

The Perils of Partnership

Robert Pahre

Most of the people who worry about U.S. foreign policy believe that the next president will need to repair a lot of relationships that President Bush has damaged. Nowhere do these relationships seem to need more work than in Europe, where the scars from the debate over the war in Iraq still linger.

The reality is not so bad. There's probably still some need for healing at the top level, where the personal relationships among leaders still matter. Both Bush and Condoleezza Rice have tried to repair relationships since 2004, with some success. New leaders in some European countries, especially President Sarkozy in France, have also helped these relationships get back on the right foot.

But a deeper challenge in Europe lies well below the level of summit meetings among leaders every year or two. Paradoxically, this is not a problem of having too few friends but of having too many partners. The United States is busily making friends along Europe's periphery. Unfortunately, our new friends live in bad neighborhoods, and those friendships will bring new enemies with them. These partnerships risk an ever-expanding definition of American interests in which it's difficult to set real priorities.

The story of these partnerships goes back to the Cold War. For 40 years, the United States helped its European allies defend themselves from a possible Soviet invasion. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, NATO could have declared victory and gone home. Instead, the countries of Europe and North America rethought their alliance and its goals.

Some of that rethinking took the western alliance into the former Yugoslavia or even outside Europe to Afghanistan. The most important part of the rethinking focuses on Europe, now encompassing the full continent. Much of the activity occurs on Europe's southern and eastern edges, with hot spots in places most Americans have never heard of, from Nagorno-Karabakh to Transdniestria.

Some of the challenges here are traditional security issues, as we saw in Russia's war with Georgia. But many of the challenges are new, including problems such as terrorism, failed states, and weapons of mass destruction. The United States decided that a big part of the solution to these problems was "stability." Stability makes it harder for international drug smugglers, human traffickers, terrorists, and other cross-border criminals to operate. The Defense Department, in particular, believes that a professional military under civilian leadership, with access to advanced technology and communications, sharing intelligence with the United States and other partners, will help stabilize each country.

For greater stability, then, the United States decided to build partnerships with many other countries in Europe. Our friends in the European Union have been pursuing the same partnership strategy in both economics and military affairs. Countries that want to join the European Union some day, including Croatia, Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey, and the Ukraine, go through a process of partnership relationships, association agreements, and formal applications for membership.

The successes are significant. Western Europe avoided war during the Cold War. Aside from Yugoslavia, eastern Europe enjoyed a peaceful transition out of Communism.

Despite their successes, partnerships pose two particular perils, one inside the partner country and one outside it. The peril outside is easy to see. Befriending one country can easily

annoy its neighbors, especially if they are inclined to dislike your new friend. The Russian-Georgia war illustrates this all too well, as NATO's flirtations with Georgia made Russia feel threatened while making Georgia feel overconfident.

Our foreign policy makers tend not to see the second problem. Though we think we are building partnerships with another country, we are really working with a *government*. In many cases, this means that the United States is taking sides in domestic politics. Pro-Russian citizens in the eastern Ukraine, for example, do not want to see a closer relationship between their country and the west. Much of the geographic and political center of Ukraine could swing either west or east.

In such cases, we can easily lose our new friends when their government changes. We've seen this in Cuba, in Nicaragua, in Venezuela, in Iran, and in many other formerly-friendly countries around the world. We must remember that governments always change. The United States will lose a valued partner somewhere in Eastern Europe, sometime in the next decade or two. This country will not find it hard to make friends with Russia and other countries with resentments against the West. Over time, then, American policy not only builds partnerships but also builds a coalition against the United States.

If these partnerships merely alienated a few rogue states, this wouldn't matter much. Unfortunately, the partnership process never ends. After World War II, we built a strong relationship with West Germany as a bulwark against Communism. After the Cold War, a united Germany could have been threatened by instability on its eastern borders, so we built partnerships with Poland, the Czech Republic, and other countries. Now our new friends in Eastern Europe might be threatened by instability on *their* eastern borders. To protect them, we seek stability in southeastern Europe, and end up flirting with an alliance with Georgia.

Our partnerships have increasingly threatened Russia, but it's not hard to imagine that other partnerships will make China also feel threatened some day. At that point, Russia and China would build an alliance more meaningful than their current Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The process of partnership misses any sense of priorities. Even as the Defense Department "solves" one security challenge, it creates new ones. That's great for the organization, which never runs out of things to do. It's not so great for American security policy.

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