



A Hard Look at Hard Power: Assessing the Defense Capabilities of Key U.S. Allies and Security Partners

Gary J. Schmitt

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Since World War II, a key element of America's grand strategy has been its worldwide network of strategic allies and partners. This network has provided the United States with the framework for sustaining its global presence, enhanced deterrence against adversaries in key regions of the world, and, when called upon, provided men and materiel necessary to fight wars. Indeed, since the fall of the Berlin Wall, with one exception—the U.S. invasion of Panama in December 1989—American forces have not engaged in a major conflict without allies fighting alongside them. Although, in the words of Bill Clinton administration Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the United States might be “the indispensable nation,” as a matter of practice, America is so in conjunction with its security partners.

This practice is grounded in four simple considerations. The first and most straightforward is that allies might have capabilities that increase the overall “punching power” of a given military campaign. Second, allied militaries, even when requiring the assistance of U.S. enablers, will often reduce the overall burden on U.S. forces. Third, and related to the second consideration, is that, when confronted with two major military campaigns as in Iraq and Afghanistan in the last decade, the United States required additional forces to sustain both campaigns simultaneously. As a matter of “economy of force,” allied militaries helped “hold” Afghanistan against the Taliban as the body of American military forces turned their attention to the main action in Iraq from 2003 to 2009. And, finally, although U.S. administrations routinely claim the prerogative of acting unilaterally to address threats to U.S. security, the American body politic prefers to act in conjunction with allies—especially democratic allies—when engaging in military operations. It does so for the simple reason that the American public and its leaders believe that coalitions of like-minded liberal governments confers a degree of legitimacy on such operations that unilateral action is short of. Whether this is necessarily the case—and, arguably, unilateral actions can be just as legitimate as those undertaken under “collective security” arrangements in certain circumstances—the political and diplomatic reality is that the United States favors going to war with other democracies.

Despite this preference for coalitions, following the end of the Cold War and the existential threat posed by the Soviet Union and its Iron Curtain allies, increasingly less attention was paid to America's allies—especially their “hard power” capabilities—in the 1990s. Everyone, including the United States, was busy collecting on the “peace dividend” that seemed to flow from the fact that the West was no longer facing a military superpower. To be sure, there were new missions for our European allies, such as in the Balkans and Africa, but those missions did not require militaries of the scale that had previously been under arms. Moreover, savings from cutting the size of the militaries could then be put to modernizing and reshaping them; it would be a “win-win” for America's security partners. Except it was not.

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