

CHAPTER 1

**INTRODUCTION: AMERICAN  
POWER AT THE GLOBAL  
FRONTIER**

It is by the combined efforts of the weak, to resist the reign of force and constant wrong, that in the rapid change but slow progress of four hundred years, liberty has been preserved and finally understood.

—Lord Acton

What is the value of allies at the outer frontier of American power? Since the end of the Second World War, the United States has maintained a network of alliances with vulnerable states situated near the strategic crossroads, choke points, and arteries of the world's major regions. In East Asia, Washington has built formal and informal security relationships with island and coastal states dotting the Asian mainland: South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines, as well as midsized offshore powers Japan and Australia. In the Middle East, it has maintained a special relationship with democratic ally Israel and security links with moderate Arab states Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates (UAE). And in East-Central Europe, in the period since the Cold War, the United States has formed alliances with the group of mostly small, post-communist states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria—that line the Baltic-to-Black-Sea corridor between Germany and Russia.



**Figure 1.1.** U.S. frontier allies worldwide.

Despite their obvious geographic and political dissimilarities, these three regional clusters of U.S. allies share a number of important strategic characteristics (see figure 1.1). All are composed of small and mid-sized powers (most have between five and fifty million inhabitants and small landmass). Most are democracies and free market economies deeply invested in the Bretton Woods global economic and institutional framework. All, to a greater extent than other U.S. allies, occupy strategically important global real estate along three of the world's most contested geopolitical fault lines. Most sit near a maritime choke point or critical land corridor: the Asian littoral routes (South China Sea, North China Sea, Sea of Japan, Straits of Taiwan, Straits of Malacca); the Persian Gulf and eastern Mediterranean;

and the Baltic and Black Seas and space connecting them that underpins the stability of the western Eurasian littoral.

Perhaps most important from a twenty-first-century U.S. strategic perspective, all these allies are located in close proximity to larger, historically predatory powers—China, Iran, and Russia, respectively—that are international competitors to the United States and within whose respective spheres of influence they would likely fall, should they lose some or all of their strategic independence. None of these states is militarily powerful; with the important exceptions of Japan and Israel, they lack a realistic prospect for military self-sufficiency in any protracted crisis. As a result, all look to the United States, either explicitly or implicitly, to act as the ultimate guarantor of their national independence and security provider of last resort.

The view has begun to take root in the United States that these sprawling alliances are a liability—either because of the costs that they impose through the necessity of maintaining a large military and overseas bases or because of the perils of entrapment in conflicts involving faraway disputes. Maintaining extensive, expensive, and binding relationships with exposed and militarily weak states located near large rivals, we are told, will cause more problems than they are worth in the geopolitics of the twenty-first century. Citing nineteenth-century Britain’s alleged aloofness to foreign states, domestic critics of alliances counsel Washington to spurn continental commitments to small and needy allies. Echoing Prussian chancellor Otto von Bismarck, these critics warn that the United States must avoid intervening in conflicts that aren’t “worth the bones of a single Pomeranian grenadier,” whether that conflict be in Estonia or in the South China Sea.

But these views are wrong—and dangerous. For the past sixty years U.S. foreign policy has pursued exactly the opposite course, and for good reason. The United States has deliberately cultivated bilateral security linkages with small, otherwise defenseless states strewn across the world’s most hotly contested regions, militarily building them up and even providing overt guarantees to them. In fact, it has often seemed to value these states precisely *because of* their dangerous locations. During the Cold War America’s overriding imperative of

containing the Soviet Union lent geopolitical value to relationships with even the weakest allies, which in turn utilized U.S. support to strengthen regional bulwarks against the spread of communist influence. In the unipolar landscape that followed, the United States surprised many foreign policy analysts by not only *not* dismantling this globe-circling alliance network (as would be expected of a great power after winning a major war) but actually expanding it through the recruitment of new allies from among the former communist zone of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). In both structural environments, allies have been the “glue” of the U.S.-led global order: in the Cold War by containing the Soviet Union and in the post-Cold War period by sustaining the benefits of stability and prosperity that the Cold War victory helped to create.

These alliances have not been cheap for America to maintain, in either financial or strategic terms. To a greater extent than in relationships with large, wealthy, insulated states like Britain, Germany, or Australia, American patronage of frontier states like Poland, Israel, and Taiwan entails potential strategic costs, insofar as such states lie at the outer reaches of American power and require recurrent demonstrations of physical support vis-à-vis would-be aggressors. To underwrite the independence and security of these states, the United States has for decades made available a wide array of support that includes both “normal” alliance mechanisms—formal or informal security guarantees, military basing, coverage under the U.S. nuclear umbrella—as well as other special forms of support targeted to the needs of these states, such as military funding, troop exercises, forward naval deployments, technology transfers, access to special U.S. weapons, and various forms of economic, political, and military aid. In the diplomatic realm, Washington has paid a kind of “sponsorship premium” for these states, providing backing and support in the regional disputes in which many inevitably find themselves embroiled. The more exposed the ally, the higher this sponsorship premium is.

Not surprisingly, critics of an active U.S. foreign policy have often complained about the expense and risk required for maintaining these alliances.<sup>1</sup> But despite this criticism, America’s commitment to these states has remained steady for the better part of seventy years, making it one of the most consistent tenets of modern U.S. foreign

policy. And in both strategic and economic terms, it would be hard to argue that the United States has not gotten a good return on this investment. By exerting a strong, benign presence in formerly unstable regions, U.S. patronage of alliances in East Asia, the Middle East, and East-Central Europe has helped to contain and deter the ambitions of large rivals, suppress regional conflicts, keep crucial trade routes open, and promote democracy and rule of law in historic conflict zones. In East Asia, the U.S. presence facilitated pathways of financial investment that contributed to the creation of some of the world's most dynamic economies and major engines of global growth while guarding the sea-lanes through which the majority of U.S.-bound energy supplies and consumer goods pass. In East-Central Europe, U.S. efforts to propel NATO and European Union (EU) expansion effectively eliminated the geopolitical vacuum that had helped to generate the conditions for three global wars in the twentieth century—two hot and one cold. And in the Middle East, U.S. engagement has helped to contain regional cycles of instability and prevent their spillover into global energy markets and the American homeland. In both the bipolar and unipolar international settings, allies have been indispensable to maintaining the global order that has allowed for the peace and prosperity of the “American” century.

Part of the reason U.S. patronage of states in these regions has been so successful is that U.S. allies and potential challengers have understood that it is unlikely to change suddenly, in large part because of how deeply encoded in contemporary American strategic thinking has been the support of small allies. Since the turn of the twentieth century the United States has invested its strategic resources in a combination of naval power and, after two world wars, “defense in depth” through a presence in the Eurasian littorals—what the mid-twentieth-century American strategist Nicholas Spykman called the global “rimland” (see figure 1.2). This pattern of forward engagement is not only the basis for American investment in allies located in the three hinge-point regions, it is a central tenet of U.S. foreign policy. Building on this foundation, America, though primarily a maritime power like Britain, has avoided the island dilemma of being perceived as fickle, retiring, and unreliable—in short, of becoming a second “perfidious Albion.”



**Figure 1.2.** Spykman's rimlands.

Source: Mark R. Polelle, *Raising Cartographic Consciousness: The Social and Foreign Policy Vision of Geopolitics in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 118.

But there are signs that America may be beginning to rethink its approach to alliances. In recent years U.S. policy makers' view of the relative costs and benefits of maintaining far-flung small-ally networks has begun to shift. The change is partly fueled by adjustments in global geopolitics and the "rise" or resurgence of revisionist states, many of which claim to have historic spheres of influence that overlap with the regions where America's alliance obligations are highest and its strategic reach most constrained. Another driver has been the changing U.S. economic landscape and constraints on the U.S. defense budget, which call into question whether the United States will continue to maintain the force structures that have made its geographically widespread alliances possible to begin with. Finally, and perhaps most important, Washington appears to be deprioritizing many of its longest-standing relationships with traditional allies in pursuit of grand bargains with large-power rivals, if necessary over the heads of its allies.

The net effect of these changes in the geopolitical, economic, and political realms has been to challenge the central paradigm on which the United States has based its strategy for managing global alliances since the Second World War. What value do alliances hold for America in the twenty-first century? Do the benefits of alliances that led the United States to accumulate them during bipolarity and unipolarity still apply under conditions of contested primacy? How does a great power that has accumulated extensive small-power security commitments maintain them when the geopolitical landscape becomes more competitive? What do geopolitically vulnerable allies like Israel, Poland, or Taiwan have to offer America amid the rise of large powers? Is it still worth paying the economic and strategic costs to provide for their security? If so, how should the United States rank the importance of the weapons, bases, and funding that sustain these alliances alongside other national security priorities in an era of constricted budgets? Would the United States be better off reducing its commitments to these states and maintaining a freer hand in global politics, as critics claim?

These are the kinds of questions that are likely to confront American diplomats and strategists with growing frequency—and urgency—in the years ahead, as the shift from the post-Cold War global order accelerates. Such questions are not new in the history of international politics, but they are relatively unfamiliar to the U.S. policy establishment, which has arguably not had to reexamine the fundamentals of American grand strategy in many decades. In recent years Washington has been slow to study the geopolitical changes that are under way in the world and respond to them in a strategic way. Increasingly the U.S. foreign policy agenda seems to be driven by a combination of crisis management—Iran, Syria, North Korea—and a political agenda that takes the basic contours of the U.S.-led international system for granted and focuses on achieving laudable but unrealistic and outright silly goals, such as global nuclear disarmament. Both approaches tend to magnify the apparent advantages of partnering with large powers on ad hoc issues as the preferred template for U.S. foreign policy over the near term while deferring for a later day bigger questions about how to sustain U.S. leadership in the international order.

But American grand strategy cannot remain on autopilot forever—geopolitics is forcing its way onto the agenda. Rivals and allies of the United States alike perceive that changes are afoot in America’s capabilities and comportment as a great power and are responding purposefully to the opportunities and threats that these changes present. This is partly driven by the hypothesis of American “decline.” In many of the world’s capitals, it is taken as an article of faith that the United States is slipping from its decades-long position of global pre-eminence and that the long-standing U.S.-led international system will eventually give way to a multipolar global power configuration. It is also driven by the perception that, declining or not, the United States is simply not interested in maintaining the stability of frontier regions—that the alliances it inherited from previous eras will be a net liability in an age of more fluid geopolitical competition.

U.S. retrenchment from these regions creates a permissive environment for rising or reassertive powers. All three of America’s primary regional rivals—China, Iran, and Russia—possess prospective spheres of influence that overlap with America’s exposed strategic appendages in their respective regions. Should China manage to co-opt or coerce the foreign policies of the small littoral states surrounding it, Beijing would be able to alleviate pressures on its lengthy maritime energy routes, shift strategic attention to the second island chain, and focus more on landward expansion. Similarly, should Russia, for all its economic backwardness, manage to reinsert its influence into the belt of small states along its western frontier, Moscow could consolidate its commanding position in European energy security, regain access to warm-water ports, and stymie NATO and EU influence east of Germany. Should Iran manage to gain greater influence among its small Arab neighbors, particularly those along the Persian Gulf coastline, it would be able to enhance its ability to disrupt international oil supplies.

In all three cases, America’s rivals stand to gain in potentially significant ways from U.S. retrenchment. But these powers face a dilemma. While they may sense that changes are under way in the international system and even imagine enlarged opportunities to revise the status quo, they don’t want to incur the potentially high costs of a direct confrontation with the United States. Sensing an opportunity, they want

to revise the regional order, but they are uncertain about the amount of geopolitical leeway they have and therefore the degree of license they can take in safely challenging the status quo. From the standpoint of these revisionist powers, the United States may be in retreat, by choice or necessity, but it is unclear by how much. And this makes it risky to pick a direct fight. Even in the era of sequestration, America retains many hegemonic capabilities and characteristics—including the forward-deployed system of alliances and security commitments that America continues to maintain in their own neighborhoods—that present real obstacles to aspirant powers.

Rising powers therefore have an incentive to look for *low-cost* revision—marginal gains that offer the highest possible geopolitical payoff at the lowest possible strategic price. That means not moving more aggressively or earlier than power realities will allow. And that, in turn, requires getting an accurate read of global power relationships. How deep is the top state's power reservoir? How spendable are its power assets? How determined is it to use them to stay on top? And how committed is it to defending stated interests on issues and areas that conflict with the riser? Would-be powers need to understand the likely answers to these questions *before* they act.

Historically, rising powers faced with this dilemma have found creative ways to gauge how far they can go in a fluid international system before encountering determined resistance of the leading power. One way would-be revisionists have done so historically is to employ a strategy of what might be called “probing”—that is, using low-intensity tests of the leading power on the outer limits of its strategic position. The purpose is both to assess the hegemon's willingness and ability to defend the status quo and to accomplish gradual territorial or reputational gains at the expense of the leading power if possible. These probes are conducted not where the hegemon is strong but at the outer limits of its power position, where its commitments are established (and potentially extensive) but require the greatest exertion to maintain. Here, at the periphery, the costs of probing are more manageable than those of confronting the hegemon directly, which could generate a strong response by the leader.

Probing, though not widely studied, is the natural strategy for many revisionist powers. This was the technique a rising imperial

Germany used in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as it concocted low-intensity diplomatic crises to test British resolve and alliances in various regions. There is growing evidence to suggest that the rising and resurgent powers of the twenty-first century are using this same strategy. The Russo-Georgia War (2008), the Hormuz Straits crisis (2012), the Senkaku Islands dispute (2013), the Ukrainian War (2014–present), the Baltic Sea air and naval tensions (2015), and the Spratly Islands confrontations (2015) are all examples of an increasingly frequent category of strategic behavior by revisionist powers to assess U.S. strength and level of commitment to defending the global security order. Although the exact nature of the tools involved in these crises may differ, the basic principle is the same: to avoid high-stakes challenges to America itself while conducting low-intensity reconnoitering of remote positions on the U.S. strategic map.

U.S. allies find themselves on the receiving end of these probes. Owing to their exposed geography, allies in frontier regions like Central Europe, littoral East Asia, and the Persian Gulf are some of the most security-conscious states in the world. Leaders there analyze local and global power shifts for signs of changing threat possibilities. Their first instinct is to look to America for reassurance, in keeping with the long-standing assumption of U.S. strategic support that has been the fail-safe centerpiece of their foreign policies for decades. But faced with the combination of mounting pressure from rising neighbors and growing indications of decreased political support from Washington, these states have begun to reexamine the full range of coping mechanisms available to states in their exposed positions. For the first time in decades they are contemplating new strategic menu cards in the quest for backups to, alternatives to, or possibly even eventual replacements for their decades-long security links with Washington. Like small states at previous moments of uncertainty in the history of international relations, they are exploring a variety of options, from military self-help and regional security groupings to so-called Finlandization and even bandwagoning with the nearby rising power.

Though still in its early phases, this emerging trend of allied reassessment and repositioning holds profound implications for long-term U.S. national security interests. Together the cycles of revisionist

probing and allied anxiety could fundamentally alter the security dynamics of global geopolitics, undermining factors of stability that have provided for the peace and prosperity of the world's most strategically vital regions, to the benefit of the United States and the world, since the Second World War. Such stability has not been the norm for most of these regions' histories. While a continuation of current trends would not necessarily bring an overnight deterioration in global stability (though that is certainly possible), it would impose steep costs on U.S. interests and values down the road, bringing reactivated regional security dilemmas that could ultimately drive up the costs of U.S. diplomacy; a more fragile global alliance system, fueling the need for U.S. reassurance in multiple places and stretching U.S. attention and resources; less support for U.S. missions, as allies that are worried about their own security devote less energy or will to help the United States in international missions; and, most dangerously, emboldened revisionist powers, fueled by the sense of uncertainty in frontier regions to accelerate probes of the allied periphery in hopes of low-cost gains.

This is not a world the United States should want to see emerge. Yet in many ways it is a world that current U.S. policy is helping to create.

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In 2010 we began to write about the emerging changes that are under way in America's allied frontier in a series of opinion pieces and analytical briefs for the Center for European Policy Analysis. In a spring 2011 article for *The American Interest* magazine, we described the growing tendency toward allied insecurity, revisionist probing, and the linkages between these dynamics as nascent phenomena, capable of being addressed if dealt with creatively and aggressively by U.S. policy. We continued developing this line of thinking, including elaborations of the methods of our rivals and possible counter-strategies for the United States and its allies, in subsequent articles for *The American Interest* and *The National Interest*. When we first wrote about these issues our arguments were novel and somewhat controversial. In the period since, as signs of the growing global disorder have increased, other scholars have embraced our thesis.<sup>2</sup> To further

test our assumptions, we conducted two years of additional research, visiting the capitals of key U.S. allies in East-Central Europe and East Asia and talking with U.S. and allied diplomats and military officers.

What we found was alarming. The dynamics of allied insecurity and rival probing in frontier regions are intensifying. The American alliance network is in a state of advanced crisis. Many long-standing U.S. allies believe that the United States, for reasons of either decline or disinterest, is in the process of pulling back from decades-long commitments and inaugurating a multiregional diplomatic and military retrenchment. In the three years since our first article was published, a steady succession of U.S. actions—cancellations of regionally deployed U.S. weapons systems, reductions in forward-deployed U.S. combat units, lessening of U.S. diplomatic support for traditional allies, participation in tacit bilateral bargaining with large authoritarian states, a much-touted but under-resourced Asian “pivot”—have seemed to confirm their suspicions.

Defenders of current U.S. foreign policy dispute that any one of these decisions has harmed American credibility. But it is the aggregate effect of the decisions, across regions and alongside U.S. defense budget reductions, that has convinced many U.S. allies that a downward shift in the strategic, political, and material foundations of American power is now under way. These allies see signs of advanced decay in the U.S. extended deterrence that undergirds the stability of their regions. America’s rivals have taken note of these things too. Leaders in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran are increasingly cocky: they perceive the opening of a more permissive environment, are convinced of the justness of their revisionist ambitions, and believe in the inevitability of an eventual American retrenchment from the regions that matter most to them. For these players, even a seemingly decrepit Russia, confidence in their own power potential is at an all-time high at exactly a moment when the confidence of their small neighbors (and maybe even of America itself) in U.S. power and credibility is at an all-time low. Perhaps as a result, over the past year U.S. opponents have steadily ratcheted up their probes, which in some cases—such as Russia in Ukraine—have turned violent and in other cases—such as China in the South China Sea—are coming perilously close to military confrontation.

We are at a dangerous moment in global geopolitics. The international system that the United States has built and maintained for the past several decades is still in place, but it is very fragile. For the first time in the post–Cold War era, the continuation of this system can no longer be taken for granted; virtually every element in its foundation is increasingly in question. If current trends hold, the U.S.-led global alliance network could unravel in coming years through a combination of external pressure from opportunistic powers convinced that America is in decline, internal pressures of allies that are unconvinced America will still support them in a crisis, and the failure of U.S. statecraft to prove both views wrong. Such an unraveling could undo in a few years what it took America three generations to build.

Should such an unraveling occur, it would have far-reaching negative consequences for U.S. national security, the American economy, and the wider world as we have known it for more than half a century. Unfortunately, U.S. leaders do not appear to be fully aware of this unfolding reality or the extent of its implications for the United States. This void in U.S. strategic thinking reflects a lack of understanding not only about the perceptions of America’s allies and the intentions of its rivals but also about how U.S. moves are interpreted competitively. Moreover, it reflects a general memory loss about why the United States is involved in the world’s strategic crossroad regions to begin with and the benefits we derive from maintaining a robust presence in these places. Most of all, it reflects a crisis of confidence in our own ideals and power potential at a moment in world history when a diminished American global role could fuel negative (and avoidable) geopolitical adjustments worldwide. This void in both strategy and confidence must be filled if America is to thrive and prosper in this emerging new world.

The purpose of this book is to make the strategic case for America’s frontier alliances—why they matter, how we are losing them, and what America needs to do to preserve them for a new era. We argue that, far from a hindrance, America’s global networks of front-line allies are essential elements in its success and prosperity as a great power. If anything, the changes that are under way in the international system, particularly the emergence of more assertive rival

powers to contest U.S. leadership, have enhanced the strategic value of these alliances to the United States in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 2 we track the deterioration that has occurred in the foundations of America's relations with many of its longest-standing allies over the past few years, both through a weakening of the political bonds with Washington and through diplomatic and military probes at the hands of U.S. rivals.

In chapter 3 we examine the nature of revisionist probing and the form that it takes in various regions. Drawing on historical examples of imperial Germany's use of low-intensity colonial crises to challenge Britain and its allies in the early twentieth century, we argue that rising powers are employing similar techniques in the global periphery to test America's resolve in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 4 we examine how U.S. allies are responding to the combination of probes and America's deprioritization of alliances by reconsidering their "menu cards" of options for surviving geopolitical change. Using historical examples such as Central and Eastern European states during the interwar period of the 1930s, we argue that U.S. allies, to an extent largely overlooked in Washington, are now considering a wide range of coping mechanisms to prepare for the possibility of U.S. retrenchment and examine the effects that their strategic choices could have over time.

In chapter 5 we assess the benefits of frontier alliances for the United States both historically and today. Referring to earlier work of strategists such as Sir Harold Mackinder, Nicholas Spykman, and Walter Lippmann, we argue that, for the United States as a maritime power of global reach, using forward-deployed alliances in the rimlands of Eurasia is a cost-effective tool for managing the international system that is preferable to the strategic alternatives now being presented for U.S. foreign policy.

In chapter 6 we conclude by reviewing the options at America's disposal for reversing the erosion of its frontier alliances and countering the probes of its rivals to ensure stability in the early decades of the twenty-first century. We offer recommendations for how the United States can revitalize its credibility and capabilities of itself and its allies in the world's most critical regions.