



Friends Like These

Security Cooperation with Difficult Allies

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The Allied Coalition

During a tense moment in the Anglo-American partnership, President Franklin Roosevelt, chided Winston Churchill with an old prayer, “Spare me from my friends...I can handle my enemies.”ⁱ FDR’s frustrations were justified. The redoubtable Churchill’s behavior sometimes threatened the success of the coalition and Joseph Stalin could strain the most magnanimous partner. In the pursuit of US interests, FDR required a means to bind these unlikely partners together – one that could be customized to each partner and the conditions of the moment. FDR’s administration answered the need by constructing and honing a proto-defense security cooperation instrument flexible enough to advance US interests, despite beguilingly complex coalition partners with radically different post-war visions. The Roosevelt administration’s security cooperation initiatives, which included providing material aid, establishing combined command and control, and sharing intelligence and planning, resulted in a collective force more effective than its individual components.

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Tactful finesse and influence over his two major allies proved difficult and vexing for FDR and his advisors.ⁱⁱ The FDR administration had to manage a pugnacious Churchill who embodied the spirit of Allied resistance but was also an unreformed imperialist with an appetite for high risk, low reward schemes. Meanwhile, it needed to establish a measure of trust with Stalin and bolster his resistance to the Axis powers while containing the implacable expansionist Soviet regime. Security cooperation established the collaborative forum, and material means for achieving these ends. Through the conferences, bureaus, and staff to staff coordination the US was able to communicate intention, preferences, and willingness or hesitation to support British or Soviet goals. Lend-Lease legislation breathed force into these goals.

Trust among the “big three” did not come easily. The US-UK special relationship may be taken for granted now, but in 1940 antipathy on both sides of the Atlantic could easily have prevented its development. Given American distrust over unpaid debts and disdain for imperialism, it’s a minor miracle, wrought by Churchill and his friendship with FDR, that it developed at all. But develop it did, and with such strength that by war’s end, the British had received 42% of all exported lend-lease aid.ⁱⁱⁱ

If Stalin at times seemed intent on sabotaging the alliance, we must recall that both the US and the British had fought the Bolsheviks on Russian soil during the civil war just two decades earlier. Perhaps this predisposed Stalin to ignore as subterfuge the first Allied attempt at security cooperation: the sharing of intelligence prior to Operation Barbarossa. His refusal to travel, minimization of assistance received, and complicity in war crimes put unnecessary strain on it. In truth, he had the stronger bargaining position – the western Allies needed him more than he needed them. Moreover, spies had seriously undermined US leverage by revealing secrets about the Manhattan project and administration “redlines” on eastern Europe.^{iv}

The British received the lion’s share of US war aid. But material support, as enormous as it was, may not have been as important as the development of novel combined command structures that went far beyond harmonizing campaign efforts. Boards and bureaus staffed by British and American officials made decisions about what type of war supplies to produce, in what numbers, and to whom they ought to go. In the field it resulted in combined operations which placed US troops under British command, and vice versa. There was no precedent for this level of cooperation.^v

The “special relationship” endured serious strain at times. Prior to the passage of Lend-Lease legislation, FDR and his team felt compelled by law and public opinion to insist on payment from the British until financially exhausted –



which in due course also hastened the end of the British Empire.^{vi} Churchill, the unrepentant imperialist frequently distracted his military advisors with ill-advised schemes to preserve the empire abroad.^{vii} And he continuously pressed for indirect approaches to the Axis that could only delay the much-desired opening of a second front in western Europe.^{viii} American shipping and landing craft capacity constituted the limiting factor and FDR, along with his military advisors spent much of 1943 diplomatically bludgeoning Churchill into submission on this decision. The trump card, in the end, was that such limited assets needed for an amphibious assault were mostly under US control.

In the Soviet case, sharply different circumstances animated a different security cooperation approach. Vast distance and dangerous seas separated the two, making strategic logistics more costly and difficult. Shipping routes and infrastructure had to be developed and constructed to bring material and training personnel to the USSR. The Murmansk Run, ALSIB air route, Persian Gulf, and North Pacific routes each required some degree of logistical preparation to become functional lines of communication.

The Soviets also required operational and tactical logistics capability to carry the war into Germany. The Red Army and the Soviet population lacked basic food stuffs, making them dependent upon US provisions. And while Soviet industry managed to produce an impressive number of combat vehicles, even under serious pressure, it lacked motorized transportation and distribution capability, fuel and the aluminum needed to construct combat aircraft. At great cost to the western allies, the Lend-Lease program provided for these needs.^{ix}

Of equal importance to the Soviets, was the imperative to open a second front in Europe. By the Tehran conference near the end of 1943, the hour had grown late and FDR's administration now worried that Stalin's army could reach Berlin well before them. FDR would summon the whole of his political genius to corner a slippery Churchill into agreement on a date and target for Operation Overlord, while holding tightly to the landing craft and shipping.

Reflecting on the World War II experience, we may extrapolate two points of continuing relevance. First, the complexity of coalition warfare means that security cooperation aid can simultaneously work for and against one's national interests. Calculating if it does more harm than good is as much art as science. As an example, one byproduct of US war aid to Stalin was the bifurcation of Korea and extended Soviet influence over the Far East. But, without certainty as to the atomic bomb's readiness and anticipating a horrific butcher's bill to seize Japan's home islands by force, the administration accepted this possibility.^x



Second, effective defense cooperation extends beyond material goods. Crude measures such as numbers of tanks and aircraft may draw our attention, but these fall short of the full picture. The innovations of FDR's security cooperation effort, such as combined planning headquarters and management bureaus added value by modifying command structure at virtually no cost. Shared scientific research led to the war changing innovations in radar, signal intelligence, and of course the atomic bomb. Thus, strategically valuable defense cooperation springs from shared wisdom and knowledge as much as equipment transfers.

Conclusion

While Allied fighting men and women fought the campaigns at sea, on land, and for the heavens, policy makers a world apart struggled to maintain the alliance and ensure it served their strategic interests. The will of this coalition, quickened by skillfully applied defense cooperation effort, gave meaning to their sacrifice. Frustrations, subterfuge, and mistrust strained the alliance, but despite its disfunction, they cooperated well enough to withstand the Axis. FDR's administration developed effective security cooperation capabilities that delivered material aid, developed combined command and control, and shared planning and intelligence making them more than the sum of their parts. The supreme importance of maintaining a coalition to resist the Axis powers led FDR into uncharted waters and uncomfortable compromises – but as Lawrence Freedman observed, the key to victory was precisely that.^{xi}

ⁱ Franklin D. Roosevelt to Winston Churchill, June 26, 1944, *Balkans – Spheres of Influence*, Franklin D. Roosevelt, *Papers as President: Map Room Papers, 1941–1945*, Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum.

ⁱⁱ Giles Milton, *The Stalin Affair: The Impossible Alliance That Won the War*, (Henry Holt and Company, 2022), 233.

ⁱⁱⁱ Max Hastings, *Winston's War: Churchill, 1940-1945* (A. A. Knopf, 2010), 157; "Twentieth Report to Congress on Lend-Lease Operations," U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945, 13.

^{iv} *Vassiliev Yellow Notebook #1*, Wilson Center Digital Archive, accessed July 9, 2025, <https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/vassiliev-yellow-notebook-1>, 20; Lewis E. Lehrman, *Churchill, Roosevelt & Company: Studies in Character and Statecraft* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2020), 240.

^v David Rigby, *Allied Master Strategists: The Combined Chiefs of Staff in World War II* (Naval Institute Press, 2012), 154; Andrew Rawson, *Organizing Victory: The War Conferences 1941-45*, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2013), 32 & 66.

^{vi} Nigel Hamilton, *Commander in Chief: FDR's Battle with Churchill, 1943* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), 21; Hastings, *Winston's War*, 148.

^{vii} Nigel Hamilton, *War and Peace: FDR's Final Odyssey, D-Day to Yalta, 1943-1945* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), 134.

^{viii} Edward Farley Aldrich, *The Partnership: George Marshall, Henry Stimson, and the Extraordinary Collaboration That Won World War II* (Stackpole Books, 2022), 297.

^{ix} Huhn Jones, *The Roads to Russia: United States Lend-Lease to the Soviet Union* (Oklahoma Press, 1969), 237-238; Sean McMeekin, *Stalin's War: A New History of World War II*, (Basic



Books, 2022), 420-423; Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev, *Memoirs of Nikita Khrushchev*, (University Park, PA : Pennsylvania State University, 2004), 648; *Twentieth Report to Congress*, 20-23.

^x Hamilton, *War and Peace*, 411; *Inter-Allied Consultation Regarding Korea*, in *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conferences at Malta and Yalta, 1945*, doc. 247 (Washington, D.C.: Office of the Historian, U.S. Department of State), accessed August 3, 2025, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1945Malta/d247>.

^{xi} Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 143.

