approach international affairs and our national security.

I sense in some quarters a growing inclination toward isolationism--a kind of withdrawal syndrome from our international obligation and interests.

Now, I suspect the people warning us about the need to retrench think of themselves as political realists, as advocates of fiscal responsibility--as anything but adherents of such a thoroughly discredited doctrine as isolationism.

But I am convinced that isolationism is, in fact, the correct way to describe them. We must realize that isolationism is as much an attitude as a doctrine. The desire to turn inward, to escape from our international responsibilities, can lead to an isolationism in practice as crippling as any formal doctrine renouncing our international obligations.

One way this new impulse toward isolationism emerges today is in an increasing indiscriminate attack on our alliance structure. It is now quite commonly assumed that the United

States carries far more than its "fair share" of the burdens of alliance defense and that, in return, America gets little in the way of support or even appreciation from its allies.

These assumptions have taken on new force as the United States enters a period of fiscal constraint. Calls for cutting back our contributions to our alliances--or punishing allies who fail to contribute more--are getting a hearing.

These proposals are sometimes prescribed as a sort of shock treatment that will result in our allies deciding to shoulder more responsibility for alliance security. But in any case, the isolationist impulse begins to show itself. There is a certain sentiment that whether the allies pick up the slack or not, we have had enough. We are all ready to go our own way.

Well, I don't think we should risk our security interests in what is, in effect, little more than a high-stakes game of "chicken." We cannot trust America's national security to chance.

More than at any earlier point in the post-war period, we need to think clearly about our alliances and about America's relations with its alliance partners. This is why I want to share my views on the importance of our alliance structure; on the scope of our allies' current contributions to collective security; and on the kinds of contributions we should expect our allies to make in the years ahead.

I want to begin by calling attention to a commonly held assumption that is such fertile ground for the isolationist impulse--the assumption that our contribution to collective security is simply paying for someone else's defense. That is not at all correct. Those who adopt this attitude turn their backs on the common bonds between democracies and--in the case of Europe--the centuries-old cultural heritage that links us to our allies.

They also fail to recognize the fact that the origins of our alliances are strategic--not philanthropic. We do not maintain alliances as a favor to our allies--we do so because it is in our interest.

Collective security and the strategy of forward defense have been central to our national security for more than four decades. They are sound strategies for a country such as ours--even when we focus solely on the economics of collective security, as many critics of our alliances structure are now doing.

The reasons have to do with the geopolitical circumstances in which the United States finds itself. The United States is an island nation, not fully self-sufficient in resources--with the consequent need to develop a community of interest among nations. Trade relations and commerce--giving us access to the raw materials we need and outlets for the products we manufacture--are our lifeblood. We cannot expect to protect those interests and prosper if we isolate ourselves from the rest of the world.

The central fact of international economic life is the growing global interdependence of commerce, trade, and markets. The implications for our national security should be clear. We cannot hope to expand our economic horizons at the very moment we scale back our international security commitments. We must recognize that the era of isolationism is long past.

As President Ronald Reagan said in his report on national security strategy, the 1980s are a transition period in international security affairs. To cite just one development, the emergence of new economic powers in Western Europe and East Asia will have an increasing impact on global political and strategic relations. As in any transition period, we need to take these new factors into account as we address our national security concerns.

My point to those now engaged in the burdensharing debate is that we must be clear about goals. Burdensharing-- the allocation of roles, risks, and responsibilities within our alliances--is a legitimate issue. But our aim should be to work within our alliances to encourage our partners to do more--rather than simply indicting our allies so we can justify doing less.

Determining an equitable allocation of roles, risks, and responsibilities among 16 sovereign NATO partners is not an easy task. The Defense Department's Annual Assessment of Alliance Contributions--a report that runs to 134 pages--has been sent to the Congress.

It subjects alliance "inputs" and "outputs" to a number of different measurements and notes a number of contributions that do not fall into the category of defense expenditures, but nonetheless affect the burdensharing equation. It also acknowledges other less easily measured contributions to the common defense, such as tasks associated with the development or storage of nuclear weapons, the impact of exposure on the front line of the alliance, and involvement in out-of-area activities.

All these factors and more weigh in the burdensharing balance. Our conclusion is two-fold: first, our allies continue to make a substantial contribution to the common defense--considerably more, in fact, than they are often given credit for; second, that even taking their contributions into account, many of our allies can and should do more--particularly those alliance members who, by almost any measure, fall far short of making a contribution commensurate with their economic strength.

The United States, as has been the case since the creation of NATO, spends a much larger portion of its national resources on defense than almost all of its allies. While our report provides a more precise perspective on the full scope of our allies' contribution to the common defense, it does not make the disparity between the contributions of the United States and its allies disappear. Room remains for improvement.

We need also to understand that what we spend on defense must always serve a strategic purpose. There is no fixed percentage of gross national product that we must spend on defense. What is necessary is a willingness on the part of every alliance member to fund the defenses that meet the force goals and alliance missions it has agreed to undertake.

And those contributions to alliance security are not measured simply in dollars and cents. The willingness to provide base rights, to maintain a conscript army (as all but four of our 15 NATO allies do), to stand in solidarity with the alliance in spite of political risk--all contribute to overall alliance security in ways that cannot always be easily measured.

The true test of alliance strength is the willingness of each member nation to make an honest assessment of its true capacity to contribute--whether that means spending more on defense or accepting a greater share of the risks that cannot be separated from the many benefits of alliance.

Clearly, the United States will be hard-pressed to persuade its allies to do more to bolster their defenses if we ourselves succumb to the temptation to do less. We must keep our perspective: defense spending in 1989 will consume 5.7 percent of our annual gross national product--only one-half of one percent more than at the beginning of our defense buildup under President Reagan.

Looking back over the last half century of defense spending is even more instructive. The United States has spent less than 5 percent of its gross national product on defense only seven times in 50 years. During that time, our gross national product has grown from \$100 billion in 1940 to more than \$4 trillion today--a 40-fold increase. Clearly, spending 5.7 percent of our gross

national product on defense will not cripple our national economy. There is, after all, another 94 percent that is not spend on national defense.

Surely none of those who argue that the United States must narrow its security commitments will be so bold as to claim that a one percent difference in the proportion of our national wealth we devote to defense will spell the difference between American ascendancy and decline. But that same one percent that has little impact on our national economy can make a major difference in our defense capability.

History demonstrates that the price of inadequate attention to national security is unacceptably high. The same coalition strategy that has secured our interest for four decades remains central to our national security today--and will remain so in the years ahead, in spite of the inevitable changes in international circumstances. Now is no time to indulge a destructive desire to turn away from our international obligations and interests and seek refuge from our global responsibilities in some sort of isolationist haven.

Neither America nor its alliances is in decline. It is fashionable but false to make that claim. Maintaining defenses adequate to ensure our collective security is well within our economic means--and our allies' as well. Whether we do so or not is a matter of political will.