**Civics 101**

**Episode 82: U.S. Allies**

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**Virginia Prescott:** [00:00:00] Virginia Prescott and this is Civics 101, the podcast refresher course on the basics of how our democracy works. Today, a question about U.S. allies. What kind of relationship, obligations, and responsibilities does the U.S. have with its allies?

Melissa Waters is professor of law at Washington University in St. Louis and she's joining us to better understand what it means to be an ally.

Many people hear the word allies and maybe think of forces fighting alongside the U.S. during World War One or Two. This is not what we're getting at today. So what is a U.S. ally?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:00:35] So a U.S. ally can mean a few different things depending on the context. First it might be helpful to actually think about what an ally is not. An ally is not just a country with whom the United States maintains formal diplomatic relations. We have diplomatic relations with almost all of the member states of the United Nations with just a couple of exceptions, and allies are also not just a country with whom we maintain friendly relations. We have friendly relations with all sorts of countries that we wouldn't really consider allies.

China is a good example. It's an important trading partner. We cooperate on all sorts of issues that are of common interest to both nations. But we don't tend to think of China as an ally of the United

So, what is a U.S. ally? At its most basic level, it's simply a nation with whom the United States has a close relationship or a strategic partnership. It's important to understand when we use that term we are really describing very different kinds of relationships; there are different kinds of allies. So let me just break that down a little bit.

First, there are a very small number of countries with whom the U.S. has what it calls special relationships. These are nations with whom the U.S. enjoys a particularly close longstanding friendship. Countries like the UK, Canada, and Japan. So we might think of these special relationship countries as sort of super allies of the United States.

Then we also have strategic allies. Sometimes when we're using this term we're describing nations that we may not have a particularly close friendship or share many common values but that are nonetheless countries with whom the United States has developed important strategic partnerships. So think of Colombia as a key ally in the U.S. war on drugs. Pakistan is a key ally in the war on terrorism.

Finally and most importantly the U.S. has formal military alliances with many countries around the world. Often when you hear the term ally, this is what we're talking about.

This was not always the case by the way. For the majority of our history, the U.S. followed the advice of George Washington who said we should steer clear of permanent alliances with the rest of the world. So for the first 150 years of our history for the most part the U.S. really tried to avoid getting entangled in formal military alliances with other nations.

This began to change dramatically after World War II. Thanks to the Cold War the United States, because of its concerns about Soviet expansion, began entering into a whole host of regional and bilateral military alliances with other nations. And so today George Washington would not even recognize the world that we've created. And I think he probably would not like it very much. We have this sort of thickly woven fabric of alliances that tie the United States to many many other countries around the world. It's really served as the cornerstone of the United States national security policy over the past several decades.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:03:31] Are alliances formalized in any kind of way?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:03:34] So in some cases they are formalized and in some cases they're not. So it really again depends on the context. We have many informal alliances with countries on a wide range of issues. And and in those cases there are no sort of official designations with respect to what an ally might be or what the obligations of the United States to its allies might be.

But where military alliances are concerned in most cases these are actually formal alliances. And so what it means to be an ally is going to be determined by the language of the treaty or the agreement establishing the alliance.

So just to clarify there are there are different kinds of military alliances. First we have formal alliances that are called collective defense or collective security agreements.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:04:22] So if the U.S. engaged in some sort of military action against a country the ideas that other countries would follow suit and support the U.S.?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:04:30] It's a little bit different. A collective defense agreement is an agreement where the United States and another country or many other countries have agreed to come to the aid of each other if one of the countries is attacked. So a good example of this is NATO, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a collective security agreement among the United States Canada and 27 different countries on the European continent. So that's an example of a formal military alliance.

Now we also have more informal military alliances with for example countries in the Middle East. So the United States decides to go to war in Afghanistan and other countries may as an informal matter agree to contribute troops to contribute military aid financial aid that sort of thing to our war effort.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:05:17] What happens when the relationship no longer serves the U.S? How do we end alliances?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:05:23] So I think this is one of the key things to understand about our alliances with other countries. With the exception of that handful of longstanding alliances that I mentioned, the U.K., Australia, the so-called special relationship countries, U.S. alliances are actually constantly shifting as the geopolitical situation shifts, as U.S. interests in a particular region shift shifts, and governments come and go.

Sometimes it can also be because the government in the in the foreign country has changed. A quite dramatic example of course is our relationship with Iran which was historically quite a strong ally of the United States in the Middle East. And that all changed in 1979 with the Iranian revolution. So the Shah of Iran was deposed and with him went our alliance. The United States alliance with Iran collapsed in quite spectacular fashion and the U.S. really had to begin rebuilding and reshaping all of its strategic alliances in the Middle East in the face of this very dramatically altered geopolitical map.

We're also seeing a lot of shifting alliances recently because of the rise of China as a global power. So a good example here is the Philippines, again historically a very close ally of the United States. But more recently relations have really cooled. Now this is actually coming mostly from the Philippine side. So last year the president of the Philippines, President Duterte, announced that he wanted what he called a separation from the United States and that he wanted instead to pursue closer ties to both Russia and China.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:07:01] What about when we disagree with an ally? What is the U.S. obligation if we are for example obligated to support another country if it is attacked?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:07:13] Yeah. So this is a really interesting question. Here's the bottom line. We have formal military alliances with many countries around the globe that, while they are alliances on paper, when the rubber meets the road often the United States does not actually comply with its legal obligations to for example come to that country's aid. There is a great example actually from our founding. The United States' very first military alliance was with King Louis the 16th of France. France played a really instrumental role in the American Revolution. It provided the United States with financial aid, with its 12000 troops to the United States, and helped defeat the British.

And we repaid that favor just a couple of years later by repudiating our military alliance with the France and refusing to come to France's aid in its war with other European powers.

Another more recent example of this is the Falklands War. The United States is actually party to a regional collective defense agreement called the Rio Pact with many countries in the Western Hemisphere including Argentina. So at least technically on paper we had an obligation then to come to Argentina's defense when the UK decided to invade the Falkland Islands. But the United States decided instead of supporting our regional ally Argentina to side with our special relationship ally the United Kingdom in that war. And so essentially we refused to live up to our obligations under the formal military alliance with Argentina through the Rio Pact.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:08:56] Is there a financial benefit to being an ally of the U.S?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:08:59] There can be huge benefits to being a US ally depending on the kind of alliance. So for example countries that are designated major non NATO allies for these countries the financial rewards are potentially quite huge. So it can mean millions or even billions of dollars in military aid and other kinds of financial assistance, infrastructure investments, priority sales of fancy U.S. weaponry, that sort of thing. And of course for countries with whom the United States has entered into an actual collective defense agreement the United States is supposed to come to the aid of that country if it's attacked.

What about when the government is allied with foreign groups that are not heads of state? So for example the Mujahideen during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that sort of comes to mind or maybe the alliance with the resistance groups now operating in Syria instead of the official Assad government. How are those relationships bound and managed?

These are particularly complicated relationships. I'm not even sure that I would call those relationships alliances at least in the way we tend to think of an alliance. There are certainly important partnerships with some of these groups and what we have typically done and the Mujahideen is a good example is the United States will actually partner with a regional ally. So in the case of the Mujahideen in Afghanistan the United States actually partnered with Pakistan and so much of our support for the Mujahideen was routed through Pakistan.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:10:32] Is there a government department or office that oversees relationships with allies?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:10:37] So it's really going to depend on the kind of alliance that we're talking about.

] So just focusing for the moment on military alliances, obviously the Defense Department plays a key role but it's not alone. It's also going to cooperate very closely with the State Department at least historically and the National Security Council. And then again it really depends on the contours of the alliance. Sometimes agencies that you would never think of as being important in managing our our alliances come into play.

A good example recently is the U.S. Agency for International Development, USAID, which is managing infrastructure investments in the Philippines because of a recent collective defense security agreement that we entered into with the Philippines. So it's also really going to depend on which administration is in office. So which agency has primacy in managing a relationship with a particular ally is going to change from one administration to another.

] So for example the State Department historically has played an extraordinarily important role in managing our alliances with our strategic partners around the world. This is particularly true for those so-called special relationship allies like the United Kingdom and Japan under President Trump. Thus far at least this is much less the case. The State Department has really been I think by many accounts sidelined as a as an important player in managing our our strategic alliances.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:12:12] Have there been times in U.S. history when alliances, either seeking them or having those alliances, have not been as popular either with the government or with the people?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:12:23] Oh sure. I think that there has always been a pretty vigorous debate about the value of this sort of vast network of regional and bilateral military alliances that the United States has entered into. So sometimes these alliances have proven to be more popular than others so as I said prior to World War II the United States was quite isolationist in its orientation after World War II when we began to worry about the Soviet Union and its expansion its influence over various countries around the globe military alliances were our solution.

More recently many critics have begun to call into question the value of this really thick fabric of of alliances that we have woven. These critics argue that in the 21st century these alliances really just don't serve U.S. interests particularly well. And worse they actually really place the United States in jeopardy of getting dragged into wars that are really not in our interests to be a part of.

**Virginia Prescott:** [00:13:27] Is there any key takeaway for understanding U.S. relationships with its allies?

**Melissa Waters:** [00:13:33] Yeah so I would say a couple of things. First of all keep in mind that when you hear the word U.S. ally you really need to ask what kind of ally we're talking about here. Keep in mind there are different kinds of allies.

Second, remember that the United States has alliances with other nations are in many cases quite fluid. So we have some key allies of longstanding: the U.K., Australia, Canada. But many other strategic alliances are constantly shifting. They're strengthening or they're weakening depending on the situation on the ground.

And one final thing I would emphasize this is really a time of great change and instability for US alliances. We've spent several decades now weaving this very thick fabric of sort of interlocking interwoven alliances with other nations around the world. It really has served as the cornerstone of U.S. national security for so many years now. And I think the really fascinating question moving forward into the 21st century is whether this network of alliances is going to survive the really seismic changes that we're seeing at the moment around the world. I think it will but I think it's going to be in dramatically altered form.