



By: *Richard Haass*

Partners, not protectorates - What will future American alliances look like?



US President Donald Trump's second administration has been clear from the outset that it would recast American foreign policy in fundamental ways.

Its **National Security Strategy**, released last November, declared that "The days of the United States propping up the entire world order like Atlas are over"—a shift that is especially significant for America's many allies and partners, which have long made dependence on the US the central tenet of their national security.

The most recent articulation of the changed American approach came last week, in Defense Secretary **Pete Hegseth's speech** in Singapore to a gathering of defense ministers and experts: "We need partners, not protectorates," Hegseth declared. "We seek alliances built on shared responsibility, not dependency. This is the maturation of our alliances in a new era."

This line of American thinking reflects, in part, the widely held view that for too long the country's security partners have not carried their weight.

There is more than a little truth to this, as many US allies have the economic wherewithal to spend more on defense.

What has traditionally held them back has been domestic politics and even a presumption that the US would always defend them, come what may. That won't be accepted in Washington anymore.

It is also reasonable for US allies and partners to shoulder responsibilities closer to home.

The US has unique and extensive global responsibilities in multiple theaters, including Europe, **the Indo-Pacific**, the Middle East, and the Western Hemisphere, suggesting a larger US motive: narrowing the gap between America's military capabilities and commitments.

This gap would become readily apparent if more than one contingency arose

simultaneously, which is more than a hypothetical possibility, given the number of threats, potential and actual, from state and non-state actors, confronting the US and its security partners.

The gap between US capabilities and commitments

But the Iran war already has brought into sharp relief the gap between US capabilities and commitments.

America lacks not only the military systems relevant for this moment, but also the manufacturing base that would enable it to produce them quickly, cheaply, and at scale.

America's traditional partners have begun to rethink their own national security strategies

Here the US would be wise to learn from **Ukraine**, which has emerged as a contemporary arsenal of democracy and is leading the world when it comes to the production and use of drones.

For these and other reasons—especially the erratic nature of a US foreign policy that no longer regards allies as privileged and deserving of unflinching support—America's traditional partners have begun to rethink their own national security strategies. They are right to do so.

Greater self-reliance

For starters, they should spend more on defense, but how is more important than how much.

Increasing the share of GDP devoted to defense is necessary but not sufficient. **Europe spends** a good deal on military hardware, but the whole is less than the sum of its parts.

The same could be said about the Arab states that face Iran. In Asia, the hub-and-spokes alliance system with Washington at the center needs to make way for a networked approach, with US allies doing more with one another and playing complementary roles in deterring and responding to aggression.

Meaningful defense cooperation requires systems tailored to local strategic circumstances, reflecting geography, available manpower, likely aggressors' capabilities and strategy, and assistance that can reasonably be expected from the outside.

Greater self-reliance can and should be an element of strategic calculations, but self-sufficiency is rarely, if ever, a realistic option

It also requires that governments be prepared to integrate defense forces rather than duplicate them country by country.

Greater self-reliance can and should be an element of strategic calculations, but self-sufficiency is rarely, if ever, a realistic option.

Forging new and deeper partnerships is. Partnerships can involve the production of equipment and ammunition, intelligence sharing, and planning and training for joint military deployments and combat.

Partnerships need not be only local

The most obvious partners are to be found in their respective regions: Japan and South Korea come to mind, as do European countries worried about Russia and Middle Eastern countries anxious about Iran.

But partnerships need not be only local. **Saudi Arabia** is forging new ties with Ukraine to benefit from Ukraine's extensive experience manufacturing and deploying drones. South Korea is investing in missile production in Poland.

It also makes sense for countries to recast rather than reject their security relationships with the US.



Saudi Arabia is forging new ties with Ukraine to benefit from Ukraine's extensive experience manufacturing and deploying drones

There is no reason to seek—and every reason to resist—a divorce. But to make the relationship with the US work nowadays calls for redefining the division of labor, rethinking roles, and restructuring command arrangements to give the partners a larger say.

There may well be a diplomatic dimension to all of this, to try to reduce tensions with potential or actual regional adversaries: China or North Korea in the Indo-Pacific, Russia in Europe, or Iran in the Middle East.

But these potential or actual foes should be approached only from a position of military strength, which, as noted above, requires new and deeper partnerships.

To attempt to accommodate any of them alone or absent a favorable military balance, and without effective deterrence, would be foolhardy, dangerous, or both.

In a world in which the US cannot be counted on as it once was, the objective is not stability at any price, but rather stability on terms consistent with national and Western interests.

This is achievable, but only if the friends of the US recognize the new reality and act individually and collectively to meet the

challenge.

Richard Haass, President Emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations, senior counselor at Centerview Partners, and Distinguished University Scholar at New York University, previously served as Director of Policy Planning for the US State Department (2001-03), and was President George W. Bush's special envoy to Northern Ireland and Coordinator for the Future of Afghanistan.