WHO IS AN ALLY, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

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Key points

1. In addition to the 51 allies the United States is obligated by treaty to defend, it has a number of quasi-allies: states the United States is not committed to defend but to which it provides a substantial degree of military and political support.

2. By creating uncertainty about U.S. commitments both at home and abroad, quasi-allies’ ambiguous status creates dangers for both the United States and the quasi-allies.

3. For the United States, the danger is entanglement; having quasi-allies can pull the United States into trouble outside its core interests, creating needless cost, risk, and even war.

4. Quasi-allies may suffer a kind of moral hazard; they may falsely believe they have U.S. military protection and fail to secure themselves sufficiently or become emboldened and dangerously provoke adversaries.

5. U.S. leaders should be more wary of these dangers and avoid loose talk and policy acts that imply a commitment to non-allies’ defense.

The problem of quasi-allies

An ally is a state that a first state has made a formal defense commitment to defend via treaty, or one it fights alongside in a war, like the Allied Powers in the World Wars.\(^1\) By this definition, the United States is allied with more than one-fourth of the world’s countries. There are a variety of problems with having so many allies, especially maintaining permanent alliances, as opposed to the temporary sort used to fight wars. This paper, however, is about a narrower problem: confusing or broadening the definition of an ally by suggesting that the U.S. might defend states it has no commitment to defend.

Putting states into this ambiguous status, what we call “quasi-allies,” is dangerous, both for the United States and those states. By intimating it may defend states it has no official commitment or intention to—and more importantly, has no vital interest in defending—U.S. leaders risk entanglement in other nations’ troubles, taking on needless cost and risk, and even fighting pointless wars.

Quasi-allies may also suffer because of their uncertain status—they may underestimate their risk because they think the United States will rescue them if they run into trouble. One potential result is policies or negotiating stances that lead to these would-be allies being threatened or attacked. Another consequence of misplaced reliance on U.S. support might be underinvestment in defense.

\(^1\) Meriam-Webster defines an ally as: “(1) a sovereign or state associated with another by treaty or league and (2) one that is associated with another as a helper: a person or group that provides assistance and support in an ongoing effort, activity, or struggle.” “Ally,” Merriam-Webster, accessed March 31, 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ally. The first of these definitions is appropriate for international relations; the second is for other matters. To this first definition, we add wartime partners, even if not bound by treaty, as any definition not including them would violate almost everyone’s idea of what an ally is. This second kind of alliance ends when the war, or one state’s participation in it, ends. Some formal definitions of alliance, to be sure, include informal arrangements. For example, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations defines an ally as “An informal or formal relationship between groups, parties, peoples, states, or organizations for common purpose and mutual strategic and political benefits.” Others, however, agree with our emphasis on formality. The Max Planck Encyclopedia of International Law, for example, says: “An alliance is a formal union or league between States designed to achieve a common objective through combined action.” “Alliances,” Max Planck Encyclopedias of International Law, https://opil.ouplaw.com/view/10.1093/lawoppl/9780199231690/loaw-9780199231690-e896#:--text=1%20An%20alliance%20is%20a%20common%20objective%20through%20combined%20action.
Who are U.S. allies and quasi-allies

The United States has signed and ratified seven defense treaties that remain active today: the Rio Treaty (1947); NATO (1949); and bilateral defense commitments with Australia and New Zealand (ANZUS) (1951), the Philippines (1951), Korea (1953), and Japan (1960). Some of these commitments are more meaningful than others—the Rio Treaty has arguably become moribund—but all create real allies the United States is obligated on paper to defend: 51 countries and more than 1.4 billion people. To these, our definition would add nations the U.S. is now fighting alongside. But, with the U.S. exit from Afghanistan and anti-ISIS fighting essentially over in Iraq and Syria, this category of ally is now empty.

U.S. treaty allies

Source: U.S. Department of State, CRS

The United States committed to defending more than 1.4 billion people abroad—a number more than four times larger than the U.S. population—in at least 51 countries.

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Venezuela is not counted as party to the Rio Treaty, despite Juan Guaido’s opposition government reentering the treaty in 2019, due to the ongoing presidential crisis and unclear legitimacy. This count also does not include members of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, as this treaty has been defunct for decades. Further, due to the United States’ defense commitment to France, French Guinea is also included in the map of U.S. allies; however, in the number of countries, they are both counted as one.
The term quasi-ally describes countries the United States is not committed to defend but that receive some degree of U.S. military and or political support such that the U.S. is clearly on its side against likely adversaries. This is intentionally not a precise definition; quasi-alliances are relevant because they are muddy affairs with blurry edges where leaders may wonder what exactly the U.S. will do for them in duress.

U.S. quasi-allies include the confusingly named “major non-NATO allies,” a legal status that “provides military and economic privileges,” but “does not entail any security commitments to the designated country.” Countries designated as MNNA qualify for certain privileges: expedited approval for certain arms sales, eligibility for loans for joint research projects, authorization to house U.S. military stockpiles, eligibility to bid on contracts to service overseas U.S. forces, and more. Some MNNA are treaty allies, but most are not: Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Pakistan, Qatar, Taiwan, Thailand, and Tunisia.

Taiwan is a quasi-ally by policy. Taiwan was once a true U.S. ally, but the United States has, since the normalization of relations with mainland China in 1979, followed a policy of “strategic ambiguity”—never committing to defend Taiwan, or committing not to, in order to avoid escalating tensions with China, while still deterring a prospective attack on Taiwan, and encouraging Taipei to not declare independence. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, largely a congressional response to the derecognition of Taiwan, commits the United States to provide “defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability” but does not obligate the United States to defend Taiwan.

This belief, possibly misplaced, that Taiwan can rely on the United States coming to its defense might account for its lack of urgency in increasing its military spending as a share of its economy since the 1990s.
Israel is a quasi-ally, not an ally, as the U.S. has never formally committed to defend it. However, Israel is a unique quasi-ally, one closer to being an actual ally, in that the U.S. would likely defend it if it were attacked. U.S. policy support for Israel comes in the form of heavy aid (now more than $3 billion annually), including paying for the Iron-Dome missile defense system, and diplomatic backing, like voting against U.N. resolutions criticizing Israel. U.S. politicians also widely give Israel almost uniform rhetorical support, which is especially notable at times when it is broadly criticized elsewhere.

U.S. bilateral aid to Israel

The United States provided more than $3 billion in aid to Israel in recent years and more than $125 billion since 1945, but aid is not the equivalent of a defensive alliance.

Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf States—Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Oman—are quasi-allies due to long-standing U.S. interest in the region’s oil production capacity, which has created a near consensus in Washington that U.S. support is needed to help these states deal with threats—once the Soviet Union, then Iraq, now Iran. Saudi Arabia’s key role in the global oil market and economic clout make it the most

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important of the Gulf quasi-allies. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has become a top destination for U.S.-made weapons and military equipment, with U.S. exports accounting for 79 percent of Saudi’s major conventional weapons between 2016 and 2020.13

In 1990, the United States came to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia’s aid following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait by deploying more than 500,000 U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia and then liberating Kuwait in the Gulf War.14 U.S. force levels in Saudi Arabia were reduced to the low hundreds in 2003, increased during the Trump administration, and now number 2,100.15

U.S. and Saudi Arabia oil production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>U.S. Oil Production (MMbpd)</th>
<th>Saudi Arabia Oil Production (MMbpd)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Trading Economics

Saudi Arabia is not an ally, and the reason often given on why the United States should treat it like an ally—oil production—is less of a factor now than in earlier years given the increase in U.S. production.

Iraq is now also a quasi-ally, due to the ongoing U.S. troop presence there and stated mission to combat the Islamic State. When the Iraq war against ISIS was ongoing, Iraq, by our definition, was an ally. But now, with


ISIS’s territory lost and its fighters reduced to scattered bands, the U.S. is involved in a post-war stabilization mission, not a war. There are about 2,500 U.S. troops and no plans for their removal.  

As has become clear since Russia attacked it in February 2022, Ukraine is not a U.S. ally. Despite the heavy U.S. support that makes it a quasi-ally—over $60 billion in aid this year, intelligence support, and years of arms shipments and military training—the limit of the U.S. commitment is clear: no direct military involvement. As discussed below, this limit was sometimes deliberately obscured by top U.S. officials in their rhetoric and by the U.S. policies of holding open the prospect of Ukraine joining NATO and signing agreements, including vaguely signaling support for Ukraine’s sovereignty in November 2021.

Quasi-allies entangle the U.S.

Quasi-allies are partly an outgrowth of the prevailing U.S. grand strategy of “primacy” or “liberal hegemony,” which guides U.S. foreign policy. The theory of primacy holds that the United States achieves security by maintaining military dominance everywhere, pacifying allies, and deterring all would-be challengers. If the United States balances or deters all global troublemakers, the thinking goes, others will not have to and the world will be saved from the consequences of anarchy—that is, from military competition, or at least its excesses. To primacy’s many advocates, allied states and U.S. garrisons stationed there are the chief means of exercising the military dominance needed to order global politics.

This mode of thinking—that the United States manages global politics through alliances and commitments of resolve to help various states—fuels the quasi-allies problem. Americans, especially the elites who dominate U.S. policymaking, see military commitments as an almost unvarnished good and promises that create expectations of U.S. support as inherently virtuous. So, the risks of implying that the U.S. will defend states it has no good reason to defend are ignored or dismissed.

An alliance entangles nations in each other’s security dynamics by design, theoretically in service of U.S. security interests. Quasi-allies entangle the United States less deliberately, in circumstances where U.S. interests are generally far murkier—if U.S. interests were obvious, an alliance commitment would likely follow. Essentially the nation confuses itself about its commitment and interest in defending these states. This occurs in two stages. First, with some set of official words and deeds, the United States links itself to another state’s defense—without, of course, formally agreeing to defend it and thus making it an ally. Subsequently, U.S. leaders see the fact that this occurred, that the state has achieved this quasi-allies status, as a rationale to do more for it, potentially even to fight a war for it. Cheap talk in this way can pave the way for expensive and risky commitments, if not actual uses of force.

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These stages are important in understanding that entanglement with quasi-allies is not exactly an accident. There is likely both a deliberate effort by some elites to extend the U.S. security perimeter without a treaty and a secondary effect where others see quasi-ally status as binding in some sense. Hence causality is a bit complicated—the United States may both have quasi-allies because it set out to protect them and protect them because they are quasi-allies.

There are two ways this incidental side entanglement can occur: public confusion and leaders’ credibility fears. These mechanisms can operate in tandem. In both cases, U.S. leaders may feel trapped by prior policies and rhetoric, including their own.

**Public confusion**

The more quasi-allies are called allies or receive military aid or promises of vague support, the more the American public may consider it to be one. Special interest lobbies, like émigré groups, can amplify such misconceptions, resulting in democratic pressure to stand up for quasi-allies with military commitments. You would expect to see this most in Congress, the most democratic branch, with cries to stand up for “allies” like Israel or Taiwan, for example.21

Similarly, public opinion facilitated U.S. entry into the Korean War in 1950. On the heels of the communists “taking” China in 1949, the move was quite popular, with 78 percent of Americans approving of President Truman’s decision to send ground troops to Korea.22 Ukraine today is another example, with rhetoric insisting on continued U.S. support for Ukraine (as well as other, bigger factors, like public outrage against Russia) increasing congressional pressure to do more militarily for Ukraine.23

**Misplaced fears about U.S. credibility**

The other mechanism entangling the United States with quasi-allies is leaders’ belief that using the term “ally” puts U.S. credibility on the line. Due to largely misplaced beliefs about how credibility and deterrence work, U.S. leaders tend to think that once someone in power has said or implied that the U.S. will defend a state, not doing so becomes dangerous to actual allies. Leaders can also express these beliefs about credibility cynically, to win support for actions they support for other reasons. Either way, past hints at defending quasi-allies can become real defenses now, due to concerns about true allies.

There is little empirical or logical reason to believe credibility travels this way. The bulk of scholarship says it depends instead on local interests and capability. But some U.S. leaders seem to believe this theory and likely will act accordingly.24 Hence they may feel compelled to defend a quasi-ally that a country has no intrinsic interest in defending. A similar process might simply involve a misplaced sense of obligation; a vaguer sense that one must back your friends and allies for reputational or moral reasons.

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The domino theory that fueled the U.S. involvement in Vietnam is an example of such credibility fears.\textsuperscript{25} Once the United States, through advisors and aid, became invested in South Vietnam’s success in suppressing communist insurgents, it took on quasi-alliance status. U.S. leaders feared that its failure would endanger U.S. credibility to defend allies elsewhere and allow Communist gains.\textsuperscript{26}

A more recent example is the Obama administration’s 2015 decision to back the Saudi Arabia-led campaign against the Houthis in Yemen with expedited arms sales and intelligence to help target airstrikes. Although the administration’s motivation remains somewhat unclear, former officials have pointed to a need to back the Saudis, as an ally of sorts, because of its position against Iran or its power in the oil market.\textsuperscript{27}

**Extending wars with shifting goals**

Another form of entanglement with quasi-allies can occur during wars. Insistence that the United States is fighting for, rather than with, allies can confuse the means (allies) with the ends (winning the war) and prolong post-war occupations indefinitely. By the definition here, when a war ends but U.S. forces and other levers of support remain, a wartime ally becomes a quasi-ally. Having just fought a war in which they needed U.S. assistance, these quasi-allies tend to have major problems and want outside help to fix them. These problems easily get confused with U.S. security needs as the quasi-ally is wrongly still called an ally.

For example, per the definition used here, the Kurdish YPG (or People's Protection Units) in Syria, which then formed the core of the Syrian Democratic Army, was a U.S. ally in the war against the Islamic State (ISIS).\textsuperscript{28} However, when U.S. anti-ISIS objectives were achieved, its territorial caliphate destroyed, it became common to assert the U.S. aim in Syria was now to protect its Kurdish ally.\textsuperscript{29} This shifted the focus of the U.S. mission and remains a rationale for keeping U.S. forces in Syria.\textsuperscript{30} A similar dynamic exists in Iraq, where U.S. military support for the Iraqi government lingers on in the name of defeating a largely extinct ISIS entity with no exit in sight.

**The varied consequences of entanglement**

The most dire consequence of entanglement with quasi-allies for the U.S. is getting dragged into a war in which it has no core interest in fighting. However, war is not the only risk. A misplaced sense of obligation to quasi-

\textsuperscript{26} To a large extent, domino theories are probably more of a justification for actions policymakers already prefer than their real rationale, but presumably these theories convince some people, there are true believers, so the theories are casually relevant, a cause of war. Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 276–300.
allies can also lead to wasted resources, like excessive U.S. basing and defense costs to defend quasi-allies; forgone opportunities to engage productively with quasi-allies’ rivals; and moral, or at least reputational, harm by being associated with quasi-allies’ misdeeds.

**Map of the Syrian Civil war**

ISIS’s territorial caliphate collapsed in Syria in March 2019, ending the rationale for U.S. intervention. The U.S. military presence today lacks a clear objective and endangers U.S. troops.

U.S. policies in the Middle East exemplify these problems. Quasi-allyship with Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia, has been a cause of the sprawling and costly basing infrastructure in the region.\(^3\) It has been a hurdle to diplomatic engagement with Iran, not only on the Iran deal but other matters like the war in Syria.\(^3\) It has also associated the United States with Saudi Arabian human rights abuses, starting with its escalatory and disproportionate bombing of civilians in Yemen.\(^3\) Likewise, even prior to Russia’s invasion in early 2022, U.S.

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support for Ukraine damaged relations with Russia, endangering useful cooperation on arms control, the war in Syria and everything else—without actually protecting Ukraine.34

**Quasi-allies generate moral hazard**

The risks that limited U.S. commitments create for quasi-allies result from a kind of moral hazard. Moral hazard occurs when a party is more willing to run risk due to the expectation that someone else bears the cost.35 Because the United States is so militarily formidable, moral hazard is a major problem with U.S. allies, who may take provocative actions against adversaries due to confidence that the U.S. will back them up.36 In this way U.S. defensive promises can encourage conflict between neighbors rather than discourage it. The twist with quasi-allies is that they run risks under the false idea that U.S. forces would protect them—in fact, they typically bear their own risk. Thus, they face more dire consequences than treaty allies (assuming the U.S. would honor its commitments to allies).37

**China and Taiwan military comparison**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Defense budget (2021)</th>
<th>Total active forces</th>
<th>Ground forces</th>
<th>Navy</th>
<th>Air force</th>
<th>Reserves</th>
<th>Tanks</th>
<th>Aircraft</th>
<th>Submarines</th>
<th>Navel ships*</th>
<th>Artillery</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHINA</td>
<td>$207 B</td>
<td>2,035,000</td>
<td>965,000</td>
<td>260,000</td>
<td>395,000</td>
<td>510,000</td>
<td>5,400</td>
<td>3,227+</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>9,834+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAIWAN</td>
<td>$16.2 B</td>
<td>169,000</td>
<td>94,000</td>
<td>40,000</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>1,657,000</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>504+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>2,093</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Only includes ships classified as principal surface combatants, such as aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers and frigates
Source: The Military Balance 2022, IISS

Taiwan’s defense spending and military capabilities relative to China show they are relying on the prospect of substantial U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan scenario.

This sort of recklessness can involve taking insufficient measures for self-defense, under the expectation the U.S. threat makes doing more an unnecessary expense. Taiwan, a nation under great threat of invasion from China, spends around 2 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, much of it on big-ticket items of questionable utility to its primary security imperative of halting a Chinese amphibious invasion.38 One reason for this is Taipei wants to curry favor with U.S. policymakers in Washington; another, relatedly, is the prospect of

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37 There remains a degree of ambiguity in all U.S. defense commitments, formal and informal, so the problem is not strictly limited to quasi-allies. On the inherent uncertainty of commitments to fight for others, see Joshua Rover, “Ambiguity is a Fact, Not a Policy,” *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2021, https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/ambiguity-is-a-fact-not-a-policy/.
U.S. military intervention undercuts the incentive for Taiwan to spend more or to spend more efficiently.\(^39\) The possibility of a more energetic defense effort could reduce potential U.S. support: a perverse incentive.

Moral hazard can entail provoking or even attacking a stronger adversary. Perceived U.S. support may drive states to take undue risks they otherwise would not. A major example is the Georgian Crisis of 2008. In April 2008, at the NATO Bucharest Summit, NATO allies committed to supporting Ukraine and Georgia’s eventual accession to NATO, as well as the “territorial integrity, independence, and sovereignty of Ukraine and Georgia.”\(^40\) That move and broadly supportive rhetoric in Washington likely gave Georgia false confidence when it sent troops into separatist South Ossetia later that year. Georgian leaders may not have believed that U.S. forces would back them with direct force but may have tragically thought that possibility would stay a Russian response. The move instead gave Russia pretext to invade, triggering the resulting five-day conflict that resulted in 850 Georgians killed and 35,000 displaced.\(^41\)

More recently, Saudi Arabia may have overestimated the depths of U.S. support, encouraging risky behavior like its proxy war with the Iran-backed Houthi rebels in the Yemeni Civil War and other conflictual postures toward Iran and aligned actors in the region.\(^42\) Having gotten U.S. military support in Yemen during the Obama administration and strong rhetorical support from the Trump administration, Saudi leaders may have felt untouchable, especially by Iran.

However, in 2019, drones widely thought to be Iranian attacked targeted Saudi ARAMCO, the state-owned oil company, suspending its 5.7 million barrels per day of crude oil production.\(^43\) Even the Trump administration declined to retaliate on Saudi Arabia’s behalf—although a recent report claims President Trump himself wanted to.\(^44\) This may have been something of a wake-up call for Riyadh, a remedy for moral hazard, as the Kingdom subsequently entered diplomatic negotiations with Iran and talks to end its involvement in Yemen.\(^45\)

Ukraine is the foremost example of the peril brought by the false prospect of U.S. support.\(^46\) As early as 1994, with the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances, U.S. leaders fostered the impression that they might be obligated to defend Ukraine. Although the agreement committed the United States (and other signatories) only to respect Ukraine’s sovereignty and complain to the U.N. Security Council if someone else did not, the

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agreement’s title seems designed to confuse people and imply Ukraine had something like a NATO Article 5 commitment; many U.S. commentators duly so.\textsuperscript{47} In 2008, at the Bucharest Summit, the alliance, due to the efforts of the George W. Bush administration, supported Ukraine’s (and Georgia’s) eventual accession to NATO membership.\textsuperscript{48}

However, NATO did not give Ukraine a date by which it would join, nor did it provide Ukraine with a Membership Action Plan, the standard way of putting countries on a path to joining. U.S. aid to Ukraine ratcheted up after Russia’s seizure of Crimea and support for rebels in eastern Ukraine in 2014, with only minor interruption due to President Trump’s suspension in efforts to gather dirt on his opponent Joe Biden’s son.\textsuperscript{49} In all other respects, the Trump administration continued or even enhanced U.S. support for Ukraine.\textsuperscript{50} Ukraine also became a NATO “Enhanced Opportunities Partner,” in 2020, which heightened its access to information sharing, interoperability programs, and exercises.\textsuperscript{51}

As Russia began a buildup of troops along Ukraine’s border in early 2021, the Biden administration repeatedly emphasized its “unwavering” and “ironclad” support for Ukraine’s sovereignty.\textsuperscript{52} Coupled with an insistence that NATO retained an “open door” to Ukraine’s potential membership, this rhetoric may have fueled Ukraine’s hopes that the United States or NATO might intervene militarily on its behalf, although President Biden eventually ruled that out.\textsuperscript{53} It is hard to say that the prospect of U.S. and NATO support, however uncertain, caused Ukraine to avoid cutting a deal with Russia that would have avoided invasion. But it is fair to say that the U.S. support—its quasi-allyship—encouraged the uncompromising side of Ukrainian politics, which rejected Russian demands for their neutrality and swift implementation of the accords.\textsuperscript{54}

Some might argue that quasi-allies like Ukraine know perfectly well that the United States has no real commitment to help them and should not be confused about the risks they bear. This is a reasonable rejoinder, but it misses the power of people and states in dire circumstances to generate false hope due to foreign powers. Ukraine, for example, in late 2021 would have had to make severe and perhaps humiliating sacrifices to avoid invasion by Russia: neutrality, acceptance of the loss of Crimea, and loss of control over much of Donbas—and even then, it might not have staved off an attack.\textsuperscript{55}


\textsuperscript{50} Karen DeYoung, “The U.S. has been rushing to arm Ukraine, but for years it stalled on providing weapons,”\textit{ Washington Post}, February 27, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2022/02/27/ukraine-us-arms-supply/.


Nationalistic sentiment, fueled in part by Russia’s 2014 seizure of Crimea and support for rebels, and its political consequences made this sort of deal hard for any Ukrainian leader to swallow. The possibility of Western (especially U.S.) help, if only via deterrent threat, was a way to believe and act as though no such choice had to be made. It is easy to see how that could be appealing. U.S. military prowess has great power to heighten wishful thinking that already exists for good reasons.

**Reduce the number of quasi-allies**

Quasi-allies are not allies, but in some senses, U.S. leaders treat them as if they are. This ambiguity is dangerous. Confused audiences at home create pressure to treat them as real allies, as do overwrought concerns about U.S. credibility. Hinting by the United States coupled with wishful thinking abroad can fuel risky behavior in states that are overly confident in their American backing. Pretending to protect these states can encourage the fate the feint tried to avoid.

To those who might address the problem of ambiguity by forming more formal alliances, the issue is the United States already has many burdensome commitments disconnected from its vital interests. Also, as noted above, treaties do not extinguish doubt about U.S. commitments—they just make a stronger claim to having important interests at stake. Where U.S. interests are nonetheless unclear, U.S. intentions to fight for the ally are irrevocably unclear. So, the same problem of getting entangled in needless trouble would still occur, just more formally. And, to the extent that the United States would not actually follow through on its alliance commitments where its interests are murky—say to Montenegro, Lithuania, or El Salvador—allies would risk even worse moral hazard problems. Having been formally told that they have U.S. military backing, countries such as these would be even more prone to over-rely on it.

Clarity by subtraction, not addition, of such half-baked commitments is the solution. This would require not only greater rhetorical discipline from presidents and their aides (Congress being largely a lost cause), but also fewer international agreements meant to give a sense of commitment. Also, blunt reminders to larger recipients of U.S. arms sales that support is not equal to a security commitment would be useful.

Making it clear that quasi-allies are not allies will limit the U.S tendency to entangle itself in places in which it lacks a real interest. While the United States cannot eliminate wishful thinking among its security dependents, such a clarification would make them more likely to accurately assess the balance of power with their adversaries, recognizing what it is rather than what they wish it to be, with imagined U.S. support providing these clients a false sense of security.

Arresting the tendency to confuse who is an ally will help limit these problems but will not halt them. The deeper issue is the belief that U.S. security comes from an endless array of allies, quasi-allies, and vague promises to defend so much of the world. It is intimately related to the tendency to see a solution involving the U.S. military for global security problems. Fixing that is a tall order. Discipline about who the United States is planning to defend is a useful first step.