

Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century

Michael Wesley (ed.)
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Comparative analyses of the world's two alliance 'systems'—the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and the 'hub and spoke' model of Asian alliances—quickly highlight the obvious differences between them, and usually offer arguments as to why these discrepancies exist.¹ *Global Allies*, a recent volume edited by Michael Wesley, shines light on two similarities often overlooked in the post-Cold War period.

These commonalities may not persist for much longer, but this analysis of them offers valuable insights into how alliances might be managed in the *post-post-Cold War* era. Chapters in this volume remind us that not just since 9/11, but since the early 1990s, America's allies in both NATO and Asia have willingly ventured further afield, to the Middle East, under alliance auspices. These allies have done so even though a strict reading of relevant treaty texts, which place geographical limits on the alliances, contain no obligation to contribute to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In many ways, this volume explains how US allies sought to manage their alliances after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and how these actions have affected the alliance outlook today.

In deciding to fight alongside the United States in Afghanistan, Iraq, or both, the hope of reciprocal loyalty—either officially acknowledged, or more often implicit—was a key motivator for many US allies. The volume's authors show that some allies, such as Japan (p. 21) and South Korea (p. 46), carefully limited their involvement to non-combat contributions, while others such as Denmark (p. 63) readily put more on the line to demonstrate their credentials as the most reliable of allies. All allies felt some obligation to assist, even in purely token ways, if only to avoid the taint of appearing unfaithful in Washington DC.

¹ See, among others, Victor Cha, *Powerplay: The Origins of the American Alliance System in Asia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016); John Duffield, 'Why is There No APTO? Why is There No OSCAP?: Asia-Pacific Security Institutions in Comparative Perspective', *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2001), pp. 69-95; and Christopher Hemmer and Peter Katzenstein, 'Why is There No NATO in Asia? Collective Identity, Regionalism, and the Origins of Multilateralism', *International Organization*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2002), pp. 575-607.

What is less clear, however, is whether these military contributions had any significant impact on alliance politics. In the Denmark chapter, Kristensen and Larsen convincingly argue that Denmark truly did “punch above its weight”, as it incurred “the highest number of fatalities relative to the size of its population of all those contributing troops to the International Security Assistance Force” in Afghanistan.² But to what end? The authors cite instances where Denmark was used by US officials to illustrate the gold standard of allied commitment, but it remains unclear as to what exact reward Denmark received, or what disincentive it dodged, in exchange for this loyalty. Here, the argument gets a little vague: the authors claim that Denmark received “increased access to Washington”.³ In the Poland chapter, Witold Rodkiewicz argues that Warsaw’s involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts created “political and moral ‘IOU-notes’ that could be ‘cashed in’ when Poland is faced with an actual military threat”.⁴ These examples, along with others in the volume, raise an important theoretical question about the notion of reciprocal loyalty within alliance politics. If alliances do truly work in this way, then allied “investments” in Iraq and Afghanistan could yield handsome future dividends. If this theory is wrong, then history could harshly judge those who managed these alliances while operating under incorrect assumptions.

The second common factor is the challenge currently faced by both NATO and Asian allies: how can they divert American attention away from the Middle East, and compete for it in their respective regions? Both on the European continent, and across Asia, allies are striving to secure the particular kind of American commitment they desire.

The volume shows that neither in Europe, nor Asia, have American allies been completely satisfied with recent US policies. Though each chapter of the edited volume basically affirms the underlying strength of the relevant alliance, some are more candid in acknowledging current difficulties in achieving cooperative action toward common goals. In his chapter on Thailand, Kitti Prasirtsuk acknowledges this tension by writing that although both allies desire regional stability, “it may be harder to mutually agree on the appropriate kind of cooperation ... that would lead to regional stability”.⁵ Issues of alliance coordination—in which allies agree on the ends, but disagree on the means—are likely to prove problematic for those allies reluctant or unwilling to follow America’s leadership preferences.

² Kristian Søb Kristensen and Kristian Knus Larsen, ‘Denmark’s Fight Against Irrelevance, or the Alliance Politics of ‘Punching Above Your Weight’’, in Michael Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies: Comparing US Alliances in the 21st Century* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2017), p.65.

³ Kristensen and Larsen, ‘Denmark’s Fight Against Irrelevance’, p. 72.

⁴ Witold Rodkiewicz, ‘Poland as an Ally’, in Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies*, p. 137.

⁵ Kitti Prasirtsuk, ‘An Ally at the Crossroads: Thailand in the US Alliance System’, in Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies*, p. 131.

Commendably, this volume neither downplays nor glosses over such challenges. Alliances are about the potential for, and realisation of, cooperation in the pursuit of shared interests. This volume makes clear that many, though not all, of the present difficulties faced by American alliances stem from the gradual evolution of interests, away from the *status quos* that existed at the time of alliance formation. As Wesley argues, these alliances “are now being found wanting as the means to greater security in more challenging security environments in both Europe and Asia”, whereas once upon a time they were exquisitely fit-for-purpose.⁶ If these alliances are to evolve and thrive, then the challenge for policymakers in Europe, Asia and Washington DC will be to identify the areas where common goals persist, and to devise new methods of cooperation. This is unlikely to occur quickly: as Taylor and Tow note in their chapter on Australia, uncertainty as to the trajectory of the US-China relationship will encourage many allies to hedge until a clearer picture emerges.⁷ Overall, the volume’s chapters seem to suggest that unless a crisis intervenes, uncertainty as to the reliability of each alliance will persist for the foreseeable future. This may be the ‘new normal’ of alliance politics.

Finally, one incidental but important contribution of this book is to serve as something of an alliance politics ‘time capsule’. Though the volume was published in early 2017, it contains few references to the unexpected electoral victory of President Donald J. Trump. This event shocked almost all observers, and cast doubt on US alliances, but the book shows that doubts and concerns about America’s alliance reliability existed before November 2016. Rather than an aberration to be conveniently resolved in four (or eight) years, the book suggests that worries about the future of US alliances are not recent phenomena, and have their source in more than simple US domestic politics.

The history of an alliance, or an alliance system, will rarely offer template solutions for future alliance problems, but this edited volume is useful for understanding how past decisions and beliefs have determined decision-making at the highest levels. It will be of interest to both academic and policy-making audiences, and is available free online at the ANU Press website.

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⁶ Michael Wesley, ‘Global Allies in a Changing World’, in Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies*, p. 13.

⁷ Brendan Taylor and William Tow, ‘Crusaders and Pragmatists: Australia Debates the American Alliance’, in Wesley (ed.), *Global Allies*, pp. 77-89.