Military Alliances in the 21st Century: Still Relevant after all These Years?

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Abstract: While military alliances have always been important to the United States, some experts wonder about their future. In today’s uncertain security environment, they question whether these alliances may have outlived their usefulness. The author argues that U.S. national security leaders face some difficult choices as they formulate strategy and determine the number and types of collective security arrangements the nation will require to secure its national interests in the future.

The contemporary international security environment presents a spectrum of daunting challenges for both the strategist and senior national security decision-makers. Recent events—from North Korea's provocative threats to the territorial disputes in the South and East China Seas, from the Arab awakening to the civil war in Syria to Iran's apparent trajectory to obtain nuclear weapons, from terrorism to cyber-attacks—raise questions regarding how the United States can best secure its national interests. Additionally, the economic crisis has resulted in a reduction of resources for defense, requiring greater emphasis on achieving security on a collective and cooperative basis. A species of collective action, the formal military alliance, served the nation well during the Cold War. However, assessing its continued utility in an uncertain security environment requires closer examination on three fundamental questions: Why do states join military alliances? What are the benefits, challenges, and costs associated with military alliances? And what are the collective security alternatives to military alliances?

U.S. joint doctrine defines an alliance as a “relationship that results from a formal agreement between two or more nations for broad, long-term objectives that further the common interests of the members.”1 Formal U.S. collective defense


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arrangements include the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); an agreement with Australia and New Zealand (i.e., the ANZUS treaty); the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO); and bilateral treaties with the Philippines, Japan, and South Korea. Additionally, the United States has informal alliances that do not take the shape of a treaty or accord but nevertheless imply a security guarantee, e.g., the relationship between the United States and Taiwan, Saudi Arabia and Israel. In total, the United States maintains formal defense commitments to nearly 50 states around the world.

An alliance can feature prominently in a nation’s grand strategy. For example, Robert Art argues that “America’s unipolar moment is over” as its current fiscal condition and other challenges will weaken and eventually overturn its position as the world’s only superpower within the international system. Consequently, he advocates “some adjustment in the nation’s international ambitions” and offers a grand strategy of selective engagement for the United States that focuses on the three regions of the world most important to secure its national interests—East Asia, the Middle East and Europe. In order to favorably “shape events” in these key regions, Art recommends an in-theater military presence and emphasizes the criticality of retaining the two central alliances with Japan and NATO “not only because they enable a forward defense posture, but also because they are tools of political management and enhance cooperative solutions to regional security issues.”

Art’s emphasis on these regions and alliances is consistent with the recently-published Defense Strategy Review Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense that describes a rebalance to the Asia-Pacific, while “hedging” against crises in the Middle East and stressing the importance of NATO and other allies and partners.

Why Do States Enter into Military Alliances?

In his book, The Origins of Alliances, Stephen Walt offers some insights regarding alliances as a state’s response to threats. Traditional international relations balance of power theory contends that states form alliances in an attempt to prevent stronger powers from dominating them. According to Walt, states may try to offset an unfavorable balance of power through either balancing by means of an alliance in order to counter a threat before it becomes too powerful, or by bandwagoning, for example, aligning with the source of danger or strength. In other words, a state forms an alliance either by allying against, or with, the principal external threat. However, this calculus becomes complicated by the fact that, according to the

National Intelligence Council’s *Global Trends 2030* report, “by 2030, no country—whether the U.S., China, or any other large country—will be a hegemonic power.”\(^6\) This suggests a “multi-polar” world where the diffusion of power will most likely result in a combination of balancing and bandwagoning as states take necessary steps to ensure their security and secure their national interests.

Bruno Tertrais offers another perspective and argues that two main factors drive the formation of alliances. The first is “idealism,” describing a situation in which states commit themselves to fight alongside others because of shared values and ideas such as freedom, democracy, etc.\(^7\) This was most prevalent during the Cold War when two distinct ideological models were in competition and manifest themselves in two separate alliances: NATO and the Warsaw Pact. However, Karsten Jung argues that, since the end of the Cold War where the “fundamental antagonism between East and West wound down, national interests of alliance members were less and less determined by a *priori* ideological considerations, but instead shaped and shaken on a case-by-case basis depending on the distinct characteristics of each situation.”\(^8\)

Tertrais’ second factor is “realism,” which depends on each state’s cost-benefit analysis. This perspective recognizes that alliances can reduce costs and multiply benefits through the division of responsibilities, the sharing of common assets, or simply the protection provided by having a stronger country as an ally.\(^9\) This essay focuses on Tertrais’ second factor: what are the benefits, costs, and challenges associated with military alliances?

### Benefits of Joining a Formal Military Alliance

A perceived benefit of joining a formal military alliance is the belief that because such a form of collective defense enhances security by providing a formal commitment of military and other elements of national power between the signatories, the alliance deters actions by potential enemies. There is also a symbolic dimension to formal alliances, one that was succinctly captured by former Secretary of State Madeline Albright when she stated that “NATO is the expression of the indispensable transatlantic link.”\(^10\) Alliance advocates believe that these formal agreements promote peace and avoid wars and offer the example of NATO, which they contend was instrumental in deterring the Soviet Union and “winning” the Cold War. Although critics argue that NATO is today little more than an obsolete

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relic of a past era and an “alliance in search of a mission” after the demise of the Soviet Union, the fact remains that traditional state-versus-state challenges still exist and deterrence remains an important part of any national security “toolbox.” Thus formal military alliances can help to deter war.

For instance, it can be argued that the U.S. military alliance with South Korea has helped keep the peace on the Korean peninsula for 60 years, despite such North Korean provocations as nuclear and ballistic missile tests, missile launches, and the dangerous events of 2010—the sinking of the Cheonan and artillery strikes on the island of Yeonpyeong. Currently, the United States has some 28,500 troops based in South Korea, which according to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, provides “assurance to our allies” in the region. For its part, the 650,000-strong Republic of Korea (ROK) armed forces are a modern, capable military force and the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Commander General James D. Thurman recently testified that “Our combined, joint team provides the trained, ready, and disciplined forces that are prepared to fight and win on the Korean Peninsula, providing a strong deterrent to North Korean aggression.”

Although certainly not the only factor, there is little doubt that the US-ROK mutual defense treaty continues to loom large in North Korea’s calculus even as the government ratcheted up its provocations in the spring of 2013 and abandoned the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953 in response to increased sanctions aimed at halting its nuclear weapons program. To send an unambiguous message of commitment to its treaty obligations, the U.S. flew B-52 and B-2 stealth bombers over South Korea in a public demonstration of U.S. military global strike capability that includes a “nuclear umbrella,” while also deploying F-22 stealth fighter jets and ballistic missile defense systems to the region. It is worth noting that subsequent to these U.S. actions the North Korean military, despite being placed on “high alert,” showed no signs of large-scale mobilizations or positioning for conflict.

Another benefit of alliances is that they facilitate burden sharing between members. For example, NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 and subsequently committed military forces to Afghanistan in its first “out of area” operation. The alliance’s involvement

14 Article 5 states, “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defense recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United States, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed
Military Alliances

enabled the creation of the International Security Assistance Force Afghanistan (ISAF) that eventually grew to 50 nations. In February 2013, there were just over 100,000 ISAF troops serving in Afghanistan. While the bulk of these forces (66,000) were U.S. troops, the remaining 34,000 stand as a testament to the enduring commitment of the alliance and represents additional military resources that the United States did not have to commit to conduct military operations in Afghanistan that are in the nation's vital national interest. The concept of burden sharing is especially attractive as the U.S. confronts a resource-constrained environment resulting from a $487 billion defense cut required by the Budget Control Act and another $500 billion due to sequestration over the next decade. As a result, the Department of Defense is planning to cut some 100,000 troops, as well as cancel or delay the delivery of several weapons systems that will affect overall military capability.

An alliance offers a greater perception of “legitimacy” within the international system, especially when compared with unilateral action by a single state—no matter how big or powerful. This is illustrated by comparing two recent uses of force by the United States. In 1991, the George H.W. Bush administration was able to create a coalition of over 30 countries working within a United Nations Security Council Resolution 678 that authorized the use of force against Iraq. In contrast, the 2003 decision by the George W. Bush administration unilaterally to invade Iraq after it failed to rally support for military action in the United Nations and within NATO, is believed to have caused problems for the United States in the international arena. For instance, the United States has seen its favorability ratings plummet over the last decade and, as David Hendrickson and Robert Tucker argue, remains “hobbled by a reputation for the reckless use of force,” that is going to take a long time to overcome.

Finally, alliances offer geostrategic access (i.e., basing rights, overflight permissions, etc.) to key areas where national interests are at stake. That said, even allies retain their sovereign right to refuse access as evidenced by Turkey’s decision to deny the U.S. the use of its territory during the 2003 Iraq invasion.

force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.” For more information, see “What is Article V?,” http://www.nato.int/terrorism/five.htm.


16 For more information regarding UNSCR 678, see http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/575/28/IMG/NR057528.pdf?OpenElement

Challenges to Military Alliances

Rajan Menon described the effect of national interests on the efficacy of formal military alliances when he wrote, “When circumstances change, shared practical objectives, which are far more vital to the health and life spans of alliances than ethereal sentiments, begin to erode. In the words of the nineteenth century British foreign secretary Lord Palmerston, nations do not have ‘permanent friends, only permanent interests.’ The next decade will reveal the veracity of Palmerston’s dictum.”

The tension that exists in balancing national interests with alliances is exacerbated when member states have divergent views surrounding a controversial issue such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq. At that time NATO members France and Germany, faced with the prospect of a domestically unpopular war that included a number of civil protests, openly opposed military action and led efforts to deny a U.S. request for military planning and defensive support for Turkey in the event of a war with Iraq. This resulted in a heated and bitter debate that included Secretary Donald Rumsfeld’s barbed statement about “old and new Europe,” contrasting the support for U.S. actions by new NATO members Poland and the Czech Republic with the lack of support from Germany and France. In addition, U.S. Ambassador to NATO Nicholas Burns asserted that NATO faced a “crisis of credibility,” all of which threatened to fracture the alliance.

Another challenge facing military alliances is the concern that certain states become “free riders,” willingly receiving the security benefits without accepting the financial and military responsibilities associated with membership. For example, decreased defense spending in Europe resulting from the global economic crisis has been especially hard on the “Eurozone.” Currently, the United States underwrites nearly three-quarters of the total military spending within NATO, while only the United States, the United Kingdom and Greece meet the 28-member alliance's defense spending guidelines of two percent of gross domestic product. In light of this abysmal statistic, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen recently complained that “This growing transatlantic gap is unsustainable. It undermines the Alliance principle of solidarity. NATO is about sharing. Allies share the risks and the responsibilities, just as they share the security benefits.”

Some U.S. officials have warned that, unless European countries commit more funding to defense, they risk “collective military irrelevance.” In 2011, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned about NATO becoming a “two-tiered alliance,” resulting from both a lack of will and resources in an era of austerity. He went on to predict that “The blunt reality is that there will be dwindling appetite and patience in the U.S. Congress—and in the American body politic writ large—to expend increasingly precious funds on behalf of nations that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.” This is potentially challenging for the recently-published Defense Strategy Review, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense, that heavily emphasizes the importance of existing military alliances to support its strategic objectives around the world.

That said, there is some room for optimism as demonstrated by newly-elected Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s plans to increase defense spending by .8 percent to $51.7 billion. This represents the first rise in 11 years and should meet with approval in Washington. Additionally, despite disagreements surrounding U.S. military bases in Okinawa, Japan remains committed to providing host nation support for all military forces in the country and currently spends $2.02 billion per year on Japanese employee salaries, utilities and base maintenance. Although constrained by Japan’s “pacifist” constitution, which includes the Article 9 guideline that limits defense spending to 1 percent of GDP, Abe is discussing changes to the document that would loosen some of the current restrictions regarding the Japanese Self-Defense Force by arguing that “It’s been over 60 years since its enactment, and its contents have become obsolete. The spirit of writing our own constitution is


what will take us to the next era.” These actions suggest that, rather than being a “free rider,” Japan remains committed to meeting its treaty obligations with the United States and absorbing a larger share of the collective security burden.

Richard Haass recently examined a third challenge confronting military alliances, describing the “delicate balancing act” facing American foreign policy that “must communicate enough resolve so as to discourage aggression against its friends and allies, but it must avoid signaling unconditional support…lest it encourage those friends and allies to behave provocatively or recklessly.”

Currently, China has a number of territorial disputes with its neighbors in the South and East China Sea that affect U.S. military allies Japan and the Philippines. The dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island group became heated last year when the Japanese government purchased three of the five main islands from private businessman Kunioki Kurihara in September 2012. Prime Minister Abe has vowed to protect the islands and said that “In the unlikely event that they [China] were to land, it would be natural to expel them by force.” This is problematic for the United States. As former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated in October 2010, “The Senkakus [Diaoyus] fall within the scope of Article 5 of the 1960 U.S.—Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security.”

This sentiment was reinforced during General Martin Dempsey’s visit to China in April 2013 during which he informed the leadership that, although the United States does not take sides in the territorial dispute, “…we do have certain treaty obligations with Japan that we would honor.”

As Paul Smith recently wrote, “This means that the United States potentially bears substantial risk in the event of a rapid escalation of tensions between Japan and China” and that the formal agreement “could paradoxically exacerbate tensions, by emboldening Japan to initiate provocative actions designed

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30 Article 5 states that “Each Party recognizes that an armed attack against either Party in the territories under the administration of Japan would be dangerous to its own peace and safety and declares that it would act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional provisions and processes.” For more information regarding the U.S.–Japan Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security, see [http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html](http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/n-america/us/q&a/ref/1.html).
to consolidate its sovereign claims over the islands.”

Indeed, there are concerns that miscalculation on the part of either country in the midst of elevated tensions surrounding the islands and the U.S. rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region could trigger an “accidental war.” A recent white paper released by the People’s Liberation Army illustrates the danger, stating that “some countries are strengthening their Asia-Pacific military alliances, expanding military presence in the region, and frequently making the situation there tenser.”

Despite these concerns, the Japan–U.S. alliance remains a cornerstone of regional security, a point that Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel recently confirmed when he said that “Strengthening our security alliance is also critical to achieving the goal of the U.S. rebalance, enhancing prosperity and promoting peace and stability in the region.”

Such pledges of enduring commitment are admirable; however, a failure to act in the event of an armed conflict between Japan and China over the Sankaku/Diaoyu Island group risks the loss of credibility on the part of the United States, leading other allies to conclude that it will not fulfill its other mutual security treaty obligations. This, in turn, could embolden potential adversaries and isolate allies who might then feel compelled to engage other, more reliable, security partners.

Georgia offers another example of the risks associated with collective defense arrangements and potential conflict. A major issue associated with Georgia’s potential membership in NATO concerns Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: would NATO actually come to the country’s defense in the event of an attack by an adversary? This is one of the reasons why, despite President Mikheil Saakashvili’s efforts to join NATO that were intensified after the Russian attack against Tbilisi in August 2008, the alliance has been hesitant to allow Georgia as a member. Perhaps to curry favor with the United States and NATO, Georgia has committed military forces to Iraq and is currently the largest non-NATO troop contributing nation to the ISAF operation in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, it is clear that the prospect of Georgia’s joining the alliance will only exacerbate relations with Russia, which seeks to halt NATO’s eastward expansion that began in the 1990s and also believes that Georgia’s membership only “encourages the Georgian authorities in their efforts to seek revenge” for the 2008

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36 For a list of ISAF troop contributing nations, see http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php.
attack. Karl-Heinz Kamp has categorized Russia’s continued attempts to pressure NATO not to accept Georgia as a member as “some power play, arm wrestling and arm twisting.” In response to Russia’s efforts, NATO Secretary General Rasmussen has made clear that “It’s not for Russia to decide whether Georgia or certain states in the future can join our alliance. It is for NATO and for Georgia to decide.” That said, while the alliance has agreed that Georgia will become a member of NATO, the question of when this will occur remains unanswered at the time of this writing.

Finally, one of the most contentious issues that alliances must contend with is the use of national caveats, which are the restrictions that member states place on how the organization can employ their forces. This challenge was highlighted in Afghanistan, where some of these caveats posed a complex problem for the ISAF commander’s campaign plan. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe General John Craddock said that such caveats “increase the risk to every service member deployed in Afghanistan and bring increased risk to mission success” and are also “a detriment to effective command and control, unity of effort and command.” While the adverse impact of these caveats may be mitigated through robust communication with national capitals and deft operational planning, they nevertheless remain a reality in modern coalition warfare.

The Alternatives: Coalitions of the Willing and Partnerships

Less formal security arrangements offer the advantage of greater flexibility and largely avoid the criticisms of a “war by committee” approach that was on display during the 1999 NATO Operation Allied Force. According to critics, the requirement to achieve consensus resulted in a “gradualist” approach to the bombing campaign in Kosovo, diminishing the effectiveness of the air strikes by limiting the element of surprise and the set of targets. Retired Air Force General Buster Glosson, who ran the air campaign in the 1991 Gulf War, said that “Their plans require[d] the approval of the political arm of NATO, the military arm of NATO and then officials in Washington. With all those bottlenecks, the chance of success is small.”

41 Michael R. Gordon, “Crisis in the Balkans at NATO; Allies’ War by Consensus Limiting Military Strategy,” New York Times, April 4,
Such criticisms were not lost on the George W. Bush administration, which believed that formal military alliances were insufficient to successfully wage a “global war on terror.” Zbigniew Brzezinski observed that, especially after 9/11, the administration was convinced that in order “to protect America’s national interests, the United States must have a free hand: The sovereign Gulliver must not be tied down by feeble Lilliputians.”\textsuperscript{42} Perhaps Secretary Rumsfeld was addressing this issue when he said that “Wars can benefit from coalitions of the willing, to be sure. But they should not be fought by committee. The mission must determine the coalition, and the coalition must not determine the mission. If it does, the mission will be dumbed down to the lowest common denominator, and we can’t afford that.”\textsuperscript{43}

Karsten Jung argues that “Unlike ongoing membership in a security alliance with a long and complicated history...participation in a coalition does not require subscription to or acceptance of a general set of principles and values, but only a pragmatic decision to make a concrete contribution to a clearly defined individual effort.” She describes three factors that enable coalitions to more effectively cope with an increasingly uncertain—and situational—security environment when compared with standing alliances:

- an issue-specific approach that allows for the development of “custom-tailored responses” to individual threats and challenges. The threshold for contributors is significantly lowered as each can cooperate on one issue without having to agree on a variety of others, and no future obligations are implied by present agreements.

- a “situational opt-in” that allows a case-by-case commitment of relevant capabilities for the coalition, based on national interests.

- a corollary “situation opt-out” that allows a case-by-case alignment of compatible interests.\textsuperscript{44}

Secretary Rumsfeld captured the essence of this methodology when he said that “We’re going to have different countries and different people in different countries supporting us with respect to these [Global War on Terror] activities and possibly


\textsuperscript{44} Karsten Jung “Willing to Waning? NATO’s Role in an Age of Coalitions,” \textit{World Affairs Journal}, March/April 2012, \url{http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/willing-or-waning-nato%E2%80%99s-role-age-coalitions}. 
not those…and that’s perfectly understandable. No one agrees with everybody all
of the time on everything.” Additionally, this approach was codified in the 2002
National Security Strategy (NSS) that stated, “America will implement its strategies
by organizing coalitions—as broad as practicable—of states able and willing to
promote a balance of power that favors freedom.” The NSS described these
cohesion. This is important, as the emergence of
non-state actors with global reach requires an expansion of U.S. security
cooperation beyond its traditional allies.

The Obama administration continues to embrace this coalition partner
approach, as reflected in its 2010 NSS emphasizing “comprehensive engagement.”
In addition, Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense
states that, “Across the globe we will seek to be the security partner of choice, pursuing
new partnerships with a growing number of nations…whose interests and
viewpoints are merging into a common vision of freedom, stability and
prosperity.”

Of course, a coalition of the willing is not a panacea and there are a number of
operational and strategic challenges to consider. In addition to the previously
discussed issues of free riders and national caveats, one of the most difficult hurdles
that a coalition must overcome is interoperability—the ability of diverse systems and
organizations “to operate in synergy in the execution of assigned tasks”—among its
members. This is no small task and requires a tremendous amount of effort even
in formal, standing alliances. Supreme Allied Commander Europe Admiral James
Stavridis has argued that “Multilateral coalitions built on an as-needed basis…have
no common doctrine for conducting military operations, no common capabilities or
command structure for quickly integrating national forces into a cohesive campaign,
and no standing mechanisms for debating and then deciding on an agreed course of
action. Such ad hoc coalitions therefore almost always rely disproportionately on a
single nation to bear the brunt of security burdens that ideally should be more
equally shared.” NATO has undertaken a deliberate and comprehensive
interoperability policy to address the technical (including hardware, equipment,
armaments and systems), procedural (including doctrine and procedures) and
human (including terminology and training) aspects of its operations.

Another challenge facing ad hoc and temporary coalitions of the willing is
sustainability; specifically, how does a coalition maintain its cohesion (politically,
military, and economically) during a prolonged military operation? One can envision such a scenario in Syria—especially since NATO has no intentions to intervene militarily in Syria\(^{51}\)—where a coalition of the willing created to remove the Bashar al-Assad regime faces a more formidable challenge than NATO’s 2011 Operation Unified Protector in Libya that Admiral Stavridis called a “model intervention.”\(^{52}\) This is because of Syria’s geopolitical location in the Levant and the country’s sectarian divisions that could lead to a wider regional war, as well as a professional and more capable Syrian military. For instance, a coalition of the willing would be required, at a minimum, to establish and enforce a no-fly zone intended to neutralize Syria’s air power, help alleviate violence against the civilian population, and assist the opposition forces. Commenting on the difficulty of accomplishing these tasks in Syria, General Dempsey observed that, "The air defense picture in Libya is dramatically different than it is in Syria...Syria has five times more air defense systems, some of which are high-end systems, that is to say higher altitude, longer range." He went on to assess that “The U.S. military has the capability to defeat that system, but it would be a greater challenge, and would take longer and require more resources”\(^{53}\) than in Libya.\(^{53}\) Would the coalition be willing to accept the potential loss of aircraft and pilots? What about the introduction of coalition ground troops in a lengthy ground war that includes the possible use of chemical weapons? Such questions are difficult enough for a standing alliance to address, let alone an ad hoc coalition of the willing.

### An “All of the Above” Approach to Collective Security and Collective Defense

Despite the rise of non-state actors and asymmetric, transnational threats, one cannot dismiss the requirement to deter and, if necessary, defeat state actors in “traditional” conflicts where formal military alliances offer distinct operational and strategic advantages. Consequently, the United States is unlikely to withdraw from its current formal security arrangements anytime soon. That said, it seems clear that more flexible approaches vis-à-vis collective security and collective defense are required in today’s international security environment where challenges are complex and rapidly changing.

One way to achieve greater flexibility is to refocus and adapt standing alliances to address contemporary security challenges. For example, Tetrais observes that “bilateral alliances forged in the fight against communism have found a new purpose.” For instance, Thailand and the Philippines, which were U.S. allies during

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\(^{52}\) Stavridis and Daalder, “NATO’s Victory in Libya,” p. 2.

the Cold War, have become key U.S. partners in the fight against terrorism in Asia. Despite the prediction of skeptics that NATO could not survive the end of the Cold War, the alliance continues. Admiral Stavridis argues that the NATO operation in Libya demonstrates “that the alliance remains an essential source of stability.” Nonetheless, he recognizes that NATO needs to address a number of shortfalls in order to retain its future relevance.

One initiative designed to accomplish this goal is the 2010 NATO Strategic Concept, *Active Engagement, Modern Defense*, which outlines three essential tasks necessary to enable to alliance to meet the evolving set of challenges: 1) collective defense in accordance with Article 5 of the Washington Treaty; 2) crisis management that employs a mix of political and military tools to manage developing crises before they escalate into conflicts, stop ongoing conflicts that affect alliance security, and help consolidate post-conflict stability; and 3) cooperative security through partnership with countries and other international organizations. The alliance is also examining ways to pool and share military capability under its *Smart Defense* initiatives, something that is essential in today’s fiscally austere environment.

However, the uncertain and increasingly situational nature of the current international security environment will continue to demand ad hoc and temporary coalitions and partnerships. Given this trend, it is difficult to envision an expansion of U.S. formal collective defense arrangements in the future. Thus, an holistic approach to collective security that includes formal alliances and coalition partner arrangements is likely to exist for the foreseeable future. In fact, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense* directs that “U.S. forces will plan to operate whenever possible with allied and coalition forces,” while emphasizing the importance of building partner capacity (whether as part of a formal alliance, a coalition of the willing, or on a bilateral basis) in order to share “the costs and responsibilities of global leadership.”

The future of alliances and collective security remains an intriguing debate with significant strategic implications. On one hand, Winston Churchill’s famous observation that “There is only one thing worse than fighting with allies, and this is fighting without them” speaks to the enduring value of standing alliances. On the
other hand, some have argued that the “the end of alliances” is near because, given the uncertain nature of the contemporary security environment, they have outlived their usefulness. Senior U.S. national security leadership face some difficult choices as they formulate strategy and determine the number and types of collective security arrangements the nation will require to secure its national interests in the future.