

Presidential Alliance Powers

Among President Donald Trump's most heterodox foreign policy instincts is his lifelong disdain for American alliances. His supporters argue that his transactional diplomacy has prompted allies to pay more for their defense, while most foreign policy elites aver that he has undermined U.S. collective defense commitments in the eyes of allies and adversaries—commitments that have underwritten peace and security in Europe and Asia for decades. When they highlight this newfound alliance peril, most experts lament the prospect that President Trump might formally abrogate U.S. treaty commitments, such as to NATO. Although treaty withdrawal is possible, its odds are long. The more subtle and already manifest danger is that Trump weakens U.S. alliances from within. As a matter of constitutional structure, the president wields vast powers to manage American treaty guarantees, and can therefore undermine them through action or inaction alike.¹

There is no small irony in the fact that the president appears to have such vast power to subvert alliances, because throughout much postwar history, expansive presidential powers were often justified as critical to effectuating U.S. alliance commitments. In the early Cold War years, the precise content of U.S. alliance commitments was left intentionally vague to smooth over disputes about the president and Congress's respective constitutional war powers: if a treaty ally were

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attacked, did the president have authority to defend it without first getting congressional approval? Once mutual defense treaties entered into force, however, their management became largely the domain of presidential unilateralism in military affairs—and, over time, even featured heavily in justifications for what historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. famously labeled the greatly aggrandized “imperial presidency.”² But if alliances helped strengthen the imperial presidency, the imperial presidency now threatens alliances.

Some of the president’s constitutional powers relevant to alliances—such as the power to direct military operations in war and to appoint ambassadors (subject to Senate confirmation)—have always been clear. Starting in the early Cold War, though, the centrality of alliances to U.S. foreign policy contributed to the vast accumulation of additional presidential powers—some of them delegated by Congress and others established through executive branch practice over time. After nearly 70 years, presidential authority over U.S. security guarantees now appears to be almost entirely unilateral.

Although Congress’s powers over foreign policy are circumscribed, it nevertheless has some tools with which it can influence the management of U.S. alliances, and thereby protect them from erosion by presidential action or inaction. Though rarely exercised for this purpose in the past, Congress can wield its powers to impede or slow the president’s hollowing out of one of the postwar period’s most successful tools of statecraft—if, that is, Congress has the American public behind it.

Law and U.S. Alliances

The U.S. network of defense pacts is a post-World War II phenomenon. Through the advocacy of Thomas Jefferson and the diplomacy of Benjamin Franklin, and before any constitution governed the country, the rebellious colonies concluded a first alliance with France during the Revolutionary War. Without the military pact, it could not have prevailed. Even before it had achieved independence, however, it had already soured on its European security benefactor. When President George Washington warned the country against permanent alliances in his farewell address, he did not argue that the United States should never again have cause for allies—instead, for several decades, it should focus on securing its own independence and prosperity, rather than become embroiled in European

politics as a weaker power.³ “Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course,” the first president urged. “Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?”⁴ For a century and a half, Washington’s successors held his exhortation as gospel, and the country abjured alliances as a guiding principle of foreign policy.⁵

For American strategists, Washington’s advice was demolished during the Second World War, along with the global balance of power. As Hitler felled large swaths of Europe, the United States consented to the country’s first modern wartime alliance with Great Britain, which on January 1, 1942, became the 47-member alliance of “the United Nations” and was expected to be temporary.⁶ But the protracted war devastated Europe and Asia, and as it ended, the United States now saw itself as having global economic and security interests. Rapidly advancing technology—including long-range bombers, missiles, and nuclear weapons—meant that two ocean barriers would no longer serve as sufficient protection. When the Soviet Union rejected U.S. plans for defeated Germany and blocked elections in Poland, Bulgaria, and Romania, a Cold War rivalry began to crystallize, and American strategists feared that another war would soon engulf Europe and U.S. vital interests.⁷ They also began to contemplate the security guarantee for Western Europe that would become the Atlantic Alliance.⁸

Eager to ensure that it would not be seen as abandoning the nascent United Nations, Washington and its European counterparts began to craft their defense treaty on the basis of international law. The UN Charter banned the use of force by states but it reserved to states the right of self-defense, including collective self-defense—the ability to rely on allies for defense if one was attacked.⁹ The executive branch framers and congressional proponents of the Atlantic Alliance saw themselves as invoking and supplementing, rather than supplanting, postwar institutions with a defensive alliance. Alliances had once been thought of as dangerous to a relatively fragile United States; now that it stood as one of two superpowers, it deemed them necessary to its survival.

The relationship between international law and a prospective alliance was not the only legal association in question, however. Forming a standing, peacetime alliance would require substantial legislative buy-in, as the pact would take the form of a treaty, requiring the advice and consent of two thirds of the U.S. Senate before ratifying it. Meanwhile, prospective European allies sought a commitment that if one of them became the victim of attack, the United States would automatically declare war and come to its aid.¹⁰ As they began to inspect the draft treaty, prominent senators grew concerned that a standing alliance treaty that guaranteed military aid in case of allied attack would usurp the Congress’ power to authorize or decline to enter a war.¹¹ A permanent peacetime alliance could

uspend Congress's constitutional war powers, in effect transferring the power over such decisions to the executive branch.

Permanent peacetime alliances threatened to upend Congress's constitutional war powers.

After the Senate Foreign Relations Committee insisted that the treaty be reworked without any automatic military commitment, the treaty's new formulation still treated an attack on any one member as an attack on all, but it left ambiguous the form of aid the United States was obligated to provide in return, and it included a reference to decision making according to each party's "constitutional processes."¹² This construction enabled but did not require military assistance on behalf of allies. Soon after, the Senate

approved the North Atlantic Treaty by a vote of 82-13.

Between 1949 and 1954, the United States would extend mutual defense treaties to a total of 22 countries throughout Europe and Asia (including the 11 in the original NATO charter), invoking similarly vague legal language to avoid rehashing the piqued debates over the North Atlantic Treaty. As in Europe, Asian allies wanted firm guarantees that the United States would come to their aid if they were attacked. In none of its treaties, though, did Washington commit itself to any particular action if one of its allies were attacked; in all of them, it promised to act in accordance with "constitutional processes" if a cause for war ever came. In 1951, it concluded treaties with Japan, Australia and New Zealand, and the Philippines, and in 1953-54 with South Korea, the Republic of China, and a group of countries in Southeast Asia known as SEATO. By the time the flurry of pact-making began to subside, however, it was becoming apparent that the congressional-executive balance of authority might not have been preserved after all.

Presidential Alliance Management

Congress had ensured that it gave due consideration to the formation of any new alliance, but once new pacts were in place, the president assumed almost exclusive control over alliance management. Postwar American alliances were novel in that they intended to function during peacetime as well as war. They entered into force publicly and for long periods of time (eventually, indefinitely), meaning there were few junctures at which Congress had to be consulted. The lack of specific and automatic commitments in treaties left to the president the prerogative to both manage the trappings of the alliance at times of calm and decide its requirements in crisis.

To be sure, Congress's general influence on foreign policy decisions is often subtle, though hard to measure, and can be substantial.¹³ Also, some aspects of alliance support, such as arms sales and many security assistance programs, are conducted pursuant to legislation that delegates to the executive branch broad policy discretion, sometimes along with various congressional notification requirements or review processes.¹⁴ Generally, however, Congress has had relatively narrow avenues through which it could audit the executive's approach in alliance management, save annual budgeting debates and general congressional oversight authority. Indeed, as time passed, executive alliance management arguably grew more opaque, in part because its purview during the Cold War included issues like sensitive military deployments. And, as Congress generally retreated from aggressively checking the president on foreign policy during that era,¹⁵ postwar alliance management in particular became a domain in which there was strong consensus within the executive branch, while Congress—which is always more institutionally divided—rarely needed to come together on policy.

Throughout the Cold War, foreign policy experts often worried that Congress and its sluggish “constitutional processes” might hamper the U.S. ability to meet its alliance commitments. Long-range power projection platforms and nuclear weapons meant that existential threats could materialize in a matter of minutes, and implied a need for agile alliance leadership. Whether because of access to the full suite of intelligence, or the ability to respond quickly and flexibly to international crises, it was increasingly assumed that the president was in a superior decision-making position.¹⁶ Before long, the necessities of alliance management and effective extended deterrence became major justifications for presidential unilateralism.

In the early 1950s, the “Great Debate” over stationing American divisions in Western Europe solidified the president's power to deploy forces in support of allies and showcased the use of that power to strengthen alliance credibility. A year after NATO formed, following the Soviet Union's first nuclear test and North Korea's invasion of the South, President Truman sought to dramatically increase standing U.S. troop levels in Western Europe, and to further institutionalize the alliance under a supreme allied commander. The Truman administration and other NATO leaders saw the additional troops as necessary to reinforce the credibility of U.S. commitments to Europe's badly depleted defense against the Soviet bloc, but some prominent Republican legislators objected vociferously.

Though some of their arguments concerned strategy and cost, this was also a significant constitutional dispute. The executive branch argued that a decision to station troops in Europe was an exercise of core commander-in-chief powers, while congressional opponents argued that Truman was usurping Congress's role in shaping U.S. military policy, especially with respect to war. Opponents accused Truman of pre-committing the United States to fighting the next

European war by putting large numbers of vulnerable U.S. forces on the front lines in advance. For the Truman administration, that was precisely the point: by using U.S. troops as a tripwire to bind the United States to Europe, deterrence would hold and war would be less likely in the first place. The debate was resolved in Truman's favor, and the alliance was transformed from a vague political commitment to a bristling military organization.

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It is now taken for granted that the president is essentially free to deploy U.S. forces to allied territory at will, but the formation of postwar alliances and their early management established and entrenched this precedent. As Schlesinger wrote, "The 'pactomania' of the 1950s made it more difficult than ever for Congress to prevent presidents from deploying troops as treaty commitments and the national security were deemed to require (and the presi-

dent was the judge of both). Presidents therefore acquired the habit of moving the armed forces as if they were institutional, if not personal, property."¹⁷ In other words, alliances institutionalized dormant and once-controversial presidential powers over military forces that are now routinely used outside alliances as well.

As the Cold War unfolded, moreover, it became evident that presidential alliance authority encompassed far more than conventional military troop movements. Between the mid-1950s and early 1960s, the United States introduced nuclear weapons into NATO allies' territory—including Britain, West Germany, Italy, France, Turkey, the Netherlands, Greece, and Belgium—with 7,000 nuclear weapons in all deployed within the alliance. In Asia, nuclear weapons were deployed at U.S. bases on Guam, Okinawa, and in South Korea, Taiwan, and the Philippines, with total numbers in the Pacific peaking at around 3,200 weapons.¹⁸ Nuclear weapons were often deployed in crisis or conflict to reinforce the U.S. regional position (many of the deployments to Asia were made around the Korean War, for example). And of course, the forward deployment presented the risk that these weapons would be used in a regional contingency. The executive branch's consultations with Congress about the rationale or scale of the deployment were rarely substantial. Once the purview of the Atomic Energy Commission, by the early 1950s, overseas nuclear deployment decisions were made by the president and the Department of Defense with little congressional oversight. In several instances, even U.S. allies on whose territory the weapons were stored were left unaware, for the sake of minimizing political sensitivities.¹⁹

Presidential prerogative reigned not just on military initiatives, but diplomatic ones as well. In the 1960s, as the Soviet Union reached nuclear and long-range

missile parity with the United States, making American security guarantees less credible, President Lyndon B. Johnson and his advisers set out to build new NATO institutions for the sake of allied assurance. Most consequential were the Nuclear Planning Group and the Defense Planning Committee that sought to integrate allies into NATO's nuclear and conventional force planning decisions. Neither body gave NATO allies the ability to commit U.S. forces to conflict—the country and the president ultimately retained decision autonomy—but by formally bringing allies into the decision process, these consultative bodies helped to shape how the executive branch thought about using force on behalf of allies without any direct congressional involvement.²⁰ Congressional action was not required to stand up these institutions in the 1960s, nor was it necessary to change them in the 1990s.

Around the same time, yet another presidential alliance prerogative was laid bare—the authority of the chief executive to respond to intra-alliance crises as he saw fit, including at considerable political and financial cost. In 1966, Charles De Gaulle withdrew France (and its sizable troop contribution) from NATO's military structure. By remaining a member of the alliance but refusing to contribute to the military structure or to have NATO assets based in France, he manifested the ultimate form of allied free-riding, remaining under NATO's protection without contributing to the cause. Amid allied outrage, President Johnson declared the alliance would have to “rebuild NATO outside of France.”²¹ Congress demanded full accountings of the financial costs imposed by France's departure, but by the time it conducted its audit, much of that cost had already been shouldered by the United States.²² In broader defense terms, the financial burden was hardly astronomical (it amounted to less than one percent of the concurrent Vietnam War).²³ Nonetheless, it demonstrated that Congress had relatively few avenues to exert itself in managing one of the most significant intra-alliance crises the United States experienced during the Cold War.

In the modern era, unilateral presidential statements have been used to both strengthen and demur from alliance deterrence around potentially dangerous flash-points. Although it has subtly been the country's official position since the 1970s, in 2014 President Barack Obama confirmed that Article V of the U.S.-Japan mutual defense treaty applied to the Senkaku Islands, also claimed by China. The same administration also declined to publicly assert that the U.S.-Philippines treaty applied to Scarborough Shoal in the South China Sea.²⁴ Japan has managed to shore up its defensive position around the Senkakus; the Philippines lost possession of Scarborough Shoal to China. In early 2019, the Trump administration changed tack from its predecessor and announced that the U.S.-Philippines treaty did apply in the South China Sea.²⁵ These presidential statements were hardly the sole causal factors in the course of these maritime standoffs, and these executive statements came with congressional encouragement behind the

scenes. Nevertheless, they highlight that even in the use of declaratory policy, the president ultimately holds the power to reshape American alliance commitments and strategic dynamics.

Presidential unilateralism could also be used to withdraw American alliance commitments.

Of course, presidential unilateralism could be used to withdraw American alliance commitments as well as to reinforce them. Just as the president had the authority to order deployments of U.S. nuclear weapons to allied soil, so too could he recall them. Nuclear deployments in Asia, for example, reached their peak in 1967, and presidents from both parties quietly drew down systems that were deemed no longer necessary. President George H.W. Bush put a fine point on presidential deployment power when he ordered the withdrawal

of all remaining U.S. nuclear weapons from South Korea in 1991—a decision that he made swiftly and was fully executed within three months.²⁶ That administration appeared to have barely left time to inform the South Korean government, much less to consult Congress.²⁷

The president was not merely able to make critical alliance management decisions with almost free reign. Over time, and across both political parties, alliance management has been used to bolster justifications for expanding the president's ability to use military force abroad. The executive branch cited defense treaties in claiming that the president's constitutional power to repel attacks on the United States ought to also extend to attacks on allies, as the American defense perimeter had essentially been pushed out to those territories.²⁸ During debates over the 1973 War Powers Resolution, which sought to restrict presidential authority to send military forces into hostilities, a major Nixon administration objection was that it would undermine the president's ability to credibly reassure allies.²⁹ In justifying unilateral presidential power to deploy peacekeeping troops to Bosnia in 1995, the Bill Clinton administration emphasized the U.S. security interests in maintaining patterns of cooperation with NATO allies; failure to contribute militarily to this collective peace effort in Europe, they argued, would weaken the Alliance.³⁰

In sum, once alliances were forged, the president possessed significant extant powers—and amassed, in addition to vast delegations of authority from Congress, more unilateral powers through new practices or justifications—to manage them. Occasionally, presidential authority was used to reduce commitments, but most of the time it had something of a ratchet effect: alliance commitments prompted presidential actions to strengthen commitments, which in turn paved the way for more presidential buttressing—at least for their first seven decades.

When Presidential Powers and Alliance Commitments Collide

Having relied heavily on presidential unilateralism to manage alliances throughout the Cold War and post-Cold War periods, the president now has a broad range of mechanisms through which to undermine them. Once alliances are ratified, Congress has limited powers—or at least limited experience in using those powers—to impose itself on alliance management. Modern American strategy finds itself beset by an inverse conundrum to the one that prevailed during the Cold War: a president is using his considerable diplomatic and military powers to pull back on alliance commitments—or at least to signal that he might—despite the fact that Congress largely opposes such moves.

Although Article II of the Constitution mandates that two thirds of the Senate must approve defense pacts, once an alliance is ratified, no parallel consultation is required for treaty abrogation. The Constitution is silent on the president's power to withdraw from treaties, and the Supreme Court has never settled the matter. Historical practice, however, has favored the view that the president also has inherent power under Article II to unilaterally terminate a treaty consistent with its terms (and defense treaties typically include a termination clause that any party may invoke).³¹ That is, presidents may legally abrogate collective defense commitments, at least absent binding legislative restrictions to the contrary.

The case of Taiwan illustrates the president's powers to terminate a defense treaty and the difficulties Congress faces in restraining him. As part of the U.S. policy shift to recognize the People's Republic of China in the 1970s, President Jimmy Carter decided to withdraw the United States from a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan. A group of legislators, led by Cold War hawk Barry Goldwater, sued to block Carter's action, arguing that it required senatorial or congressional approval. In a splintered decision, the Supreme Court declined to decide the merits of the issue, with a plurality of justices treating the president's power to terminate the treaty as a non-justiciable question for the political branches to work out. With no other recourse, Carter's decision was allowed to stand, and the alliance was abrogated in favor of diplomatic relations with China. Since then, presidents have withdrawn from other treaties (President George W. Bush pulled the United States out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile [ABM] Treaty, for example, and President Trump recently announced the U.S. exit from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces [INF] Treaty) and courts have been reluctant to intervene. As discussed below, though, the legal situation might be quite different if Congress were to pass legislation barring the president from withdrawing.³²

Even while remaining formally within a treaty, however, the same presidential discretion that has been used to support alliances for decades can be used to denude them, whether deliberately or through neglect. Examples abound. As the chief diplomat, the president can make statements, in public or private, that

signal a lack of commitment to protect allies, as President Trump did when he refused to reaffirm the United States' Article V guarantee in Brussels in 2017, or sided with Russian President Vladimir Putin over the U.S. intelligence community in 2018.³³ Presidents may lend anemic support to all manner of diplomatic commitments, but disregard is particularly damaging to alliances, which depend heavily on executive credibility to deter adversaries and reassure allies. Presidents can also threaten to pull back on agreements, as Trump did in 2018, arguing that the United States would “go its own way” if NATO allies did not meet defense spending targets.³⁴ Relatedly, a president can decline to allocate diplomatic and defense resources as Trump attempted to do in 2018-2019 debates with South Korea over alliance burden sharing.³⁵ As commander in chief who can deploy forces abroad, the president can also withdraw them—a prospect the sitting president has mooted several times with respect to U.S. forces in South Korea.³⁶ He can also cancel or downgrade military exercises, as President Trump did with U.S.-South Korea military exercises despite a lack of concomitant nuclear concessions from North Korean leader Kim Jong-un at their 2018 summit.³⁷ These are all discretionary actions near the core of the president's constitutional military and diplomatic powers.

President Trump has taken or threatened to take these actions notwithstanding the strong support for alliances that generally persists within the U.S. military and career foreign policy bureaucracies. Moreover, despite deep political polarization, the U.S. Congress is relatively unified in its support for longstanding alliances. Surveys show that leaders of both political parties support NATO and have taken steps to strengthen it in the face of presidential assaults, such as inviting NATO's Secretary General to give a speech commemorating the alliance's founding.³⁸

Congress has some legal authority—if it musters the will—to prohibit the president from taking certain affirmative steps toward allies. But when it comes to acts of omission, Congress's powers to reverse a persistent president are more uncertain.³⁹ There are some historical precedents for congressional requirements as to how U.S. military forces are used,⁴⁰ for example, but it is at best unclear whether Congress may direct the president to take specific and affirmative military actions abroad. Almost all historical examples of legislative restrictions on military activities abroad involve placing outer *limits* on what the president may direct armed forces to do, but do not require the president to do *more* with those forces than s/he wishes. For example, Congress has on occasions prohibited U.S. military forces from conducting operations in certain territories or required that they be withdrawn from territories by certain dates. Congress also recently passed a resolution that would have barred military cooperation with Saudi Arabia related to its intervention in Yemen, though President Trump vetoed it and Congress failed to override that veto. But as discussed further below, there

are very few—and those are constitutionally contested—examples of Congress legislatively forcing the president to engage in military activities or deployments abroad against his will.⁴¹

Only when confronted by a truly anomalous case do we realize how much of American alliance policy has functioned through tenuous consensus, between Congress and the executive, that broad executive authority generally benefited U.S. alliances rather than weakened them. Presidents of different eras and different parties all supported the general proposition that their immense unilateral authority should be used to buttress these pacts rather than deplete them. But Trump's alliance antagonism cannot be dismissed as mere aberration—it instructs us of the fact that any future executive possesses immense authority to dismantle one of the country's most successful tools of statecraft, and illuminates the need to temper the president's alliance unilateralism.

Trumph's alliance antagonism cannot be dismissed as mere aberration.

Congressional Guardrails for American Alliances

As should be apparent, Congress has decidedly limited power to hold U.S. alliances together if the executive seeks to unravel them, and the power it possesses is often not suited to this task. Congressional war powers, for example, are designed to obstruct military action rather than compel it. The legislature can withhold funds from major military operations or refuse to carry forth a declaration of war, but it is much harder for Congress to dictate any positive alliance commitment, as so many elements thereof are presidential prerogative.⁴²

Importantly, the vitality of alliances depends on the credibility of American defense commitments. Allies and adversaries must believe the United States has the incentive to act as it says it will. If the executive seems unwilling to support American alliances in peacetime, they may fail to deter rivals from testing American commitments or to reassure allies that the United States will stand with them in crises, thereby sapping alliances of their strength. Although many treaty members should be doing more to share defense burdens, the perceived erosion of American alliance commitments by friends and foes risks inviting aggression or pushing allies to hedge diplomatically in independent directions or even toward U.S. rivals. Congress has an abiding interest in ensuring this does not happen.

To say that Congress has limited alliance powers, however, does not mean that it has none. Congress has three main ways of checking presidential actions in this area: erecting statutory barriers to them, increasing the political costs of executive action,

and mitigating the foreign policy effects of those actions. Particularly if it summons some measure of political will, it may be able to impede the president from withdrawing from treaties, preserve critical deployments and alliance structures, and conduct oversight so as to signal U.S. commitments in the face of contrary unilateralism.

The 116th Congress has already begun to take actions designed to complicate presidential treaty or troop withdrawals. First, the NATO Support Act, which had bipartisan cosponsorship and passed the House with widespread and bipartisan support, declares it to be the policy of the United States to remain in NATO and denies that any funds can be appropriated for the purposes of NATO withdrawal.⁴³ With an eye on Asia, Rep. Tom Malinowski (D-NJ) has introduced a bill that would prevent the president from reducing U.S. troops below 22,000 in South Korea—a bill which is almost identical to a provision in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), now in effect.⁴⁴

President Trump is unlikely to sign the NATO Support Act, even were it to get through the Senate, though a similar provision could be incorporated into a must-pass bill or one that would be more politically difficult to veto. Trump has also objected to the NDAA provision on South Korea, expressing concerns about whether its requirements are constitutional.⁴⁵ If he did attempt to withdraw from NATO or pull troops from South Korea with these provisions on the books, this would immediately raise the constitutional issue of whether Congress had the legal authority to inhibit his action, possibly forcing legal action and contributing to the political salience of the debate. In neither case is Congress guaranteed to prevail (especially in court, should it try to sue). In both, however, it has improved its odds by attempting to set advance limits. Meanwhile, Congress has also signaled to allies and adversaries American political support to maintain alliance commitments.

Congress has additional alliance-related powers at its disposal, and sometimes Congress's most subtle tools, wielded deftly by individuals or subsets of members, can be most effective. Congressional committees should use their oversight authority to conduct hearings into issues of alliance mismanagement. For example, if influential committee members suspect that President Trump continues to pursue the possibility of major troop withdrawals from South Korea or if the administration does not restore bilateral exercises, they should hold hearings to probe the behavior and attempt to elicit commitments to the contrary from senior officials. Congressional committees can also use authority to scrutinize past processes, such as the substantial delay by the administration in concluding an alliance cost-sharing agreement. Without the need for specific hearings on these issues, individual

Sometimes Congress's most subtle tools can be most effective.

members of Congress can use regularly-scheduled defense posture hearings to extract statements of alliance commitment from administration members, too.

Congress could also adopt a broader practice of using its power of the purse to draw red lines, such as signaling that it will not approve a current budget or allocate future funds to specifically-identified activities that would undermine alliances. Finally, where the president refuses to support alliances by omission, such as through lack of positive public support, prominent Congressional members with relevant committee assignments should lead delegations to the allied countries in question to meet with leaders, audit the state of the alliance, and affirm U.S. support.

To be clear, none of these proposed congressional actions can completely thwart a president who is determined to annul a defense pact. Presidents have many ways to do so and much greater agility to act. Yet, congressional maneuvers or pressure regarding alliance management can help to deter a wayward executive from taking action. For instance, President Carter abandoned his own plans to pull American troops from South Korea after cooperation between Congress and the intelligence community convinced him to back down, even though he had the legal authority to do it.⁴⁶ Congress can raise the costs to a president of backing away from alliances and help preserve alliance cooperation structures during periods of American political disruption.

Furthermore, bipartisan congressional support for alliances combined with strong backing inside the U.S. military and from career officials of the U.S. foreign policy agencies may create unusual opportunities for pressure to sustain alliances. Whereas throughout most of the postwar period, the executive branch had the advantage of relative unity compared to Congress, on alliances the inverse is now true: President Trump and some of his political appointees find themselves at odds with executive branch bureaucracies over alliances, while Congress has been relatively unified on some measures to hem in the administration. These congressional initiatives may not only impede presidential moves directly, but they may strengthen the hand of proponents for alliance commitments within the administration.

A reasonable observer might nevertheless question whether a deeply divided Congress in a highly polarized environment has incentives to take executive-thwarting action. Fortunately, Americans strongly support the country's alliances, suggesting that efforts by Congress to take affirmative, stabilizing action are likely to be met with political support, even if voters do not prioritize this issue and members of Congress see it as ranking lower than other legislative efforts. The country has generally been supportive of alliances, and remarkably that enthusiasm has only strengthened since the current president took office, suggesting that it may be a countervailing reaction to his alliance detractors. While domestic support for alliances has generally been bipartisan, however, a partisan

Efforts by Congress to take action stabilizing alliances are likely to be met with political support.

divide has emerged since 2016, with self-identified liberals supporting NATO much more enthusiastically than their right-leaning counterparts. Support among Republicans nonetheless remains respectable, though, with the hard core of the president's base being most opposed to alliances. This suggests that many members of Congress from both political parties could find constituency support for alliance-protective measures.⁴⁷

Additionally, multiple surveys find that Americans would prefer to see alliances take on a more prominent role in U.S. foreign policy. Americans generally feel that NATO is underperforming its potential, and yet the public would like to see Washington maintain or even increase its commitment to the Atlantic Alliance.⁴⁸ Public support for using U.S. troops to defend key allies in both Europe and Asia is also actually on the rise, while support for unilateral U.S. military action has been on the wane for some time.⁴⁹ This evidence suggests that alliances may serve a useful political role for a war-weary country that nonetheless hopes to hold on to global leadership. For Congress, opposing presidential unilateralism in favor of maintaining or increasing American alliance commitments is likely to reflect public sentiment, and therefore make good political sense.

While Trump's moment will fade, Congress cannot assume U.S. alliances will be safe when it does. The current president is uniquely antagonistic to security guarantees, and voices on both the left and right have advocated for foreign policy retrenchment that could keep them in peril. Moreover, persistent and deep political polarization may make foreign policy-making more volatile for years to come, even on historically bipartisan issues.⁵⁰ Congress must therefore continue to hone its role as a security guarantee guardrail, knowing it may need to serve as a ballast for some years to come. Ultimately, the legislative branch cannot stop a zealously determined president from damaging alliances. It can, however, seek to act as parapet—an early line of defense that can delay and inhibit some of the most reckless presidential moves which diminish them.

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