

The End of Alliances

Rajan Menon

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Reviewed by Nicholas Morin

Among the many books published in recent years evaluating US grand strategy, it is refreshing to find one that asks readers to do more than imagine a world with new and evolving challenges. *The End of Alliances* reassesses the value of one of our most successful foreign policy tools: our vast network of permanent alliances. Rajan Menon argues that the conditions that gave rise to these alliances, namely the security challenges associated with the Cold War, have since changed and our alliances are becoming increasingly obsolete. While Menon's call for the creation of a new grand strategy absent formal military commitments is likely to create more problems than it solves, his analysis highlights how vulnerable the US's most important alliances are in a constantly changing world.

Menon begins his book with a familiar warning that the current landscape of power and a capabilities necessitates a new US grand strategy. Containment, although historically successful, is unlikely to help future administrations deal with the problems facing the US in a post-Cold War world. Unfortunately for Menon, other authors (Charles Kupchan, Kenneth Waltz, Stephen Walt, John Ikenberry to name only a few) have better articulated the need for reappraising our role in the world by elucidating the emergence of new threats and, equally important, the disappearance of old ones.

Menon stands out however, by utilizing these changes to call for an assessment of the durability and relevance of US alliances. He notes that for 169 years—the time between the Declaration of Independence and the end of World War II—the US avoided long-term alliances in favor of flexible military alignments, restraint, and adept diplomacy. Only with the onset of the Cold War did the US embark on a new strategy of “permanent peacetime alliances, an international circuit of military bases, the deployment of tens of thousands of American troops abroad, and guarantees to defend an array of countries across Eurasia” (p.45-46). In order to assess the continued utility of alliances, which Menon argues are both costly and obsolete, he examines three of our most important: the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Japan and South Korea.

The three chapters follow similar formats, allowing readers to see themes common among the alliances: their origins, successes, difficulties and most problematically, Menon's view of their dispensability. His chapter on NATO is his strongest. After detailing its origins, Menon examines the growing fault lines within the alliance, pointing particularly to disagreements over US involvement in Iraq. In providing evidence on growing transatlantic tensions and emerging differences, Menon is correct in his underlying observation, that “America's power stands unrivaled, but in the absence of the Soviet Union, Europe is freer than ever before to defy the United States, and will remain so”(p. 67). Menon's weakness, however, is that he looks past evidence of the continued value of NATO in favor of evidence of its disunity. Afghanistan is a notable example of

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this, and one that he cites as indicative of NATO's weakness. But while levels of assistance by member nations is varied and NATO's performance has been less than stellar, non-US NATO forces still account for roughly one-third of all troops in Afghanistan. This is not an insignificant number.

Menon's analysis is decidedly realist, but admirably, he shows a willingness to reach outside its traditional confines in order to capture alternative factors that effect alliances. For instance, he points to societal changes in Japan and South Korea —namely generational shifts that have led to a growing willingness to use force and assert itself in Japan and the growing perception that American security policies and military presence are counterproductive in Korea—that are likely to increase calls for political autonomy and decrease US influence. Menon sees this less as a tragedy than as an opportunity to reassess, and ultimately withdraw from alliances that no longer serve US interests and allies that are increasingly capable of providing for their own security.

If the success of *The End of Alliances* is Menon's analysis of the role of alliances and his warnings of their future frailty, its greatest liability is his vision of a grand strategy purposefully absent these alliances. Menon argues that the US must eschew military commitments and rediscover flexible ways to engage the world in a restrained manner. Nevertheless, abandoning alliances for alignment is more likely to antagonize our allies and incite worries that America is an unrestrained, hegemonic threat. For although Menon calls for flexible, creative diplomatic solutions, other countries are likely to view that flexibility as discarding multilateralism for unilateralism, shared values for self-interest, and restraint for assertiveness. At a time when American power and policies engender resentment and resistance, the US should be wary of discarding institutions that have preserved order for so long, and fear a world where powerful countries align with new, and perhaps unwanted alternatives.

Moreover, while Menon is correct to conclude that an asymmetry of costs exists within our alliances, he repeatedly underestimates their value. He writes that alliances are “the codification of an anachronistic and iniquitous allocation of burdens, benefits, and hazards” (p. 131). But hegemonic powers have long utilized their capacity to shoulder costs in order to extract values necessary both in maintaining supremacy and in fostering order. NATO, for example, serves as a powerful forum for discussing military matters and in exchanging strategic information between member-states. Instead, the reader is constantly left asking why, if the conditions have so dramatically changed, these alliances persist in spite of their irrelevance? Menon, despite clear and well reasoned analysis, never provides a detailed picture of the causal mechanisms involved in explaining how alliances actually end.

Ultimately *The End of Alliances* succeeds in examining the circumstances that led to the creation of our alliances and the problems they are likely to encounter in a world with changing capabilities, interests and threats. It stumbles, however, in the development of a pragmatic and nuanced post-containment grand strategy.