

19. Traditional Allies Are Not Permanent Allies

MID-NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN, although not hegemonic, was “first among equals” in the global power balance. Its then foreign minister and future prime minister, Lord Palmerston, asserted a proposition about Britain’s “interests” and allies that is remarkably relevant to the global position of the United States today.

Palmerston asserted that “we have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies,” but that Britain’s “interests are eternal and perpetual.”

To make Palmerston’s proposition relevant to the U.S. position today requires a modest adjustment and some further elaboration. Changing circumstances can change national interests: for example, progress in weapons technology as well as in the techniques of terrorism have altered America’s vital interests. In the twenty-first century these interests include, as they have not in the past, preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to other nations and especially preventing acquisition of such

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weapons by terrorists within or outside the jurisdictions of nation-states.

Furthermore, in the flux and diversity of today's world, Palmerston's dichotomy between allies and enemies is insufficient to describe the shifting stances that other countries adopt toward the United States and that the United States adopts in response. Frequent references by pundits, scholars, and policymakers to America's "traditional allies"—notably France and Germany—are hardly adequate or accurate in characterizing where, when, and why these and other countries ally with, or distance themselves from, the United States or actively oppose it on major security and foreign policy issues.

On some of these issues France and Germany align with the United States. Intervention in Afghanistan and combating international terrorism are examples. On other issues, these "traditional allies" directly and vociferously oppose policies proposed or adopted by the United States. Besides the well-publicized instances of their sharp opposition to U.S. policies relating to Iraq and North Korea, a less conspicuous but significant example is the embargo on sales to China of advanced conventional weapons (such as attack aircraft and medium-range missiles). Concern for a possible reprise of the 1996 crisis in the Taiwan Strait has led the United States to urge that this embargo—originally imposed jointly by the European Union and the United States after the Tiananmen massacre of 1989—should be maintained, notwithstanding the particularly close and cooperative relations that the United States currently has with China. Contrariwise, France has recently urged the EU to abandon the embargo.

A simple litmus test provides a good fix on which countries generally and predictably, if not "perpetually," align with the United States, which do not, and which fluctuate between one stance and the other. Underlying the test is the cardinal principle that defines an alliance: allies recognize and acknowledge that

they share major common interests, whether or not these are incorporated in a formal document. These shared interests constitute so-called collective goods, whose importance to the allies warrant their commitment to share in the costs and other burdens of securing those goods. Precisely how alliance burdens will be shared is invariably and inevitably subject to negotiations rather than being integral to the alliance.

Consider the following seven current and major international security issues; U.S. interests, policies, and pronouncements on all of them are clear and unequivocal:

- Countering global terrorism
- Committing to security, reconstruction, and democratization in Iraq
- Committing to security, reconstruction, and democratization in Afghanistan
- Promoting a two-state “road map” solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, while maintaining strong support for Israel
- Insisting on multilateral negotiations by the six powers (rather than unilateral negotiations by the United States) for the elimination of North Korea’s nuclear programs and capabilities
- Endorsing a peaceful resolution to Taiwan’s status through negotiations between the parties, while opposing provocative moves by Taiwan as well as the use of force by the mainland
- Demanding that Iran be inspected and monitored to assure that it forgoes nuclear weapons development

Now, consider which countries support or oppose these U.S. policies or, instead, adopt a stance of neutrality toward them. When this test is applied to the seven issues, it is perhaps not surprising to find that the policies and behaviors of Britain, Aus-

tralia, Japan, and South Korea display a strong alignment with the United States on at least five of these issues. On two of the issues—Taiwan and Israel-Palestine—the four countries incline toward more neutral stances than that of the United States.

What is more surprising is that the policies and behaviors of China, India, Pakistan, and Russia are more closely aligned with U.S. policies and interests than are those of France and Germany! Of the seven issues in this simple test, China, India, Pakistan, and Russia support the U.S. stance to an equal or greater extent than do France and Germany and oppose no more of the U.S. positions nor incline toward neutrality with respect to more of them, than do our so-called traditional allies!

One prescient implication of Palmerston's original proposition is as relevant today as it was in Palmerston's time: it is important to update and reclassify countries as allies or adversaries or something in between because traditional alignments with or against the United States are neither perpetual nor eternal.

POSTAUDIT

In the years since this was written, it can be argued that South Korea and Russia have perhaps distanced themselves farther from the United States, while France and Germany have moved somewhat closer. Apart from this qualification, the basic position presented in the piece, as well as its conclusion, remains sound.