

Dubious Allies: Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey
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Countries are not islands unto themselves, even countries protected on two sides by oceans. From the beginning of our country's birth, we had allies who helped us survive. Our first ally was France, a relationship forged by America's first diplomats, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. This relationship was a case of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," both being enemies of England. The French helped us with money, soldiers, and a very useful diplomat, the Marquis de Lafayette.

America's first foreign war was in 1805, against Muslim pirates (Tripoli, Barbary Coast) who were raiding shipping and taking passengers slaves. Our Navy and Marines cleaned them out. During much of the 19th century, however, when the new country was expanding westward and facing the divisive slavery issue, we were largely isolationist. But once the Civil War was resolved, we reentered the world of foreign relations. We tried to be friends of every country we could, and enemies of very few.

With the presidency of Teddy Roosevelt, we reentered the world with a bang! Our new Navy was sent around the world, showing the flag. Roosevelt received our first Nobel Prize for helping to negotiate a peace treaty between Japan and Russia, not easy with the Russians bristling over their defeat by these "little yellow people."

When World War I broke out, it was uncertain if we would side with England or Germany. The Germans blew it by getting caught trying to foment a war with Mexico, which they promised to support. Britain became our closest ally, one with a "special relationship" with us that no other state claimed. Our World War II close relationship between us and our British ally saved the world from the Nazi and Japanese fascist ambitions. Russia was our ally in the category of: the enemy of my enemy is my friend (temporarily).

Alliances are strange sorts of hybrid relationships. Not all are with friends. Our "special relationships" with all the English-speaking nations are based on genuine commonality of culture, politics, and language. Other relationships, such as those with Western European countries and Japan (Germany, Italy, and Japan having been defeated in World War II), are based on shared political systems and mutual needs.

But there is a whole category of allies who are certainly not friends, but have common interests and, sometimes, common enemies. Our relationships with Middle East dictatorships (Egypt) or authoritarian monarchies (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Iran under the Shah) were not based on commonality of culture, but on necessity. Because of low labor costs and abundant petroleum, we outsourced our energy resources and protecting these resources from enemies such as the USSR, which coveted them. Egypt actually defected to the Soviet side and then, after finding how awful their new ally was, re-defected to the US camp.

What makes these Middle East relationships so prickly is the enormous difference in culture. The Muslim world is going through two simultaneous revolutions: a youth bulge chafing against authoritarian governments, but incapable of sustaining a western-style democracy; and a deadly internal struggle within Islam itself between a militant and fundamentalist form of Islam and no modernized version yet available.

Another problem with our Middle East allies is their hard-headed hatred of Israel (an ally that is our friend), and their financial support of the worst sort of Islamist factions. Even more difficult is having allies, some Sunni and others Shiite, who are now deadly enemies to each other. Even once resolutely secular Turkey has been clandestinely pulled back into Islam and authoritarianism, leaving little commonality with us as allies.

It is difficult to justify having any relationship any longer with Saudi Arabia (recently confirmed as complicit in 9-11, as seen on 60 Minutes, April 10) and Pakistan, which is dangerously falling to Militant Islam.

Finally, there are our prickly relationships with Russia and China, neither of them out-and-out enemies, but both important enough for us to deal with diplomatically. Diplomacy is often like playing triple deck chess! And alliances are shifting issues that give even the wisest of presidents headaches.

675 words

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