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Brian Blankenship

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Managing the Dilemmas of Alliance Burden Sharing

Encouraging allies to shoulder more of the burden of defending themselves has become more important than it was for most of the post-Cold War period. The collapse of the Soviet bloc initially freed up substantial amounts of US military power, left the United States without a peer competitor, and seemed to reduce the risk of war involving American allies. As a result, particularly in Europe, allied capabilities have atrophied, while the United States focused on waging an expansive war on terrorism in much of the Middle East and Africa. But over the last ten years, with the resurgence of Russian expansionism, the rise of China, and the reorientation of US foreign policy around "great power competition," preparing for conventional major-power war is back on the menu.[1] With it come painful tradeoffs about where to invest and deploy scarce US military resources. All the while, conflicts in Gaza, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Middle East continue to make claims on US assets and attention. To the extent that the United States is unwilling or unable to devote sufficient resources for deterring and defeating adversaries in one region or another on its own, allied capabilities will need to fill the gap.[2]

Much has been written on whether US allies could defend themselves.[3] But equally important is whether the United States wants (or should want) them to—and more broadly, whether the prospective risks of encouraging allied self-reliance outweigh the potential benefits. Burden sharing is a double-edged sword. Allies that become more self-reliant also become more capable of spurning Washington and pursuing policies that run counter to its preferences.[4] Somewhat paradoxically, the allies best positioned to burden-share are typically also the

Brian Blankenship is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Miami. His book *The Burden-Sharing Dilemma: Coercive Diplomacy in US Alliance Politics* is published by Cornell University Press. He can be reached by email at bxb731@miami.edu and followed on X @BrianDBlank.

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ones most capable of fending for themselves and distancing themselves from the United States and other partners.

This article assesses the prospects for burden sharing in American alliances during an era of great power competition, with a focus on what are likely to be the United States' two main regions of interest: Europe and the Indo-Pacific. It argues that although US allies in Western Europe might be better positioned to fend for themselves than those in the Indo-Pacific, successfully encouraging burden sharing in Europe also runs greater risk of alliance decoupling. (This article does not explicitly explore the prospects for burden sharing in the Middle East, owing to its comparatively smaller US military presence and many fewer US treaty allies.)

The severity of these burden-sharing dilemmas in Europe and the Indo-Pacific will depend on three considerations. The first is whether the major powers of Western Europe would be willing and able to defend NATO's vulnerable Eastern flank members on their own. Given Russia's poor performance in Ukraine, coupled with Europe's advantages in wealth and population, a Russian campaign of serial aggression in which it conquers wide swathes of the continent is unlikely. But limited conquest—perhaps especially through quick *fait accompli* land grabs—is still very much on the table.[5] Timely and decisive Western European intervention, however, is far from assured, given the much lower perception of Russian threat among countries that do not border it and the operational difficulties of a defense or liberation of the Baltic states.

Second is whether US allies in East Asia—and China's neighbors more broadly—are willing and able to invest enough to deter China on their own. Unlike Russia in Europe, the possibility of serial Chinese conquest in Asia is not out of the question based on its relative power. China's neighbors may be able to deter it from going on the offensive by heavily investing in defensive capabilities, but enough of them have a mixed view of the threat Beijing poses and prefer to not openly antagonize it that their willingness to form an effective balancing coalition is an open question.

The third consideration is whether the resources the United States devotes to Europe and the Indo-Pacific come from a fixed (or even declining) pool of annual defense investments. If the United States produces enough military power to sustain the status quo in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, the need for painful tradeoffs is lower; if not, they are all but unavoidable.

The United States, then, faces a set of dilemmas. Many observers argue that Washington should prioritize allocating scarce resources to the Indo-Pacific considering China's growing strength in the region, which may prove too much for local allies to handle alone.[6] However, if the United States relies more on NATO contributions in Europe to do so, it hazards encouraging and empowering Western Europe to go its own way. The major powers of Western Europe, in

turn, are likely to conduct foreign policy in ways that increasingly ignore Washington's preferences. They may also not be sufficiently motivated to build the capabilities needed to defend vulnerable NATO members bordering Russia, or to expend blood and treasure to undertake a costly defense or liberation of NATO's Eastern flank on their own. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine has stiffened European capitals' resolve to safeguard the Eastern flank, the temptation to wait and see is strong for countries further from Russia, and there has yet to be evidence of political will to make necessary investments in building sufficiently capable forces.

The United States faces a set of burden-sharing dilemmas

To manage these dilemmas, in turn, the United States has three policy options. First, it can encourage burden sharing selectively, where the likelihood of success is highest and the risks of losing control over allies are lowest. This is more likely to be the case among allies in high-threat environments, as in East Asia and NATO's Eastern flank, and among allies that are of moderate size. It is more difficult among larger, more powerful allies in lower-threat environments such as the major powers of Western Europe. Second, when it does seek greater burden sharing, its best option is to use conditional pressure, combining threats of abandonment if allies do not move toward burden sharing with assurances that the United States will defend them if they do. While commonly associated with the Trump administration, conditional pressure is historically common. Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, for example, frequently wielded threats of abandonment to successfully encourage greater defense efforts by West Germany and South Korea.[7] Finally, if all else fails, Washington may need to simply prioritize allocating US resources in areas of greatest interest.

In the next three sections, I describe the tradeoffs inherent to burden sharing in more detail, how they apply differently in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and discuss the considerations that should shape how the United States approaches them. The final section concludes by offering recommendations on how American policymakers might encourage alliance burden sharing while mitigating—even if not fully eliminating—these risks.

The Dilemmas of Burden Sharing

The risks of defense burden sharing are akin to a Goldilocks dilemma. On one hand, allies can contribute too little. If allies fail to adequately invest in collective- and self-defense, they run the risk of ceding ground to revisionist adversaries. Even though allies have shared interests in avoiding this outcome, they

may be tempted to free-ride, hoping other partners will shoulder the costs of deterring and defeating adversaries. This tendency is especially strong for countries that do not anticipate bearing the brunt of fighting, whether because they expect partners to ride to their defense or because they expect the adversary to target their partners first.[8] Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, for example, US policymakers found it considerably more difficult to encourage NATO members that did not share a border with the Warsaw Pact to increase defense spending and invest in force improvements than those that did—namely, West Germany.[9]

On the other hand, allies can become too self-reliant. Pressing them for burden sharing may create friction in the alliance relationship and encourage allies to search for alternatives to aligning with Washington. These could include finding other partners, pursuing nuclear weapons, or hedging by adopting a more neutral foreign policy.[10] Even if US burden-sharing pressure does not cause an immediate rupture in the relationship, the very fact of allies assuming more responsibility for their own defense makes them less susceptible to American pressure in the future. Protection is typically the quid pro quo that Washington provides to its allies in exchange for other goods—ranging from hosting US bases, participating in US sanctions regimes, backing the US dollar, and supporting American foreign policy more broadly.[11] Asking allies to contribute more for their own defense reduces their dependence on US protection, and thus their incentives to remain in the alliance and continue to align their policies with US preferences. This tradeoff can be mitigated—for example, by integrating allied forces together, making it easier for them to fight together but harder to fight apart—but rarely overcome entirely.[12] US and other NATO policymakers worried about West German rearmament during the Cold War, for example, even though the *Bundeswehr* lacked an independent military command structure and was fully submerged within NATO command.[13]

The risks of burden sharing vary based on both the threat environment and on how much allies can provide. The greater the threat environment, the less risk that allies will spurn alignment with the United States. Poland, for one, is a natural US partner. It is not only capable of making serious contributions to NATO, but given its proximity to Russia, is also heavily invested in having a close relationship with Washington and unlikely to under-contribute.[14]

The risks of burden sharing are a Goldilocks dilemma

In turn, larger, wealthier allies who have greater ability to fend for themselves can pose more problems. Germany and Japan have long been troublesome cases given their size, with American policymakers worrying that reducing their dependence on Washington might lead them to spurn the alliance and drift toward neutrality. In turn, both countries' World

War II histories not only intensified these worries about renewed militarism among American policymakers, but also contributed to cultures of anti-militarism in Germany and Japan that made encouraging burden sharing more difficult.[15] By contrast, even though comparatively weaker South Korea launched a nuclear weapons program in the 1970s, the United States curtailed its nuclear ambitions through a combination of threats, assurances, and pressure on third party suppliers, all while compelling South Korea to significantly increase its conventional military arming.[16]

Europe vs. the Indo-Pacific: An Asymmetry of Risks

These dilemmas have implications for how American policymakers approach the issue of burden sharing, not only among different allies but across different regions. At present, there is little doubt that American defense planners view the Indo-Pacific as the primary theater of interest in US foreign policy. At least three successive Presidents have hoped to "rebalance" US attention away from other regions, especially the Middle East, in light of China's ascent, and the Trump administration made great power competition with China and Russia the lodestar of US defense policy.[17] Biden administration officials, in turn, refer to China as the United States' "pacing threat."[18] However, the enduring need to deter Russia in Europe and continued deployments of US military assets in the Middle East have continually frustrated attempts to devote resources and attention more fully to the Indo-Pacific across successive administrations, and force decisions about where the United States should allocate its own resources and where it should instead attempt to lean more on allied contributions.[19]

In the current environment, the dilemma for the United States is that its allies in Europe are likely more capable of balancing Russia on their own than its allies in East Asia are of balancing China, but it is this very capability that may prove a centrifugal force in the transatlantic alliance. Consider two potential scenarios. Perhaps the worst-case is that of a truly fractured Europe, in which the imperative to collectively balance Russia is replaced by traditional balance-of-power politics. In this scenario, reminiscent of the "back to the future" prediction made by John Mearsheimer and others during the 1990s, pre-World War II style great power rivalry might return to the continent, with major powers like France, Germany, Russia, and the United Kingdom all vying for influence.[20] This scenario cannot be ruled out, particularly if anti-European Union nationalism sweeps the continent.[21] But it would likely only have much chance of materializing in the case of a near-total US withdrawal.

But even a seemingly better-case scenario for Washington—a Europe that acts as a cohesive unit—would pose its own set of tradeoffs. Put simply, a more capable Europe would be a less pliant Europe. The less dependent allies are on US protection, the harder it is for the United States to solicit favors which allies would not otherwise do, and the easier it is for partners to act in ways Washington opposes. Allied consent plays an enormous role in allowing the United States to project military power abroad, shape global trade, and suppress security competition in key regions; this consent arises at least in part from their dependence on US protection.[22]

A more capable Europe would be a less pliant Europe

For example, the United States frequently leans on its allies when it comes to trade, going as far as to threaten troop withdrawals to compel West Germany to import American arms during much of the 1960s and 1970s.[23] Similarly, the United States relies on allies' participation in sanctions regimes to economically isolate adversaries like Russia and Iran (and the Soviet Union during the Cold War).[24] Allies likewise tend to hold disproportionate numbers of US dollars in their currency reserves, which helps the United States borrow at favorable interest rates and contributes to the dollar's preeminent role in global trade.[25] More broadly, allies' willingness to host US bases, participate in American military operations, and refrain from seeking nuclear weapons is a product of the implicit bargain that Washington assumes much of the burden of defending them in return.

The example of France is instructive. France has long had one of the most powerful conventional forces in Europe, is one of only two US treaty allies possessing nuclear weapons, and is geographically insulated from NATO's main adversaries. Not coincidentally, Washington has often had difficulty influencing French behavior, with Paris frequently acting as a spoiler to US objectives in NATO. During the 1960s, and against US urging, France devoted considerable resources to maintaining its imperial holdings in Africa and away from Central Europe, withdrew from NATO military command, and put pressure on the US dollar by converting large amounts of dollar reserves to gold.[26]

The evidence suggests that US policymakers are aware of these dilemmas, as they have seemingly been of two minds on European defense initiatives, both in the past and more recently. Despite calling for greater European self-reliance in principle since the 1950s, when actually faced with concrete proposals to this end—whether French proposals for an independent European defense identity built around the Western European Union during the 1990s, the European Security and Defense Policy in the 2000s, or Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in the 2010s—American policymakers have wavered in their supposed support.[27] During the 1990s, for example, US decisionmakers viewed

maintaining and enlarging NATO as a means to discourage alternative, European-led institutions from taking root and thus preserve American influence on the continent.[28]

Some US opposition to previous European defense initiatives has stemmed from concerns about what they would mean for the US defense industry, as these initiatives have often entailed a focus on building up Europe's own defense industrial base. During discussions of PESCO and the creation of the European Defense Fund in 2019, for example, US officials complained about "poison pills" which would limit the participation of non-EU firms in European defense projects. The Trump administration countered PESCO with threats to further restrict European defense firms' access to the US market.[29] But more broadly, it is clear that American officials viewed these European defense initiatives as potential rivals to NATO, which would at best starve NATO of resources and at worst allow Europe to act as an independent power center in its own right. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright argued against any European defense initiative which would allow Europe to "de-link" from NATO, "duplicate" NATO functions, or "discriminate" against NATO members outside of the European Union, while in 2000 Defense Secretary William Cohen went as far as to warn that the emergence of an "EU caucus in NATO" that operated independently of the alliance could turn NATO into "a relic of the past."[30]

American policymakers can expect a self-sufficient Europe to be less reliably cooperative with US preferences across a variety of issues. If Washington hopes to shift the burden of European defense onto its NATO allies, it will find it more difficult to coax them into being partners vis-à-vis China, for example.[31] When left to their own devices and encouraged to become self-reliant, many NATO capitals have shown a reluctance to become involved in economic, let alone military disputes, with China.[32] French President Emmanuel Macron, for example, recently stated his reluctance to be involved in a conflict over Taiwan, while Germany has likewise been historically hesitant to limit economic ties with China.[33]

To be sure, shared values and interests between the United States and Europe may continue to generate transatlantic cooperation even if Europe becomes more self-reliant, while the continent's reliance on US protection does equate to subservience to Washington. Europe's willingness to risk China's ire, for example, is neither guaranteed if the US commitment to Europe remains robust, nor a lost cause even if Washington abandons the continent. But American policymakers will have an easier time persuading allies to act in ways they would not have otherwise if they are more, rather than less, dependent on US protection. In Europe, then, the challenge to burden sharing is not so much whether US allies could produce sufficient military power to deter large-scale Russian expansion without the United States, but whether they are willing to invest enough to

safeguard the alliance's Eastern flank and whether becoming more capable leads them to become less deferential to US interests.

In the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, the challenge is not only whether US allies are willing to invest in balancing China, but also whether they are capable of it. As scholars like David Kang have noted, China's neighbors have been slow to balance it both individually and collectively, which may reflect a more sanguine perception of the threat it poses than the one held by US observers.[34] But even if China's neighbors did invest considerably more in defense and formed a balancing coalition, they would face considerable difficulty. China is far and away the most powerful country in East Asia, with a GDP more than three times its closest competitor's (Japan), an ever-growing navy, and substantial missile capabilities that can inflict considerable damage on military assets in the air, sea, and on land within several hundred miles of Chinese territory.[35] This reduces the chances that allies which fear China could become truly independent even if they become more self-reliant, but also makes relying on allied burden sharing and avoiding a direct US role more difficult.

Navigating Burden-Sharing Dilemmas

The United States faces the following basic set of tradeoffs: relying more on European contributions to NATO could enable Washington to devote more resources to East Asia, where China's neighbors may struggle to contain it without the United States. Yet doing so could come at the expense of not only US influence in Europe, but also the security of NATO's vulnerable Eastern flank. These tradeoffs are to some extent unavoidable. Nevertheless, moving forward these dilemmas may become more or less severe depending on three considerations.

These dilemmas may become more or less severe depending on three considerations

Would Western Europe Be Eastern Europe's Security Guarantor?

The first is whether Western Europe would be willing and able to intervene in the event of attempted Russian expansion at the expense of a NATO member. Given Europe's relative size—and Russia's battlefield performance in Ukraine—there seems little risk of Russia "running the table" and conquering large swathes of Europe. European NATO members have a combined GDP and population several times that of Russia, and Germany alone has an economy more than twice the size of Russia's.[36] This is not to downplay the challenges to European rearmament, which would need to reverse tremendous

shortfalls in equipment and readiness, to say nothing of decades of reliance on US command and control and power projection capabilities.[37] But given sufficient time and investment, there is little reason Europe could not produce an amount of military power more commensurate with its size.

Yet Russia could still cause considerable problems for neighbors like Poland, Finland, and especially the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Those NATO members bordering Russia would likely try to balance Russia vigorously, as they have before and since its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.[38] The challenge, however, is that outside of Poland, the NATO members bordering Russia are among the alliance's smallest in terms of economic output and population. Meanwhile, the major European powers of the alliance—including France, Germany and the United Kingdom—are more distant and may not respond the same way. Perceptions of the threat posed by Russia tend to be far lower among countries not bordering it, and much of Western Europe might feel insulated enough to adopt a wait-and-see approach, particularly in the wake of Russia's military struggles in Ukraine. Emmanuel Macron, for example, has long cautioned against "humiliating" Vladimir Putin in Ukraine.[39] Indeed, Poland and the Baltic states tend to distrust Western Europe's willingness to defend them, preferring to rely on Washington instead.[40]

There are encouraging signs, including Germany's announcement of a brigade-sized deployment to Lithuania, its first of the postwar era, but equipment shortfalls continue to raise questions about operational effectiveness.[41] Whatever Western European capitals' intentions today, those intentions could change when faced with the choice of actually having to fight. Moreover, the defense or liberation of the Baltic countries would be costly, operationally difficult, and require substantial improvements in European conventional forces that so far have not been on offer.[42] Indeed, despite initial promises in the months immediately following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, progress on new funds committed by each member to increasing defense capabilities—again, with the notable exceptions of NATO's Eastern flank countries—has proved slow.[43]

Take the case of Germany, which made ambitious promises of a "sea change" (*Zeitenwende*) in foreign policy following Russia's invasion. But despite approving a 100-billion-euro supplemental defense fund, how it will use those funds—and over what timeline—remains unclear. Germany's defense budget will reach NATO's 2 percent of gross domestic product defense spending target in 2024, but even so, the government has only promised to reach that target over a "multi-year period" which might prove fleeting.[44]

If Western Europe is unwilling or unable to act as the security guarantor of NATO's Eastern flank countries, this would of course complicate any US efforts to shift focus toward the Indo-Pacific. In such a scenario, the United States risks either undermining its prioritization of East Asia in order to

remain "Europe's Pacifier" or allowing Eastern flank countries to become de facto buffer states between the major powers of Western Europe and Russia—and buffer states have a grim history, being far more likely to experience violent conquest than other countries.[45] Russia's performance in Ukraine may, at least for a time, mitigate concerns about its ability to seize territory from NATO's Eastern flank members, and allow the alliance to rely on its Article 5 security guarantee for deterrence. Nevertheless, a diminished perception of Russia's capabilities may also weaken Western Europe's perceived need to mount a vigorous defense in Eastern Europe.

Can US Allies in East Asia Deter China without Washington?

American policymakers might be able to avoid leaving Eastern Europe in the lurch to the extent that US allies in the Indo-Pacific can take care of themselves. But the degree to which China's neighbors are both willing and able to balance China is far from clear. If allies and partners in the region fear expansionism on the part of a wealthy, capable China, then the United States is likely to have a good deal of success encouraging them to burden share. If on the other hand, allies take a more sanguine view—or are unwilling to risk China's ire by actively cooperating with neighbors or the United States—then Washington's task is more difficult.

There is some debate as to which of these scenarios is closer to describing today's reality. According to some, fear of China is already producing nascent balancing coalitions.[46] By contrast, David Kang and others argue that the evidence for balancing is scarce, and that China's neighbors have not appreciably increased defense spending over the past decade.[47] Recent developments—perhaps most notably Japan's plans to boost defense spending as part of its 2022 National Defense Strategy, along with similar increases in South Korea—suggest this may be changing, but their implementation remains uncertain.[48]

In any case, if China embarked on a campaign of serial aggression, perceptions would likely change—and with them would potentially come greater defense efforts and interest in forming balancing coalitions. Yet, these might not only occur too late to save frontline targets, most likely Taiwan, but also might not be enough to deter or block Chinese expansion elsewhere. The feasibility of balancing China without greater US resource commitments is an open question.[49] Unlike Russia, China is substantially larger and more powerful than any other country in its region and does not face an existing multilateral coalition like NATO. Balancing China without a continued or increased investment of US resources is thus likely to require both significant investments in defense by China's neighbors and cooperation among them. Some observers, for example, argue that Chinese expansion could be deterred through a posture

that relies heavily on defensive capabilities. This approach, they suggest, could allow China's neighbors to surmount its aggregate material advantages by investing in capabilities designed to deny an attacker's ability to take and hold space—such as anti-ship missiles, surface-to-air missiles, and drones—thus comparably cheaply frustrating China's ability to project power and creating a de facto "no man's sea" in East Asia.[50]

The challenge, of course, is that this defensive posture would take time to implement among allies and partners which have not yet developed the necessary asymmetric capabilities. Taiwan, for example, has for years disproportionately invested in expensive prestige equipment like F-16s and main battle tanks, rather than in capabilities optimized for defense like air defense systems, anti-ship missiles, and mines.[51] Japan's capabilities are arguably closer to being optimized for defense, but are still weighted toward those designed to directly and symmetrically engage an adversary, like manned aircraft and large surface vessels (though there are signs that this may change with the implementation of the 2022 National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy, which propose a greater emphasis on anti-ship, anti-missile, and anti-air capabilities). Moreover, even though Chinese forces primarily pose a threat on the sea and in the air, ground forces have received the lion's share of the Japanese defense budget for the past two decades.[52]

The feasibility of balancing China without greater US resource commitments is an open question

How Constrained are US Resources?

These tradeoffs will be less severe to the extent that the United States can allocate enough resources to simultaneously preserve the status quo in Europe and the Indo-Pacific on its own. In that scenario, Washington and its allies can worry less about commitments in either region detracting from those in the other. This, however, is far from assured. Assessments both within and outside the Defense Department suggest that competition with China and Russia under current plans will require sustained annual growth in defense spending which substantially outpaces inflation.[53] Yet, despite unusually low interest rates on US debt, defense spending has not increased appreciably since 2010 when adjusted for inflation, and shows little sign of doing so in the near future.[54] The reasons for this include the country's ever-growing national debt, coupled with fears that this debt burden might lead to higher interest rates (indeed, rates have increased since 2021); what are expected to be continued increases in non-discretionary spending (namely entitlement

programs); and increased skepticism of higher defense budgets among Progressive Democrats in Congress.[55]

If the United States cannot produce enough military capabilities to meet both regions' requirements, it will need to prioritize.[56] This challenge may be less severe in the short term. Given that optimizing for combat in Europe weights land power more than naval power, while the reverse is true in the Indo-Pacific, deployments of existing capabilities in one theater are not entirely incompatible with those in the other.[57] But this also creates a more intractable long-term problem, as what the United States builds now will decide what sort of capabilities it has in the future. In the event of a contingency, Washington will have to fight with the force it has, not the force it wants—and in the absence of careful prioritization, that force may not be optimized for the conflict at hand, whether it be a land war in Europe or a maritime conflict in the Indo-Pacific.

There could be a silver lining to resource and domestic political constraints within the United States. Namely, there is evidence that such constraints may make US burden-sharing pressure more effective. During the 1960s and 1970s, for example, due in part to a combination of "stagflation" and Vietnam-era war weariness and manpower constraints, Congress pushed for substantial troop withdrawals from Europe and the Indo-Pacific, which gave decisionmakers in the executive branch more leverage to encourage burden sharing in both regions.[58] But while this may make addressing the challenge of too little burden sharing easier, it does not alleviate the tradeoffs associated with increased allied self-reliance.

Best Practices—But No Guarantees

The goal of this article is not to make decisive recommendations for selecting among these competing imperatives, nor to make predictions. Nevertheless, it can offer suggestions for navigating these tradeoffs. First, Washington can encourage burden sharing selectively, maximizing its efforts to do so where the risks are lower and the benefits are higher. Two factors are essential here: the level of shared external threat, and each ally's capacity to contribute. Allies with an elevated perception of threat—especially those that share a border with adversaries by land—are likely to be both inclined toward greater burden sharing and more likely to seek close relations with Washington. By contrast, American policymakers may prefer to tread lightly in encouraging burden sharing by allies that have considerable capacity to contribute due to the size of their economies and populations. Unfortunately for the United States, it is the very allies that could relieve US burdens most that pose the greatest risks. It is no accident

that American policymakers have historically had misgivings about burden sharing by powerful allies like Germany and Japan, as well as about collective European defense initiatives.

The ideal candidates for burden sharing, then, are those who both perceive a high level of external threat which renders them dependent on Washington and have a moderate capacity to contribute—enough to make a difference, but not enough to become truly independent. Historically and now, South Korea has fit this description most closely among US allies in the Indo-Pacific, with the United States successfully putting enormous pressure on it to become self-reliant starting in the late 1960s.[59] Today, South Korea boasts one of the most capable militaries in the world, ranking ninth globally on overall military expenditures and spending more as a percentage of GDP than most NATO members.[60] In Europe, Poland has stepped into a similar role; its defense spending as a proportion of economic output is near the top of the NATO countries—and may soon surpass that of the United States.[61]

Two factors are essential: the level of shared external threat and each ally's capacity to contribute

Second, when the United States does encourage burden sharing, the most effective way to do so is through conditional pressure. This form of pressure would combine threats to limit US commitments to defend allies unless they contribute with promises to protect them if they do. Conditional pressure has two advantages over outright abandoning US alliances or even withdrawing substantial numbers of American forces from allied territory. The first is that it gives allies more reason to comply; a threat is only effective if allies believe they will not, in fact, be punished if they give Washington what it wants.[62] Second, actually abandoning the alliance not only removes a source of US leverage and risks emboldening adversaries, but also could make allies sufficiently desperate that they seek means of achieving security that Washington opposes—such as acquiring nuclear weapons or moving closer to American adversaries.[63] A large body of evidence points to the effectiveness of conditional pressure. By contrast, research suggests that other forms of pressure—for example, "naming and shaming" allies that fail to meet spending targets—are ineffective.[64]

Importantly, the effectiveness of conditional pressure indicates that US gestures of support and successful burden-sharing pressure are not always at odds, but rather can go together. While assurances of protection—whether they are troops deployed on allied territory, statements of support, or multinational military exercises, to name just a few—may decrease allied fears of abandonment on the margins, the United States can also threaten to withhold them.[65] Indeed, the very conditions which make allies want assurances of protection—namely, when

they have doubts about US credibility and concerns about external threat—are the very same conditions which make allies susceptible to US pressure.[66] The trade-off between assuring allies of US protection and encouraging burden sharing, then, is not absolute; the most effective pressure is that which combines threats and assurances.

Gestures of US support and burden-sharing pressure are not always at odds

Finally, if the United States can neither successfully encourage enough burden sharing from low-risk allies nor fill the gaps itself, it will need to make hard choices. In Europe, the United States faces two risks. The first is the possibility of fostering an independent Europe whose interests may diverge in important respects from those of Washington. The second is that among these divergent interests might be Western Europe's continued willingness and ability to expend blood and treasure for the defense of NATO's most exposed members in Eastern Europe. If Europe is unwilling and unable to step into the US role, then Washington may for the foreseeable future remain indispensable to the security of NATO's Eastern flank. This does not necessarily imply a huge US presence in Europe; NATO's Article 5 coupled with a smaller US presence may be enough to deter Russia. Nevertheless, it means that the United States would need to be prepared for a European contingency, which would complicate its ability to focus on the Indo-Pacific and undermine any strategic advantages of burden sharing in the first place. In the Indo-Pacific, by contrast, the primary risk of relying on allied contributions is that they may not be enough to balance China on a large scale, let alone to deter a more limited campaign of expansion, including over Taiwan.

It is beyond this article's scope to recommend which of these priorities are more worthy or which risks are more acute. However, US policymakers should approach the issue of encouraging allied burden sharing with their eyes wide open to the risks, and to the reality that although observers more typically worry about the problems associated with too little allied burden sharing, such as straining scarce US resources or failing to deter adversaries, successfully encouraging allies to do more introduces its own set of challenges. The amount of burden sharing the United States solicits from its allies may vary across cases, but no matter how it balances these competing priorities, it will have little choice but to face the tradeoffs they pose.

Notes

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