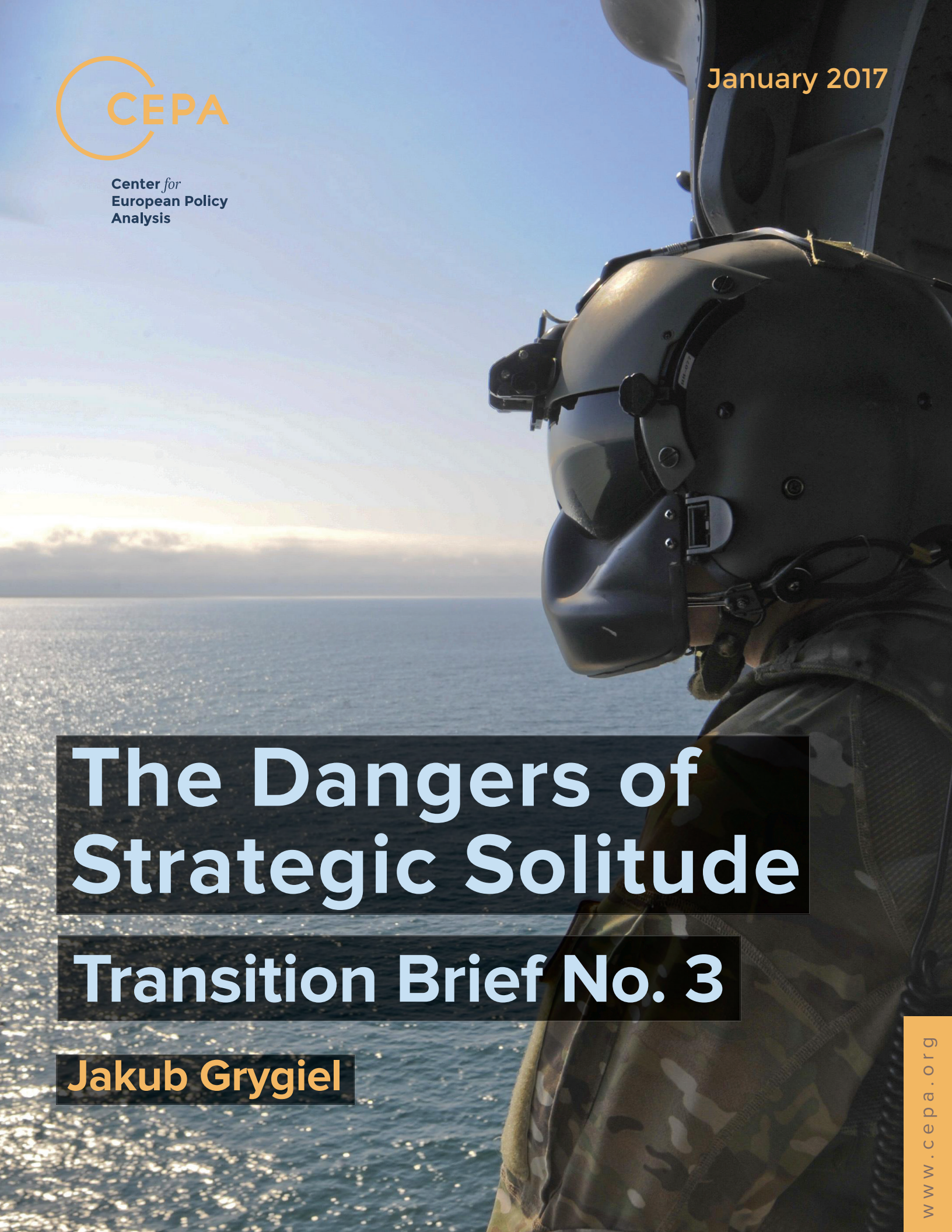

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# The Dangers of Strategic Solitude

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## About the author

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# THE ISSUE

**The United States can be neither great nor secure without allies.**

**U.S. allies, in particular those along the distant frontier of the Western order and close to the predatory revisionists (Russia, China and Iran), are the bellwethers of regional stability and the foundations of U.S. security. A less credible and weaker American commitment to its allies exacerbates the risks to regional stability and rewards U.S. rivals that aim to revise the status quo in Eurasia. By discounting or even abandoning them, the United States only increases the price of its own security.**

# The strategic case for alliances

The role of allies must be evaluated in relation to the principal purpose of U.S. foreign policy: to secure the homeland from threats abroad, in particular from Eurasia. To do so, the aim of U.S. foreign policy is to prevent the emergence of a power or a combination of powers that could dominate Eurasia and threaten the United States and its interests. A Eurasia under the sway of hostile powers would cut the U.S. from its principal trading partners and could turn the oceans from defensive moats into highways of power projection. U.S. security is therefore not on the coasts of California or New Jersey, but arises from an equilibrium of power in Eurasia.

To achieve and sustain this, the United States must have a firm set of alliances on the Eurasian landmass and in particular along the frontline with its main geopolitical rivals. The existence of these allies as independent political actors—sustained and protected by the Pentagon's extended deterrent—guarantees that the U.S. competes with rivals in Eurasia and not off its own shores. This is the lesson, learned the hard way, of the past century.

**"Insecurity does not breed greatness."**

The recurring temptation in Washington is to rely less on allies—deemed a burden rather than an asset—and seek safety in some form of hemispheric isolation and/or a bargain with the rival great powers. But the United States cannot contain, or, if needed, defeat a hostile power in Eurasia without allies. It would have to spend more, rather than less, on its defense—greatly diminishing its ability to shape the geopolitical landscape of distant regions as well as damaging its own security and greatness.

Strategic solitude is neither a source of security nor a symptom of greatness.

Photo: Staff Sgt. Brett Miller/ U.S. Army National Guard, 116 Public Affairs Detachment.

# The benefits of alliances

The United States continues to need allies—perhaps even more so than in the past—for three broad reasons.

**First,** U.S. allies are natural protectors of the geopolitical status quo. These allies—especially those most vulnerable to the opportunistic rapaciousness of Russia, China and Iran—hope to maintain the existing political order in their regions. Any change in the regional map of influence would immediately, and perhaps devastatingly, affect their welfare and even their sovereignty. U.S. allies are status quo powers that, regardless of ideological or personal differences with a particular U.S. administration, are the first defenders of the global order built by the United States over the past century.

U.S. allies, not global institutions, are the foundations of the current order. Membership in global institutions, whether the United Nations or the World Trade Organization, does not make states liberal and democratic. It has not transformed a tyrannical Iran or China or Russia into a partner of the U.S. or of the West writ large. Moscow remains a revisionist state with neo-imperial aspirations, regardless of how many global institutions it joins or treaties it signs. The same goes for Beijing and Tehran. Their interests and their behavior cannot be kept in check through institutional binding, but through balancing—and for this, Washington must rely on its alliances. If the next president wants to defend U.S. security and economic well-being, he needs to go back to the foundations: U.S. alliances.

**Second,** U.S. allies are force-multipliers. While most allies do not contribute sufficient resources for their own security, some have awakened to the rising threats from their regional rivals and are increasing their defense budgets. In the past decade, many such allies have contributed significant troops to the U.S.-led coalitions fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Pentagon benefits from the involvement of allied forces and assets, giving it a natural reservoir of states from which to draw a coalition for any given task.

But measuring the value of allies only as power aggregation mechanisms is shortsighted. Allies are valuable not merely for the mathematical addition of manpower and resources, but also because they hinder the advances of regional revisionists. Their mere existence as independent geopolitical entities—not under the sway of a regional predator—is a U.S. asset. They deprive rivals of strategic real estate, limiting their wealth and ability to control key routes, access points or platforms for further power projections. They also give the United States an early warning system, alerting it of enemy intentions and capabilities that directly and immediately target these frontline allies. In brief, a firm set of allies bestows upon Washington a key strategic advantage that rivals do not possess.

**"A United States with weak or no alliances will no longer be a great power."**

**Third,** a maritime island power such as the United States needs to have continental allies in order to shape the balance of power in distant regions. A stable set of allies in Eurasia is more important now than ever before, because without them American power projection to the region would be too costly. As rivals such as China and Russia develop more lethal A2AD capabilities contesting air, sea and land access, a U.S. re-entry into the Eurasian rimland becomes increasingly more difficult. The potential of heavy costs inflicted on U.S. expeditionary forces makes such power projection less likely and thus less credible, decreasing U.S. influence over the region's political dynamics. Such an operational reality puts greater premium on the continued existence of friendly states capable and willing to keep their immediate region open to U.S. reinforcements. It also makes a continued and enhanced presence of U.S. forces on allied territory even more necessary than before. Frontline allies are the first responders to a regional crisis and supply an entry point in a hostile operational environment in case of a conflict.

A small but credible and long-term American presence along the frontier—on the territory of U.S. allies—is an investment in U.S. security. It allows the United States to manage the regional balance of power, hold off an enemy and bring its power to bear when needed.

# The dangerous allure of strategic solitude

It is a recurring temptation in Washington to discount allies out of fatigue with the perceived burden of keeping them, or in the vain hope of striking a deal with the great power rivals. Under the Obama administration, the discounting of allies was driven by a faith in the transformative powers of global institutions and the interest—allegedly shared by all states—in solving global problems. It saw the world as tending toward a harmony of interests. States, allies and competitors alike, were all partners. Washington could thus "reset" relations with Russia and engage China, while the interests and fears of frontline allies were, at best, less salient. Such a vision proved to be detached from reality. As a result, President Obama leaves office with China grabbing maritime real estate and Russia in a shooting war along Europe's eastern frontier. Conflicts and competitions endure, and it is more effective to engage in them with allies rather than naïvely expect partnerships with rivals.

It is also tempting to believe that Eurasia's geopolitical squabbles are only that: local squabbles too distant to affect the United States. A retreat from Eurasia, effectively subcontracting the management of regional dynamics to Russia (or China or Iran), is thus an attractive option that would relieve Washington of the burden of sustaining a global order. But an American retrenchment from Eurasia would provide only illusory benefits. This tempting vision has already been tested: the current situation in the Middle East is a burning example of what happens when the United States ignores its allies and disengages, leaving its rivals—Russia and Iran—to call the shots.

The consolidation of hostile powers in Eurasia will threaten not only distant U.S. interests (e.g., markets and trade routes) but also the security of the U.S. homeland itself. Oceans are highways, not moats. With its alliances in doubt, the United States would no longer hold an edge over powers such as Russia and China and at that point would be forced to seek some sort of accommodation with them on unfavorable terms. Insecurity does not breed greatness.

A United States with weak or no alliances will no longer be a great power, but rather a territorially large state isolated in North America. The edge the United States possesses over its competitors is in its alliances. And it is an edge that the next administration ought to protect and build—not trade off for false hopes of grand bargains with rivals.


Cover photo: Senior Airman Betty R. Chevalier/U.S. Air Force.

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