

**KISSINGER'S CURSE CODIFIED: THE 2026
DOCTRINE OF TRANSACTIONAL ABANDONMENT**

Shan Mohammed | January 31, 2026



Key Takeaways

- Historical Pattern: From Iran's Shah (1941-1979) to Syria's Kurds (2014-2026), tactical partnerships formed during crises have lacked the institutional frameworks that made NATO and the Marshall Plan successful, resulting in repeated abandonment when immediate threats diminish.
- Doctrine Codified: The 2026 US National Defense Strategy clearly says that "grandiose" global commitments are not acceptable. It says that allies have been "content to let us subsidize their defense" and calls for "a sharp shift in approach, focus, and tone" toward transactional "America First" partnerships.
- The Kurdish Case: After 11,000 Kurdish fighters died defeating ISIS, U.S. Special Envoy Tom Barrack announced that the SDF's role as the main anti-Islamic State partner had "largely expired," forcing Kurdish integration into Syrian government forces despite the 2024 assurances of continued support.
- Why Abandonment Recurs: The 2026 strategies emphasize on missions "that matter most for Americans," making conditional alliances vulnerable to domestic political pressure, competing priorities, and short election cycles that clash with partners' long-term security needs.
- Strategic Costs: Repeated U.S. abandonment erodes credibility, creates power vacuums filled by adversaries (Taliban, Hezbollah, Assad's Syria/Russia/Iran), and causes allies to hedge by seeking alternative security partners or developing independent military capabilities.

In November 1968, Henry Kissinger warned that "the word will go out to the nations of the world that it may be dangerous to be America's enemy, but to be America's friend is fatal." Kissinger reportedly made his comment in the context of South Vietnamese leaders during the Vietnam War. Whether Kissinger made the statement or phrased it in this exact wording, today, more than five decades later, this observation has effectively become an official US policy. On January 23, 2026, the Department of War released its National Defense Strategy, explicitly stating, "This strategy is fundamentally different from the grandiose strategies of the past post-Cold War administrations, untethered as they were from a concrete focus on Americans' practical interests. It does not equate Americans' interests with those of the rest of the world—that a threat to a person halfway around the world is the same as to an American."

The strategy prioritizes "the missions that matter most for Americans' security, freedom, and prosperity" and explicitly states regarding allies: "For too long, allies and partners have been content to let us subsidize their defense. The political establishment reaped the credit while regular Americans paid the bill."

The U.S. policy has formally shifted: tactical partnerships will be maintained only when they directly serve American interests. This change vividly illustrates the recent strategic abandonment of Syrian Kurdish forces, despite their heavy sacrifices in the fight against ISIS. Kissinger's warning has evolved from observation to policy framework.

Four Historical Cases

Iran and The Shah (1941-1979)

In 1941, British and Soviet forces invaded Iran, compelling Reza Shah to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammed Reza Pahlavi. After 1941, Reza Shah was sent into exile, and the younger Pahlavi assumed the throne. Over the following decades, the younger Shah became a key

Cold War ally, securing billions of dollars in U.S. military aid to serve as a bulwark against Soviet expansion.

Widespread perceptions of the Shah's regime as corrupt, repressive, and overly dependent on foreign power drove the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Faced with an army mutiny, Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi fled the country. Within weeks, Ayatollah Khomeini established a theocratic government that turned a longtime U.S. ally into a lasting adversary.

Key Lesson: The belief in the Shah's durability was so deeply ingrained that alternative outcomes seemed unimaginable—Washington was unwilling to "think the unthinkable" until it was too late.

Lebanon (1982-1984)

On October 23, 1983, two truck bombs struck buildings in Beirut that housed American and French service members, killing 307 people, of whom 241 were U.S. Marines and 58 were French military personnel. On February 7, 1984, President Reagan ordered the Marines to begin withdrawing from Lebanon largely due to waning congressional support for the mission after the attacks.

The collapse of the peacekeeping mission led to renewed fighting between Lebanese factions and paved the way for the rise of Hezbollah, backed by Iran and Syria. In 1982, the Islamic Republic of Iran established a base in the Syrian-controlled Beqaa Valley, and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) founded, funded, trained, and armed Hezbollah to function as a proxy force, embedding Tehran's influence in Lebanon's political and military landscape.

Key Lesson: By supporting Hezbollah, Iran learned that it could influence the geopolitical landscape. A 1987 CIA report observed that many Iranian leaders interpreted the Beirut Marine barracks bombing as proof that terrorism can break the U.S. resolve. The subsequent American withdrawal after casualties and without a lasting

political framework left a vacuum that allowed adversaries to consolidate power and expand.

Afghanistan (1979-1989)

The CIA's Operation Cyclone directed more than \$20 billion in support of Afghan resistance groups fighting the Soviet occupation. While achieving the goal of Soviet withdrawal, the aftermath proved destabilizing, with mujahideen factions plunging the country into civil war, creating the conditions from which the Taliban emerged in 1994. Among the CIA's classified "lessons learned" was that U.S.'s role of backing the Afghan jihad against the Soviets, the United States gained neither the authority nor the clout to shape Afghanistan's postwar political order. The very fighters Washington supported eventually provided networks that enabled the rise of the Taliban, which ultimately hosted Al-Qaeda before the September 11 attacks in NY, leading to a two-decade military commitment.

Key Lesson: The CIA's experience demonstrated that the U.S. role in feeding the Afghan jihad gave it neither the authority nor the leverage to shape Afghanistan's postwar political order. Intensive military support without coherent post-conflict planning created a power vacuum that produced outcomes more destabilizing than the original threat.

Iraq and Saddam Hussein (1980-1991)

During the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. intelligence supplied Iraq with satellite imagery and detailed information on Iranian troop movements, fully aware Hussein would use chemical weapons in his military operations. The Reagan administration's objective was not necessarily for Iraq to win, but rather to prevent an Iranian victory, an example of classic balance-of-power thinking aimed at containing Iranian influence. Within a decade, the same regime faced two U.S. military campaigns, and after 2003, Iraq endured 13 years of occupation.

Key Lesson: Backing authoritarian regimes as short-term counterweights to other threats often plants the seeds of future adversaries. What appears to be realistic calculations often generate greater long-term costs than initially anticipated.

The Syrian Kurdish Case :

U.S.-SDF Partnership Timeline

Period	Key Events	U.S. Role & Outcome
2014–2019 Partnership Forged	SDF formed Oct 2015 around YPG/YPJ; liberated Raqqa (2017), seized 90% Syria oil fields; ~11,000 Kurds killed, 20,000+ wounded against ISIS.	Airpower, advisors, equipment; SDF as primary ground force, U.S. minimized casualties.
2019-2025 Strains & Withdrawal	Turkey views YPG equal to PKK; Trump pulls back troops post-Erdogan call; Turkish incursion displaces 130k Kurds; SDF invites Syrian/Russian forces.	Abandoned border security; Kurds evacuated hometowns despite prior promises.
2025–2026 Final Abandonment	Post-Assad: U.S. deems ISIS mission "expired"; backs SDF-Syrian government integration; Syrian troops retake Raqqa/Deir ez-Zor (Jan 2026).	Tacit approval of Syrian reentry; prioritized Damascus over Kurdish autonomy despite 2024 assurances.

Key Lesson: U.S. alliances shifted from an SDF anti-ISIS focus to post-Assad regional stability, reflecting evolving strategic priorities over fixed commitments.

From Doctrine to Abandonment :The 2026 National Defense Strategy

The path of U.S. policy from the Cold War to the Syrian Kurdish episode shows a bigger change in doctrine that is now clear in the 2026 National Defense Strategy. This strategy sets in stone a way of looking at the world that is purely transactional and based on self-interest.

The National Defense Strategy for 2026 makes it clear that alliances should be based on interests and transactions. The document mentions that "flexible, practical realism" is more important than promoting democracy and following international norms. The message to allies is clear: pull your weight; no more subsidizing partners without tangible returns. The strategy also makes a clear distinction between threats to the U.S. homeland and threats to other countries. It stresses that the U.S. military will be deployed selectively and pragmatically.

This change in doctrine causes abandonment through a number of structural mechanisms. First, more people see alliances as short-term deals instead of long-term commitments. The long-term security needs of partners conflict with U.S. election cycles, which makes sustained support politically fragile. Second, domestic political pressure plays a decisive role. The public and the Congress are becoming more wary of distant conflict, and they don't want to justify American lives or money on another country when threats like ISIS or Al-Qaeda seem contained.

Third, the nature of recent partnerships makes abandonment easier. Partners such as the Syrian Kurds and Afghan militants lack formal treaties, making them easy to drop with few to no legal or diplomatic consequences—unlike NATO allies who enjoy treaty protections. Finally, the strategy emphasis on focusing on immediate missions means little obligation to remain after the threat diminishes. This short-term horizon turns today's convenient ally into tomorrow's abandoned partner, prioritizing tactical objectives over long-term commitments.

Strategic Consequences

A policy of transactional alliances and selective engagement may safeguard U.S. interests in the short term, but it carries serious long-run risks and costs:

Risk One: Eroding U.S. Credibility

People notice when the U.S. pulls back or leaves its partners behind. China, Russia, and Iran, among other rivals, actively point out how inconsistent America is in order to show its weakness. Other countries are less likely to work with Washington when they think American promises are temporary and unreliable. This lack of trust can make the U.S. less powerful in diplomacy and give enemies the courage to test U.S. red lines.

Risk Two: Power Vacuums and Instability

As we saw in Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Syria, when the U.S. leaves suddenly, it often leaves a power vacuum that hostile actors fill, which leads to more chaos in the long term. The Taliban's return to power after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Hezbollah's rise to power in Lebanon after the 1984 U.S. withdrawal, and the Assad regime (with Russian and Iranian support) regaining control in Syria are all examples of how the U.S. pulling out can lead to instability and a lack of democratic progress, running against what the American interventions were meant to do.

Risk Three: Allied Anxiety and Hedging

Allies of the United States are becoming less sure about Washington's next step. If the Kurdish-led SDF, which fought alongside Americans, is easily abandoned, then treaty allies in Europe or Asia must be wondering where they stand. In response, allies may choose to hedge their bets, seek other security partners, enhance their own military power, or collaborate with the U.S. rivals to protect their own interests. For instance, we can already see that some countries in the Middle East and Asia are either asking China or Russia for help or working on their own nuclear and defense programs. America's transactional turn thus

undermines the trust that underpins alliances and could ultimately weaken the very networks of partnerships that have long bolstered the U.S. global leadership.

In Summary: The transition from Kissinger's warning to an official America First doctrine shows a drastic change in how the U.S. addresses foreign policy. American leaders now openly put US's short-term interests and concrete returns first in any partnership. This practical approach may be domestically appealing and sometimes tactically effective, but it comes at a price. By saying, "to be America's friend is fatal" is no longer just a cynical saying; it is now a real strategic calculation that both friends and foes of the U.S. must consider.

For America's allies, the lesson is sobering: their security ties with Washington might not be enduring. And for the United States, alliances based solely on deals and short-term goals could undermine the goodwill, loyalty, and moral authority that have always made America more powerful in the world.



ABOUT

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