Allies and Access: Implications of an American Turn Away from Alliances

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Abstract A defining feature of the post-1945 international system is the American network of allies and partners that has underpinned its global power. Recent developments within the United States and in the international system have severely strained that alliance network. If it collapses, what is at stake? Existing scholarship in International Relations highlights losses in aggregated military capabilities, reduced diplomatic support, and lost trade. In this essay we review these benefits and another that has been overlooked: ally-enabled access. *Access* refers to permission from allies and partners to engage in military and intelligence missions within their borders on their territory, through their airspace, or in their territorial waters. Access via America's allies and security partners has enabled Washington to use foreign sovereign spaces for military logistics, military operations, and foreign surveillance to overcome the tyranny of distance. Examples include permission from allies and partners in the Middle East to allow the US Air Force to fly from their bases to strike targets in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11, and US intelligence installations built and operated by permission from Pakistani, Turkish, and Japanese territory during the Cold War. We describe the broad functions of alliances and show how access has been key to projection of American military and intelligence power at a global scale. Perhaps limiting or ending America's global hegemonic role is desirable; perhaps it is dangerous. We argue that accounting for the contributions of access made by allies and security partners is critical if scholars, policymakers, and publics are to properly assess what is at stake in an American turn away from alliances.

The United States' post–World War II alliance network, which some have called the "Shield of the Republic,"[2] is under perhaps its greatest strain in its nearly eighty-year existence. Some attribute this strain to Donald Trump, who heavily criticized the US alliance system during his first term as president and, in his second term, seems poised to completely rewrite the terms of that network. The strains on the US alliance network are not limited to Trump, let alone internal factors. This is also a transitional moment in world politics, with the end of US unipolarity and the rise of multiple

1. Author order is alphabetical.
2. Rapp Hooper 2020.

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major powers. The internal and systemic conditions under which the American alliance system was created have changed, raising the question of whether its alliances and partnerships will also change. If the US system of security allies and partnerships were to end as we know it, what impact would it have on US foreign policy and the shape of the international system? Clear answers to this question have implications for whether and why the United States should continue to support a system of alliances and security partners, and for understanding the implications if it does not.

There is no doubt that the US system of alliances and security partners carries with it a financial burden,[3] and, consequently, there are long-standing complaints that US allies should "do more."[4] Scholars and policymakers have also argued that alliances and a US security umbrella more broadly can embolden other states to act more aggressively and to potentially entrap the United States in foreign wars.[5] The Trump administration has raised similar questions regarding security partners that are not formal treaty allies, asking whether the United States should subsidize the security of nontreaty allies like Ukraine, Taiwan, and Qatar. Yet understanding the function and value of the US system of alliances and partnerships requires accounting not only for the cost of those relationships but also its benefits. Here we revisit the fundamental question: What do states, particularly major powers like the United States, gain from such relationships? When it comes to allies, why bother?

We conceptualize allies broadly as "formal or informal arrangements for security cooperation between two or more sovereign states."[6] These include formal alliance treaty members,[7] signatories of defense cooperation agreements,[8] participants in ad hoc coalition,[9] and states with patterns of security cooperation but no formal relationship.[10] The variety of forms these relationships take reflects the variety of purposes they serve. We develop an updated typology focused on the security, diplomatic, and economic benefits of alliances. We highlight a category of security-related benefits within this typology that has been largely overlooked by International Relations scholarship and the current administration: the benefits of *access*.

Access refers to decisions by states to allow other states' military and intelligence services to operate inside their borders, on their land, in their territorial waters, or through their airspace. We show how US alliances and partnerships, in addition to providing routine or peacetime basing, offer contingency access: that is, permission to engage in active combat operations and military logistics during war from within their borders. When states allow the US military to fight wars from inside their borders, they make it possible for the United States to bring the full weight of its military power to bear against adversaries around the world. We also highlight the importance

3. Alley and Fuhrmann 2021.
4. See Olson and Zeckhauser 1966; Blankenship 2023; Becker et al. 2024.
5. See Walt 1987; Snyder 1984; Posen 2014.
6. Walt 1987, 12.
7. Leeds et al. 2000; Benson 2012.
8. Kinne and Kang 2023.
9. Kreps 2011; Wolford 2015.
10. Henry 2022, 14.

of access in the logistics of collecting high-quality intelligence—an easily overlooked security benefit that is distinct from military operations and relevant during peacetime and wartime. Proper attention to access provides a more complete picture of how allies have enabled US power projection around the world.

We use these ideas to help make sense of the potential implications of substantial changes in US security relationships. If the United States weakens its global network of allies, it could lose more than the defense budgets, coalition contributions, and the legitimacy conferred through international cooperation. Losing allies could mean an end to open access—in part because it is an underappreciated benefit of such partnerships. Without access, the United States severely restricts its ability to project military and intelligence power. Reasonable people may disagree about whether the United States should seek to maintain hegemony.[11] These are important debates with implications for the purpose of allies. Our core claim is that policies toward US allies should reflect what is really at stake. Simply put, turning away from allies could mean forgoing open access, and access denied would mean the end of US hegemony and of the global order US hegemony underwrites.

Reconsidering the Benefits of Allies

What is the point of having allies, whether through a formal treaty or via informal security partnerships? The traditional understanding of alliances is that they are a means of achieving security via capability aggregation,[12] or "external balancing."[13] The work of Morrow helped scholars to broaden their understanding of the function of alliances to include nonsecurity benefits like enhancing the independent influence, or "autonomy," of a major power in world politics.[14]

Alliances and security partnerships can offer three sets of benefits: security, diplomatic, and economic. Such relationships can support economic ties, whether those allies provide raw materials,[15] offer trading markets,[16] or are willing to hold a security patron's currency.[17] Diplomatic benefits pertain to the autonomy benefits highlighted by Morrow, the legitimacy conferred by even token participation by coalition partners in the military efforts of the major power,[18] and diplomatic support for the broader policy pursuits of a major power ally.[19] A benefit that sits at the intersection of diplomatic and security issues is greater control over the foreign and defense policies of allies, including decisions to initiate war, make defense

11. Gholz, Press, and Sapolsky 1997; Posen 2008; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth 2012; Priebe et al. 2024.
12. Altfeld 1984; Snyder 1984.
13. Waltz 1979.
14. Morrow 1991, 1994.
15. Croteau and Poast 2020.
16. Fordham 2010.
17. Norrlof 2020.
18. Kreps 2011.
19. Kim 2016; Henke 2019.

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investments, and develop operational plans. American security assurances can also reduce the desire of allies to weaponize their nuclear energy programs, as in South Korea and Japan.[20]

While economic and broader diplomatic benefits are important, our focus is on the third set of benefits: security. The security benefit most emphasized in past scholarship and by the Trump administration is the pooling of equipment and personnel to deter or fight a common adversary.[21] Exclusive focus on capability aggregation in the form of pooling resources can generate concerns about unequal burden sharing.[22] Scholars measure allies' contribution to collective security via indicators of capability aggregation such as an ally's level of defense spending,[23] the complementarity of its defense investments,[24] or its provision of combat power during war.[25] These same allied investments in defense can help prevent wars from happening in the first place,[26] although the efficacy of this deterrence benefit is difficult to empirically measure.[27]

While important, scholarly studies of allies largely overlook a second set of security benefits they offer: access. Allies, with or without formal treaties, can share the burden of security not only by spending on defense or contributing their troops and materiel to coalitions, but by allowing each other's troops and materiel inside their borders. Access includes permission for military basing, which has been studied in existing work.[28] But basing is just one dimension of access—and not necessarily the most important.

Allies grant access in many forms. Allies can allow states' military services to transit through their territory, resupply in their ports, or fly through their skies. Allies can allow states' intelligence services to build and operate surveillance infrastructure without ever committing to hosting a military base. Basing itself is a broad category of access that can be usefully disaggregated. An ally can let a foreign state own and operate bases from inside its sovereign territory; alternatively, the host can allow a state to use its own bases. An ally can allow a state to operate from its bases in peacetime only or to fight wars from inside its borders.

The value of access is rooted in a concept that has been underappreciated by scholars of alliances: the "tyranny of distance." Kenneth Boulding introduced the concept of the "loss of strength" gradient[29] in which the potency of military power diminishes the further away it is used. Boulding's insight reflects the stubborn

20. Gavin 2015.
21. Altfeld 1984; Snyder 1997.
22. Blankenship 2023; Sandler and George 2025.
23. Becker, Poast, and Hasebrook 2025.
24. Gannon 2025.
25. Snyder 1997; Morrow 1991; Kreps 2011; Auerswald and Saideman 2014; Weitsman 2004; Cappella Zielinski and Grauer 2022.
26. Fearon 1997; Morrow 1994; Smith 1995; Leeds and Johnson 2017.
27. Leeds and Johnson 2017; Kenwick, Vasquez, and Powers 2015; Kenwick and Vasquez 2017.
28. Examples include Blankenship and Joyce 2020; Nieman, Martinez Machain, Chyzh, and Bell 2021; Cooley 2008; Allen, Martinez Machain, Flynn, and Stravers 2023; Kim 2023; Allen, VanDusky–Allen, and Flynn 2016; Musgrave and Ward 2023; Reiter and Poast 2021.
29. Boulding 1962; see also Blainey 1966.

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challenges raised by military logistics. Later scholarship has further shown how security-related missions and activities become more complicated at greater distance.[30] A similar insight drives the logic of the "stopping power of water."[31]

Combat missions are harder to execute from a distance due to the practicalities that guns on tanks and aircraft do not shoot very far, aircraft need refueling, and short-range weapons systems must be transported close to the adversary. Sustainment likewise requires the transportation of the voluminous and bulky material necessary to keep the tip of the spear in the fight. Similarly, intelligence gathering is degraded by distance. Obtaining documents or insights from human sources requires intimate proximity. Wireless radio signals weaken as they travel. Reconnaissance aircraft require maintenance and refueling. There are exceptions—that is, intelligence collected at a distance via space-based platforms or cyber intrusions—but, on the whole, good intelligence is harder to obtain without close access.

Access offers a solution to tyranny of distance. If a major power can secure permission to use the territory, airspace, and waters of a foreign country that are near an adversary it wishes to deter, a theater of military operations, or a target of intelligence collection, this radically reduces the logistical burden of military and intelligence activity. Such access can, in turn, greatly increase the military and intelligence capability a major power can bring to bear against distant adversaries.

The Importance of Ally-Enabled Access

We now turn to explaining precisely how access has facilitated the projection of US military and intelligence power. We argue that access granted by the United States' network of alliances and security partnerships has underpinned the US-led global system since 1945. Access has allowed Washington to deploy personnel and infrastructure near potential combat theaters, move materiel, conduct logistics, and fight directly from within foreign territory. Foreign partners have also permitted the United States to engage in intelligence collection activities. This has extended the reach of Washington's ability to "see" and "hear." In short, access has allowed the United States to overcome the tyranny of distance, command the commons,[32] and project power around the world.

The significance of access contributions for the projection of US military power can be understood across two scenarios: routine access during times of peace, and contingency access during times of war. Routine access during times of peace is perhaps the better understood and studied form of access. Allies permitting routine access, or forward presence, allow the US military to put its people and/or the infrastructure to support them inside their borders on a regular basis. The central purpose of forward presence facilitated by routine access is deterrence of interstate aggression, by punishment and by denial. The logic of "tripwire forces" holds that by

30. Hulme and Gartzke 2021; Hulme et al. 2025.
31. Mearsheimer 2001.
32. Posen 2008, 2014.

putting US skin in the game, adversaries will calculate that attacking the ally will surely trigger a broader US intervention in the war. When US forward presence is more substantial, it can shift the local balance of military power such that adversaries calculate that they would be unable to achieve their military objectives quickly at reasonable cost.[33]

But routine access may not be the most important form of access offered by US allies. Allies often grant the US contingency access during times of war, meaning they allow the United States to conduct military operations against an adversary from inside their sovereign boundaries even if they are not under direct threat by an adversary. For every military operation, US allies not only decide whether, how many, and what kind of forces to contribute to the war effort, but also whether, how much, and what kind of contingency access to grant the US military. States can deny contingency access altogether, they can grant restricted contingency access, or they can grant total contingency access. States that grant total contingency access permit the US military to transit through their territory, skies, and/or waters en route to a target, conduct logistical operations in support of the military operation within their borders, and conduct direct combat operations from within their borders.

Consider Operation Desert Storm in 1991, hailed as the pinnacle demonstration of US military power. During Operation Desert Storm, the United States conducted a massive sealift and airlift to bases in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey, stopping along the way at bases in Europe and North Africa. Egypt permitted the passage of US aircraft carriers through the Suez Canal. Once in theater, the United States Air Force decimated the Iraqi Army from runways in Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and, of course, Saudi Arabia. In Desert Storm, the United States' allies, both formal alliance members and security partners, contributed less than 15 percent of the coalition's total sorties against the Iraqi Air Force and Iraqi Army. However, the vast majority of the airpower the United States brought to bear in the Gulf War was facilitated by access from the United States' allies.[34]

Consider also NATO's effort to stop President Slobodan Milosevic's ethnic cleansing of Albanians. In the aerial bombing campaign Operation Allied Force, the coalition in total flew almost 40,000 sorties. While the United States flew the vast majority of the sorties and coalition partners flew only a small fraction, the United States flew almost entirely from bases inside coalition partners' borders.[35] Force contributions by US allies in Operation Allied Force might have been less than impressive, but their contributions in access were decisive.

More generally, try to imagine any US-led military operation since World War II without access: Vietnam. Iraq I. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The ongoing war against the Islamic State. The United States generated the most combat power by far in each of these wars. But it did so largely from inside the borders of allies proximate to the targets. Without contingency access from its allies, the United States would

33. Reiter and Poast 2021.
34. Keaney and Cohen 1993.
35. Lambeth 2001.

have had to generate all its military power through naval aviation or long-range weapons systems. This would have dramatically raised the costs and lowered the effectiveness of the operations. Probably, for better or for worse, it would mean that the United States would not have conducted many of those operations at all because it could not have done so at an acceptable cost. It is unclear whether the United States would (or should) defend Taiwan if the People's Republic of China attempts to seize it by force. It is clear, however, that without access from allies in the region, the United States would be unable to do so.[36]

In addition to facilitating the projection of US military power, access-granting allies facilitate the projection of US intelligence power. Intelligence, or the raw data and insights states obtain through clandestine means, enables diplomacy and military planning, for defensive missions (for example, warning of military attack) and offensive actions (for example, identifying targets for a bombing campaign). The collection of intelligence—meaning the methods states use to acquire raw informational data about foreign intentions, capabilities, and events—relies on its own kind of infrastructure. This includes the physical sites, installations, and buildings that house intelligence collection and analytic functions. Such sites need to be near the intelligence targets, which are not often physically close to the United States. For this reason, since 1945, the United States has consistently and broadly relied on allies to permit building installations and operate intelligence collection activities on its territory.

The infrastructure for collection activity is easy to overlook but an essential part of its logistics. Overhead imagery obtained via drones or crewed aircraft rely on foreign airfields for take-off and landing and communication links to transmit photographs.[37] Signals interception relies on some kind of sensor (that is, an antenna) positioned to detect a wireless radio or other signal at the correct frequency and direction.[38] Seismic monitors in foreign locations enable states to monitor nuclear programs of other states.[39] Human-source intelligence often requires intimate access inside the target of interest. Such logistics are part of the "how" of intelligence collection, the "sources and methods" that states work hard to hide.[40]

Declassification of US official records is shedding more light on intelligence collection logistics and the special role of its alliances and security partnerships. One example is Turkey, America's NATO ally. Beginning in the mid-1950s, the United States operated a network of installations for intercepting missile telemetry signals and military communications along the Turkish coast of the Black Sea.[41] Access to Turkish territory allowed the United States the rare opportunity to build infrastructure close to Soviet missile testing grounds and military/naval movements in the Black

36. Anderson and Press 2025.
37. Duffy et al. 2018.
38. Clark 2013.
39. Richelson 2007.
40. Carnegie and Carson 2020.
41. Johnson 1998. When multiple versions of a declassified history are available publicly, we indicate the specific version with the second year.

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Sea. As one history notes, "no piece of real estate during the Cold War bulked larger than Turkey" from foreign surveillance activity and this activity "came to dominate American–Turkish relations."[42]

Another example, also within the NATO alliance, is Denmark. Denmark's control of Greenland offered the United States a strategically valuable position in the Far North that was highly valuable for American intelligence collection and early warning. The shortest route for any attack by Moscow was over the North Pole. Early warning installations built in Greenland could detect incoming Soviet bombers and, later, ballistic missiles.[43] Decades later, the American presence in Greenland has evolved into an important installation for space situational awareness and, in the second Trump administration, a potential new patch of American territory.[44]

The story in East Asia was similar. Along with controversial military bases in places like Okinawa, the United States also built and operated sensitive intelligence collection installations in Japan. A declassified National Security Agency (NSA) history notes the important role of signal intercept sites at Misawa and Wakkanai in Japan, which allowed the United States to listen in on Soviet military chatter during its 1983 shootdown of civilian flight KAL 007.[45] During the Vietnam War, Washington relied on access to Thailand for its surveillance activities. The NSA "used Thailand as a principal base of cryptologic operations"[46] while the CIA flew flights from Thai territory.[47]

Even as surveillance technology evolved, US allies continued to provide important forms of access. In the 1960s, the United States obtained access to British-controlled Seychelles islands in the Indian Ocean to build a space tracking installation for its new satellite reconnaissance program.[48] Later the United States built installations in Australia. Later exposed by Edward Snowden,[49] a large installation at Pine Gap has, for decades, enabled American satellite-based detection of Soviet missile launches and interception of signals.[50] Before its revolution in 1979, American leaders built a close relationship with the Shah in Iran in large part due to his willingness to permit the operation of sensitive intelligence facilities on Iranian territory.[51]

Implications for the Future of US Foreign Policy and World Order

Given the benefits provided by of alliances and security partnerships, as well as the broader role they have played for the United States, what are their implications for the

42. Johnson 1998.
43. Bernard 2004.
44. Crowley and Haberman 2025.
45. Johnson 1998.
46. Ibid.
47. Pedlow and Weizenbach 1992.
48. Arnold 2005.
49. Dent 2017.
50. Richelson 2002.
51. Nutt 2024.

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United States and the international order going forward? If the United States dramatically reorients its policies toward its allies, it will have significant implications for the diplomatic, economic, and security benefits it has long derived from those relationships. That, in turn, could reshape the world order.

Such questions arise now because of four broad patterns in the Trump administration's approach to allies thus far. First, the United States has imposed historically high tariffs on its closest allies while demanding significant improvements in how US exports are treated. Second, it has aggressively demanded that US allies pay more for their defense. At the same time, Washington is using language and adopting policies that raise doubts about its own commitment to defending its allies and upholding broader norms of territorial integrity. Third, the Trump administration has by and large been toughest on its traditional liberal democratic allies while exhibiting a proclivity to take a softer line on autocratic adversaries of the United States. Fourth, the administration has engaged in broad attack on the institutions and practices of multilateralism and has embraced unilateral military action, most notably in the American military strike against Iran's nuclear facilities and on a Venezuelan speedboat.

Returning to the prior typology, such actions could endanger the diplomatic, economic, and/or security benefits that alliances and security partnerships have historically provided. For example, allies may balk at offering diplomatic cover to an American administration that wavers in its commitments. A future effort to assemble a "coalition of the willing" for a military campaign could find fewer friends and allies willing to actively participate or otherwise lend public support. The economic implications of the Trump administration's actions are likely to be mixed and will depend on the outcome of ongoing bargaining. On one hand, economic pressure via tariffs could yield improved investment commitments and terms of trade from allies. A US–Japan trade deal reached in September 2025 is one example. On the other hand, the shakier US security commitment to allies could make many of them less willing to offer favorable economic treatment. This and other stumbling blocks could prevent the United States from reaching generous new deals, leaving aggregate tariff levels higher and diminishing the economic perks of alliances.

While the implications for the diplomatic and economic benefits are important, perhaps the most consequential changes will be in the category of security. On the one hand, the Trump administration's singular focus on the defense spending of allies has already produced meaningful increases in defense spending by its European allies, as in NATO's commitment to invest 5 percent of GDP on defense by 2035. This could reduce the free riding that has long been a complaint of the US toward its allies.[52] Moral hazard should also be reduced, as allies less certain of the United States' security umbrella should be more cautious about escalating conflicts against adversaries. Yet, over time, increased security independence does have a downside. The more capable the United States' allies become, the more they can operate without US support and initiate policies—including starting crises or even wars—that the

52. Becker et al. 2024.

United States opposes. Nuclear proliferation is also more likely in a world characterized by wavering US assurances and more frequent interstate wars.

When it comes to access, the United States may lose the permissions that have facilitated US military and intelligence power projection since World War II. To be clear, some host states have a strong self-interest in US access. Countries like South Korea and Taiwan face direct threats from large security rivals; access could be critical to their survival. Yet in many other places, the United States will no longer be able to take for granted the access it may need. It has lost access in the past. Consider Turkey's refusal to allow the US Army to open a northern front against Iraq in 2003. Or Spain and France's refusal to allow the US Air Force to overfly their territory en route to bomb Libya in 1986. The United States lost access—sometimes overnight—to intelligence installations in Pakistan, Turkey, and Iran during the 1960s and 1970s. If the PRC attacks Taiwan, US military access to bases in South Korea and the Philippines are far from assured. Such instances would likely multiply.

States have many reasons to restrict or deny access, and the pressure and disruptions from Washington, combined with the shifting balance of power, may increase the perceived costs and reduce the perceived benefits of letting the United States in. Granting access increases the risk a host is the target of military attacks or sabotage. Allowing a foreign power like the United States to attack a neighbor from its territory can invite retaliation. Allowing the United States to collect intelligence can similarly attract the coercive attention of an adversary, a factor that led both Turkish and Australian leaders to press for reduced US access in the Cold War. Given the Trump administration's wavering commitment to collective defense, such criticism could convince allies that they have little to gain from offering access to a state unwilling to protect them in return. This could be particularly decisive in a strategic environment characterized by rising powers and the proliferation of offensive weapons that make states increasingly vulnerable to attack.[53]

Allies may also restrict or deny access for reputational reasons. Hosts may deny access to spare themselves the reputational costs abroad and at home of abetting a great power whose foreign policy is increasingly viewed as illegitimate, particularly if the military operation for which access is requested is controversial. States may also deny the US access due to its support for allies engaged in what many foreign capitals see as human rights abuses, such as Saudi Arabia in the War in Yemen or Israel in the War in Gaza. The United States may find itself relying on hefty cash payments to try to buy access, and it might find itself unable to purchase the alliance benefits it previously enjoyed for a much lower cost. Future research can deepen and extend these ideas, including by analyzing the causes of variation in access, why access changes over time, and generating new empirical evidence on the consequences of different access arrangements.

In short, the current administration's shift in approach toward its alliances and security partnerships may reduce some alliance costs but do significant damage to diplomatic and access-related security benefits. Loss of access, a form of burden

53. Poznansky and Sand 2025.

sharing often taken for granted by policymakers, is a significant but overlooked risk that affects both American military and intelligence power. There is debate in International Relations scholarship and within the current administration about whether the United States should continue to project power globally or give up its global role and focus on its borders. Ending access would end the debate. Access denied would mean the end of American hegemony and the end of US-led world order.

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