Leadership at Risk: The Perils of Unilateralism

“An attention to the judgment of other nations is important to every government for two reasons. The one is that, independently of the merits of any particular plan or measure, it is desirable, on various accounts, that it should appear to other nations as the offspring of a wise and honorable policy. The second is that, in doubtful cases, particularly where the national councils may be warped by some strong passion or momentary interest, the presumed or known opinion of the impartial world may be the best guide that can be followed.”


Many of America’s longtime allies are increasingly frustrated, if not downright angry, with the recent behavior of the United States. On the 57th anniversary of the Hiroshima bombing, Hiroshima Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba lashed out at the American response to the September 11th terrorist attack. He felt the U.S. response was based on the philosophy of “I’ll show you” and “I’m stronger than you are,” with the result in Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and the Middle East being the victimization of “women, children, the elderly, and those least able to defend themselves.” As he put it, “The United States government has no right to force Pax Americana on the rest of us, or to unilaterally determine the fate of the world” (BBC Worldwide Monitoring 2002).

Sadly, the mayor’s feelings are not unique. The September 11th attacks are the worst-case illustration of “a deep vein of global anti-American resentment” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002, 21). While such resentment might be expected from those who do not share American values, it is more surprising when it comes from those who do share those same values. Such resentments have become a global phenomenon. According to the Pew Research Center (2002), the United States is globally perceived as “Too big, too powerful, too willing to go it alone in the world.” According to the Council on Foreign Relations (2002), “Around the world, from Western Europe to the Far East, many see the United States as arrogant, hypocritical, self-absorbed, self-indulgent, and contemptuous of others.” The problem is severe enough to warrant the Bush Administration’s creation of an Office on Global Communications, designed to polish the American image around the globe.

Image-polishing, spin-doctoring, and other public relations approaches may be helpful, but they can only go so far. The real problem lies in U.S. unilateralist policies, the list of which is quite long. U.S. rejections of policies endorsed by the rest of the international community include the Ottawa Convention banning land mines, the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the verification protocol for the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention, and the new International Criminal Court. The current Bush Administration went further to ‘nullify’ the prior U.S. signature on the International Criminal Court Treaty, an unprecedented step that raises troubling questions about other prior U.S. commitments. In multiple international venues, the administration continues to advance the exception of U.S. forces from any future prosecution before the ICC, threatening the withdrawal of U.S. funding for global peacekeeping operations if its demands are not met. In bilateral talks, the administration has reportedly threatened to suspend military aid to allies unless they agree to exempt U.S. forces from ICC prosecution.

Other illustrations of unilateralist behavior abound. For over a decade, the United States has withheld either its UN dues payments, or payments on its arrearages, until the UN satisfied U.S. concerns. The United States recently forced the ouster of the executive director of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, because he was not anti-Iraqi enough to satisfy the Bush Administration. In a move surely to be seen as hypocritical, in 2001 the Bush Administration called on the World Bank to invest more money in education in the developing world but then, in 2002, chose not to provide any funds for the World Bank’s education projects. At the 2002 UN General Assembly special session on children, the U.S. delegation insisted upon (and got) a provision exempting the United States from any requirement barring the imposition of the death penalty or life imprisonment for those under the age of 18. Only the United States and Somalia have not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the United States is the only advanced industrialized state not to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. U.S. opposition alone killed a proposed UN convention to limit global trafficking in small arms. Finally, according to one summary, over the past decade the United States has either threatened or imposed unilateral economic sanctions on 35 countries representing over 40% of the global population (Maynes 1998).

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Such widespread use of economic sanctions has been called a form of “hyper-unilateralism” (Mastanduno 2002).

It is one thing to offend one’s opponents but quite another to offend one’s friends. Behavior such as this creates real tensions with key allies in Western Europe. European allies resent that the United States chooses not to pay its full UN dues, provides less development aid per GDP than do 16 other countries, and fails to ratify treaties that it encourages others to ratify (Berger 2000). Many in Europe do not care for U.S. strategic values or instrumental tactics (Blinken 2001). In their view, Americans tend to act unilaterally and without authorization by others, while Europeans prefer multilateral approaches that respect international institutions and international law. They also see an American preference for violent and confrontational instruments while they prefer diplomatic instruments that emphasize engagement (Haass 1999a). In an April 2002 poll, solid majorities in Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy disapproved of President Bush’s increase in steel tariffs and felt the United States was not considering its allies’ interests in the “war on terrorism.” Majorities in Britain and Germany felt U.S. antiterrorist actions were making situations in their countries more dangerous rather than less (International Herald Tribune, April 17, 2002).

High-handed moralism and expressions of American exceptionalism combine to make such policy disputes increasingly difficult to resolve. As a member of the British House of Lords put it, Americans want to be either in charge or not involved. Further, they “like to think that their own country is the uniquely godly power in a world of fallen angels and their ways of thinking are genuinely good for everyone. They are startled and annoyed when others disagree” (Skidelsky 2002, 50). It seems that American leaders have forgotten that no one likes to be patronized.

Beyond unpopularity, unilateralist actions and appearances have consequences. Even if not used, American power alone elicits anxiety and dread on the part of others (Tucker 1999). No less than two-thirds of the world’s population feels the United States is the greatest single threat their nations face (Huntington 1999). Countries like France, Russia, China, and India—all of whom prefer a multipolar world of regional powers—can be expected to oppose the United States whenever possible (Blinken 2001; Pfaff 2001). Consider a recent example. In 2001, following the early actions by the Bush Administration, the United States was voted off as a member of the UN Human Rights Commission. This act was shocking in two ways. First, the United States had been a member of the Commission since its inception. Second, two regimes with records of notable human rights abuses—Sierra Leone and Sudan—were elected to the Commission at the same time. The international community was sending the United States a message. More recently, throughout 2002 the Bush Administration sought international cooperation for its efforts to punish Iraq as a supporter of terrorism and a producer of weapons of mass destruction but got little support—either from its friends in Europe or “moderate” Arab regimes considered allies (Turner 2002).

As Stanley Hoffmann (2002, 3) points out, “Washington has yet to understand that nothing is more dangerous for a ‘hyper-power’ than the temptation of unilateralism.” Those who do not agree with U.S. actions or attitudes are not required to either follow U.S. wishes or reward U.S. behavior. A troubling example of this comes in the “war on terrorism.” President Bush “does not appear to have convinced European publics that the war on terrorism is their war,” because they do not feel the United States is waging the war in their interests or the interests of “humanity in general” (International Herald Tribune, April 17, 2002). The U.S. actions seem to reflect a unilateral U.S. agenda, not a widely shared one. Moreover, Bush’s attempt to broaden the “war on terrorism” by characterizing Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an “Axis of Evil” produced strong opposition in Europe, by both publics and leaders. Others know the United States does not like these three regimes, but, with the possible exception of Britain’s Tony Blair, they do not feel the United States has produced any evidence to link these regimes with the events on September 11th.

Beyond military-security issues, international trade and finance represent other potential areas of retaliation against U.S. interests (Spiro 2000). In the short-term future, the United States faces very real economic conflict with two regional superpowers—the European Union and East Asia. The United States and Europe are divided over European beef and banana imports, aircraft manufacturing subsidies, farm subsidies, energy and environmental issues, and monetary policy. The United States and East Asia are divided by U.S. concerns over the growing cooperation amongst East Asian states that are trying to create regional mechanisms for coordinating their trade, monetary support, and similar policies following the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s (Bergsten 2001). Further, the Bush Administration’s increase in tariffs on imported steel products upset both European and Asian steel manufacturers. Thus, American corporations and their workers could bear the retaliatory costs of a unilateral American foreign policy agenda (Blinken 2001; Spiro 2000).

Finally, as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 attest, retaliations against American unilateralism may continue to be violent as well. While some terrorists are motivated by who and what Americans are, others are motivated by what the U.S. government does (Pillar 2001). When multiple states engage in actions that could inflame potential terrorists, the choice of where and against whom to retaliate becomes muddled. But when the United States takes unilateral actions perceived by potential terrorists to be against Islam (such as its highly-visible support for Israel, the semi-permanent basing of U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 airstrikes against Sudanese and Afghan targets, or the more current plans to topple the Iraqi regime), it becomes an inviting target for retaliation. In fact, U.S. actions promote anti-American sentiments that help potential terrorists in two ways: by generating both recruits and abettors willing to provide them shelter or assistance (Daalder and Lindsay 2001).

Unilateralist choices thus risk high costs. The choice to participate in only the international issues the United States cares about and to insist on only U.S.-preferred solutions to those issues may be ‘good politics’ back home, but such behaviors are typically viewed abroad as hegemonic or imperial acts.

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Over time, it is natural to resent the dominant power, and such resentments arise on the part of both friends and foes. Worse still, such resentments can last for decades. The case of the Palestinians provides a good example. Due to the British mandate period, Palestinians born before 1930 typically see Britain as the archvillain responsible for their political troubles. The generations of Palestinians born since 1930 typically see the United States in this archvillain role (Shipler 1986). Given U.S. actions in the Mideast, one can only wonder how long anti-U.S. sentiments will last in the broader Arab and Muslim communities. However, regardless of who the U.S. actions are directed against, unilateralism breeds resentments that linger. “Unilateralism may produce results in the short term, but it is apt to reduce the pool of voluntary help from other countries that the United States can draw on down the road, and thus in the end to make life more difficult rather than less” (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002, 31). In short, unilateralism is counterproductive.

The way to avoid these costs is for the United States to pursue its foreign policy goals in a multilateral fashion wherever possible. Current policy makers seem to have forgotten that multilateral approaches have been very successful before. For many, the “heyday” of American leadership in world affairs was the 15 years following the end of the Second World War (Lundestad 1990). At a time of unparalleled relative power, the United States chose not to act like a hegemon. Instead, it chose to work with others to build an international architecture of multilayered institutions that created order and dispensed benefits for all those who chose to participate. Such institutions (like the United Nations, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, NATO, etc.) helped empower others while addressing American political, national security, and economic objectives. The system lasted, in part, because its participants saw it as legitimate (Ikenberry 2001; Luck 2002).

Current times seem to demand multilateral foreign policy approaches. As Ikenberry (2002, 122) notes, “at key historical turning points, U.S. officials have resorted to multilateral institutional agreements that were related to the basic organization of international relations, using these commitments to advance the goals of grand strategy.” The ending of the Cold War and the beginning of a new era certainly qualify as one of those “key historical turning points.” As Nye (1991, xv) argued over a decade ago, “Americans need to develop better approaches to multilateral burden sharing to deal with issues arising out of the diffusion of power. Yet the United States is the largest country in the international system in both hard and soft power resources, and if the largest power does not lead in organizing multilateral action, no one will.” That lesson is even truer now. The United States may be a unipolar power in military terms, but there are still other major regional military or nuclear powers (Huntington 1999). Moreover, many of the problems facing the United States cannot be resolved either by military instruments or by the United States acting alone. They require cooperation and economic instruments, and there is no unipolar power in the international economic system (Brooks and Wohlforth 2002; Nye 2002). Other major powers can be expected to resist U.S. unilateralist initiatives through counterbalancing strategies wherever possible. Multilateral approaches can help overcome the resentments and concerns of these other powers. “It is here—in the attempt to stabilize world political order during an era of extraordinary power disparities—that multilateral institutions can be most fully justified in the pursuit of the nation’s core strategic interests” (Ikenberry 2002, 123–4). Even “establishment” organizations like the Council on Foreign Relations and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace are coming around to this point by publicly questioning the current Bush Administration’s unilateralist actions (Observer, April 7, 2002).

The bottom line is that we live in a quid pro quo world. If the United States hopes for international cooperation on the issues it cares about, then its leaders should be prepared to cooperate on the issues others care about. Certainly, U.S. leaders should not compromise core societal values, but otherwise U.S. leaders and citizens should expect that, in order to get...
something, they might have to give something up. To most world governments, a small compromise on sovereignty is a reasonable trade-off if it helps solve global problems. The United States should adopt this approach. Insisting on unfettered U.S. sovereignty at all costs is not only irresponsible in a global community, it ignores the fact that accommodating the interests of others brings benefits to all.

Such an approach is even more relevant when the policy issues that others care about also affect the United States. Like everyone else, Americans face environmental threats. Yet, in defending his decision not to abide by the Kyoto Protocol on global warming, President Bush said: “We will not do anything that harms our economy, because first things first are the people who live in America.” European commentators decried the American response to Kyoto as arrogant, irresponsible, and isolationist. In this case, the more legitimate U.S. complaint was that the agreement spared Third World polluters from its provisions—no matter how polluting their industries. A better response would have stated that cleaning the environment was a globally shared need, and that the United States stood ready to participate meaningfully in an international regime that regulates all polluters. At that point, negotiations could have proceeded without the United States being portrayed as the most irresponsible member of the international community.

Global trafficking in small arms also threatens the United States. Small arms and other light munitions flow to those unhappy with the status quo, whether they are international terrorists, rebels opposed to their own governments, or armed militias in chaotic or failed states. Given the global scope of U.S. interests, eventually such groups will become a problem for U.S. policy makers. Concerns about domestic Second Amendment rights caused the Bush Administration to walk away from a proposed draft UN convention dealing with trafficking in small arms and light munitions (Patrick 2002). It would seem that the national security threat posed by global trafficking in such arms should far outweigh the minor advantage of earning the domestic goodwill of American conservatives who are likely to support the Bush Administration anyway.

Failed states are also a shared threat, as they serve as a breeding ground for new waves of terrorists. Successful counterterrorism requires nation-building (Abramowitz 2002). Examples like Somalia, Afghanistan, and Sierra Leone show that creating order and viable governing institutions are daunting tasks. Burden-sharing in such cases just makes sense (Wallace 2001). Kosovo provides a good example. Europeans are providing 85% of the troops, and thus incurring most of the costs, of the KFOR peacekeeping force in Kosovo. The EU is planning and financing the vast majority of Kosovo’s reconstruction and rehabilitation. The leaders of both the military and civilian implementation groups in Kosovo are Europeans. In short, “America may have run the war, but Europe is running the peace” (Daalder and O’Hanlon 1999, 137). Beyond burden-sharing, multilateral efforts at nation building may be more effective, as they tend to be perceived as more legitimate by all the parties involved (Mallaby 2002).

Globalization and international economic exchange are multilateral issues that affect the United States, and again unilateralist responses miss the mark. According to a former assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury, “the United States is perceived as wanting to call the shots without putting up much of its own money or making changes in its own laws and practices. These specific economic complaints fuse with and feed on more general anti-American sentiments throughout the world” (Bergsten 2001, 24). The two leading economic competitors to the United States, the EU and East Asia, are consolidating their economic bases and the result is “a clear and steady erosion of both the United States’ position on the global economic scene and the multilateral rules and institutions that it has traditionally championed” (Bergsten 2001, 24). As these examples demonstrate, multilateral responses to a wide array of policy issues seem to present greater chances at success than do unilateralist ones.

The current international setting is ripe for the promotion of a U.S. foreign policy agenda featuring multilateral approaches to major problems, and prior administrations made some effort in this direction. The creation of NAFTA, APEC, and the WTO on the economic front, as well as the enlargement of NATO on the political-military front, are all examples of such efforts (Ikenberry 2001). However, as the litany of unilateralist actions from the mid-1990s on noted earlier indicates, more multilateral efforts can be made.

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Current U.S. foreign policy makers ignore the fact that the American public supports multilateralist foreign policy approaches and has done so for a long time. For decades, Americans opposed by a two-to-one margin the argument that “we should go our own way in international matters, not worrying too much about whether other countries agree with us or not” (Kull 2002, 101). More recently, working through the UN and NATO was endorsed by over 90% of Americans in 1998 and 1999 (Kull 2002). In 2000, the public was asked: “As a general rule, when it becomes necessary to use military force, do you think it is best for the U.S. to act on its own, to act as part of a United Nations operation, or to act as part of a NATO operation?” Forty-nine percent favored the use of force through the UN, 26% through NATO, and only 17% favored unilateral uses of force (Kull 2002, 105). In 1999, 65% said “yes” when asked: “If another country files a complaint with the World Trade Organization and it rules against the U.S., as a general rule, should the U.S. comply with that decision?” (Kull 2002, 111). Finally in 2000, 72% thought “the U.S. should do its share in efforts to solve international problems together with other countries” (Kull 2002, 101). As Kull (2002, 117) summarizes, “contrary to widespread assumptions among the U.S. policy elite, the American public is not only amenable to multilateral engagement, but indeed strongly prefers it over other options . . . the American public shows strong support for the UN, multilateral use of force, international environmental regimes, international economic institutions, and international legal structures.”

Thus, there is a confluence of factors supportive of a more multilateralist U.S. foreign policy. Global problems are increasingly difficult to address alone, the post-Cold War timing seems right for creating a stable and peaceful international order relying on multilateral foreign policy instruments, and the American public stands ready to support such multilateral initiatives (Luers 2000). While unilateralist initiatives may “feel good” at some emotional level and seem easy to understand and to explain within the borders of the United States, they will not help the United States effectively achieve its foreign policy goals in the near-term future. “Indeed, no country has championed multilateral institutions
more enthusiastically than the United States or used these frameworks more effectively in the advancement of long-term national interests. Critics who argue that unilateral commitments either are irrelevant or actually detract from the pursuit of the national interest are profoundly wrong” (Ikenberry 2002, 122). Again, the blind pursuit of unilateralist actions is counterproductive. After all, it is influence, not power, that is ultimately most valuable. The further one looks beyond the immediate short term, the clearer become the many issues—the environment, disease, migration, and the stability of the global economy, to name a few—that the United States cannot solve on its own. Such issues entail repeated dealings with many partners over many years. Straining relationships now will lead only to a more challenging policy environment later on (Brooks and Wohlfarth 2002, 32–3).

For some issues in the current political environment, using multilateral approaches may prove to be a political challenge. The Clinton Administration briefly embraced what it called “assertive multilateralism” in a hope to institutionalize burden-sharing in dealing with regional military conflicts (Bolton 1994). Yet, there seemed to be no real commitment to such a cooperative approach by the Clinton Administration. “Assertive multilateralism” seemed an attempt to get national security on the cheap and to delegate difficult military dilemmas to others. Thus, when the administration learned that relying on NATO-based approaches to regional problems could result in limiting the president’s flexibility and could force the administration to commit troops in support of NATO operations there, the Clinton Administration’s references to “assertive multilateralism” quickly ended (Foyle 2002). Beyond its own internal qualms about using U.S. troops, the administration also feared the reaction by the “sovereignty first” bloc in Congress.

Embracing multilateralism as a preferred way to deal with regional or global issues will not always be politically easy. Administration officials will have to avoid the apparent ease of either defining issues in American terms alone, or assuming that the United States has already done enough for the international community. They will have to engage in Capitol Hill lobbying or public education campaigns to remind some in Congress that the American public prefers group approaches to difficult foreign policy problems. Administration officials, and their allies in Congress, will have to stress the benefits of multilateralism. The most difficult problems facing the United States are global in scope—issues like terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, genocide, and economic competition. In such a policy environment, “[i]n addition to distributing the burden of promoting order, multilateralism can restrain the impulses of others, reduce opposition to U.S. actions, and increase the chances of policy success” (Haass 1999b, 44). After all, “if we listen, we may learn something” (Wills 1999, 53). Even for a hegemon, pursuing multilateral tactics rather than unilateral ones results in gains of influence that far outweigh any loss of flexibility or freedom of action (Hoffmann 2002). Working with others to address shared problems is imminently preferable to trying to either “go it alone” or impose the U.S. will on the rest of the world. As Sam Rayburn put it long ago, “You cannot be a leader, and ask other people to follow you, unless you know how to follow, too” (Rayburn 1961, 34). In the future, multilateral, not unilateral, foreign policy approaches to regional or global problems are the wiser choice.

References