

CHAPTER 2

MULTILATERALISM AND UNILATERALISM

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*Our best hope for safety in such times, as in difficult times past, is in American strength and will—the strength and will to lead a unipolar world, unashamedly laying down the rules of world order and being prepared to enforce them.*¹

Charles Krauthammer

*The paradox of American power at the end of this millennium is that it is too great to be challenged by any other state, yet not great enough to solve problems such as global terrorism and nuclear proliferation. America needs the help and respect of other nations.*²

Sebastian Mallaby

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States enjoys a historically unprecedented accumulation of national power. The American economy is the largest in the world and even in a slowdown far outstrips that of any other nation.³ The prowess of America's armed forces has been demonstrated again and again, from Kosovo to Afghanistan to Iraq. In 2002, the United States accounted for 43 percent of the world's military spending, more than the total of the next fourteen together.⁴ Projected increases in American military spending will likely lead to the United States spending more on defense than the rest of the world combined, and the training and technological superiority of America's armed forces provide a quantum advantage that no nation is likely to even approach in the near to medium term. The combination of overwhelming economic and military power gives the United States enormous political influence throughout the world. There are few, if any, global issues that can be addressed or resolved without U.S. support and cooperation.

One central debate in U.S. foreign policy has been the degree to which the United States should be involved in the affairs of the world. World War II and the Cold War seemed to settle the question of isolationism or engagement in favor of the latter. After the Cold War, the issue of isolationism rose again, but only briefly. The real post-Cold War debate was and remains over the degree to which the United States should pursue its foreign policy alone or in partnership with other states. The debate has been framed in terms of multilateralism versus unilateralism and is heavily influenced by competing views on what the United States should do with its position of preeminent international power and influence. In one sense, "the differences [between the two views] are a matter of degree, and there are few pure unilateralists or multilateralists."⁵ However, there are clear differences between the two schools of thought on when and to what extent the United States should work with others. We should keep in mind that unilateralism and multilateralism are not strategies. Strategy is about matching ends, means, and ways. Unilateralism and multilateralism are competing ways to approach problems. This chapter will examine the advantages and disadvantages offered by each approach. The goal is to identify those conditions under which it is better to work with others through coalitions and alliances and when it is might be best go it alone.

Unilateralism

People who advocate unilateralism tend to believe that the post-Cold War world is unpredictable and dangerous. They believe America must use its power to protect, and in many cases propagate, its interests and values. America no longer need constrain itself in the assertion and expansion of its influence out of fear of provoking a confrontation with the Soviet Union. The end of the Cold War stand-off with its threat of nuclear war created an opportunity for the United States to apply its overwhelming military, economic, and political power to build an international order that will perpetuate America's preeminent position in the world.

Unilateralists contend that an assertive approach to foreign policy is justified on both pragmatic and ideological grounds. Charles Krauthammer concisely summarizes the unilateralist philosophy: "The essence of unilateralism is that we do not allow others, no matter how well-meaning, to deter us from pursuing the fundamental security interests of the United States and the free world."⁶ In other words, as a practical matter, the United States should not compromise when pursuing national security interests. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and America's subsequent pursuit of a global war on terrorism (GWOT) strengthened the belief that the United States was vulnerable to threats and needed to act aggressively to defeat those threats, irrespective of how the strategy played on the global stage. Ideologically, unilateralists argue that American values and ideals are essentially universal. Policies and actions intended to advance them are in the interest of not only the United States but people throughout the world. The 2002 National Security Strategy states that "the United States must defend liberty and justice because these principles are right and true for all people everywhere . . . America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands of human dignity."⁷ The non-negotiability of interests and values calls for their uncompromising pursuit, preferably with the support of others, but alone if necessary. The United States, with its overwhelming aggregation of national power, can be a decisive player anywhere in the world on virtually any issue it desires. "It is hard for the world to ignore or work around the United States regardless of the issue—trade, finance, security, proliferation, or the environment."⁸ The United States should not squander its position and capabilities by compromising and diluting its objectives in order to attract allies and partners. If the cause is right and just, the United States should pursue it without compromise. Other states can either accept America's arguments and follow her lead or be left behind as the United States does what it should and must to advance its interests and values.

One of the main advantages of unilateral approaches to problems is that they provide maximum freedom of action. While allies and partners can bring extra capabilities to the table, they often bring constraints on how their tools can be used. Those who contribute to an enterprise normally expect to have a say in how it will operate. A common problem in UN military operations in the 1990s was the "phone home syndrome," under which commanders of forces assigned to UN operations had to seek approval from authorities in their home capital before accepting orders from the coalition commander. Unilateralists also point to the limitations that the NATO allies placed on air operations during the Kosovo campaign as an example of how multilateral approaches can be inefficient and reduce the effectiveness of American capabilities by restricting how they will be used. Because foreign militaries cannot approximate American capabilities, their military contributions are seldom worth the inevitable constraints they add.

Multilateralism

Multilateralists acknowledge that there are circumstances in which the United States should not rule out acting unilaterally, particularly when "vital survival interests" are at stake.⁹ On the other hand, multilateralists argue that most important issues facing the United States in the twenty-first century are not

amenable to unilateral solutions. Transnational issues requiring multilateral approaches include terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, illegal drugs, and organized crime. Globalization has made management of international trade and finance even more important, as economic crises are susceptible to contagion that can have global impact, as was seen in the Asian financial crisis of 1997. And environmental and health problems, to include the spread of infectious diseases, can only be dealt with on a global basis.¹⁰

The reality is that American power, while overwhelmingly superior to that of any other state or present coalition of states, is not unlimited. Allies and coalition partners allow the consolidation and pooling of capabilities. A group of nations can almost always bring more tools of power to bear against a problem than one state can alone. While the NATO allies did place constraints on air operations over Yugoslavia, they provided the majority of the peacekeeping forces deployed to Kosovo following the air campaign. The price of their participation in post-conflict operations was a say over how the war was fought. While air planners may have chafed under the politically imposed limitations on their freedom of action, those limits were seen as an acceptable price to pay for cooperation in the peacekeeping effort. The United States certainly had the capacity to conduct the air campaign itself (in fact, the overwhelming majority of missions were flown by American aircraft). However, it was not in the interests of the United States to be the sole or main provider of ground troops for what was bound to be a protracted peacekeeping mission that would follow the air campaign. Going it alone may offer short term efficiency, but sometimes long-term interests call for multilateral approaches and making concessions in order to have committed partners. And measuring allies' worth only in terms of their military capabilities ignores the importance of their political and diplomatic contributions.

Multilateralists agree that the United States should seek to protect and extend its status as the sole superpower. However, they believe that exercising power unilaterally could actually be counterproductive. Historically, dominant powers have faced efforts by other states to counterbalance their accumulation of power. "Balance of power theory makes a clear prediction: weaker states will resist and balance against the predominant state."¹¹ For the United States to maintain its position in the international system, it should endeavor to secure the cooperation of other states in addressing global problems. Such a cooperative approach might negate or lessen any perceived need to counterbalance U.S. power. Multilateralists reflect a liberal institutionalist point of view in arguing that it is easier to gain the support and cooperation of others by working within a system of norms, rules, and institutions that assure others of America's intention to act in good faith as a partner, not a hegemon. While unilateralists contend that the United States should use its power to impose an international order favorable to maintaining America's long-term supremacy, multilateralists counter that eventually that approach will generate resistance and backlash. A system developed through cooperation is more likely to stand the test of time. Given America's predominance of power, it would take a remarkable effort and investment of resources for any state or group of states to challenge America's position. If America behaves as a cooperative member of the international community and does not create the impression that it threatens international stability, there is no reason for other states to seek to balance against American power. No one doubts American capabilities. What America does with its capabilities will determine how others will react, and if America's position will be accepted or challenged.

Alone or with Others?

The rhetoric in the dispute between multilateralist and unilateralist approaches obscures that there are few foreign policy decisions that are purely one or the other. Advocates for both positions agree that it is better to have allies in support of a cause than to go it alone. They disagree over what the United States

should be willing to give up to recruit partners. Unilateralists favor staking out one's position and moving forward with whomever is willing to go along. Multilateralists favor rallying other nations to our cause and are more willing to accept trade-offs in building coalitions. Unilateralists and multilateralists agree that there is little room for compromise on such fundamental issues as survival interests. Time constraints may also limit the ability of the United States to drum up allies. Threats that are immediate and pose a serious threat to survival or vital interests may force the U.S.' hand.

Finally, both unilateralists and multilateralists agree that the United States should seek to build an international order that will favor the expansion of American values and help preserve America's dominant position in the world. The United States has a unique opportunity to establish international rules and standards that protect American interests. They differ on how the United States should attempt to build that order. Unilateralists tend to favor more assertive, even coercive approaches. They fall more into the realist school of international relations theory and argue that ultimately power is what matters and reliance on agreements or treaties in lieu of real power is dangerous. On the other hand, multilateralists favor moving ahead in a framework of international institutions and treaties that will bind all states, America included, to rules and commitments. They feel that restrictions on the United States will assuage concerns "about a global order dominated by American power—power unprecedented, unrestrained, and unpredictable."¹² And even within the constraints of a rules-based system, America will continue to enjoy a preponderance of power.

The Case of Iraq

The U.S.-Iraq War of 2003 was a showcase for the different approaches to foreign policy. The American position was clear: Iraq would comply with UN Security Council resolutions requiring it to divest itself of all nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and medium-range missiles or the United States, with whomever was willing to assist, would enforce the resolutions by force. Advocates for unilateral American action argued that the United Nations had been ineffective in enforcing its own resolutions. Iraq posed an imminent threat to the United States, and the United States could no longer tolerate the international community's unwillingness to force Iraq to comply and disarm. While the United States welcomed other states that were willing to support the forcible disarmament of Iraq, the positions of other states, including key allies and the Security Council, would not influence the course of American foreign policy. The United States saw a need to act and was going to do so. And by acting alone, the United States could actually enhance stability in the Middle East and the globe. An America willing to use its power without the support of the international community would have greater credibility in dealing with other threats. No longer could potential adversaries hope the United Nations or America's allies could dissuade it from major military action. When the United States said it would act, that would be a credible threat. Knowing the consequences of defying America would deter states from doing so in the future, which could only contribute to stability and to American security.

Multilateralists approached the issue differently. While acknowledging Iraq's failure to comply with UN resolutions and the likelihood that Iraq was in possession of significant quantities of banned weapons, they questioned whether it was in America's best interest to take military action without broad support within the international community. While it would be faster and militarily more expedient for the United States to forge ahead with a unilateralist Iraq policy, the costs of such a policy were likely to be prohibitive in the long run. By acting largely alone and without broad international support, the United States risked weakening the international norm against unilateral use of military power to resolve political disputes. A war with Iraq had potentially global consequences, both political and economic. By undertaking such a war and assuming these risks for the international community without its approval, the United States would

reinforce fears of unconstrained American power and increase the potential for a future backlash. Finally, the United States risked finding itself burdened with a lengthy and expensive occupation of postwar Iraq. There would be no guarantee of significant international support for post-conflict efforts following a war the United States started and waged largely on its own. Leaving the United States saddled with postwar Iraq would serve as something of a balancing tool. An America committed to a major military presence in Iraq would not find it as easy to exercise military operations in other parts of the world without support from allies. Also, a lengthy and costly overseas commitment could undermine domestic support for future actions.

In the summer of 2003 it was still too early to assess how the Iraq war would affect America's position in the world or how the world would react to American power. However, the unilateralist and multilateralist camps used the lead up to the war to make their cases for acting more or less unilaterally or within broader international coalitions. While the war and early phases of the occupation of Iraq have not settled the debate, both have established some measures by which to determine if, in this case, a generally unilateral approach to foreign policy and war helped or hurt America's long-term standing in the world. The end of the war may have opened the door for progress in the Israel-Palestine conflict, but there has been relatively little international support for postwar occupation, which may leave a substantial portion of America's ground forces committed to Iraq for some time to come.

Conclusion: Recent Trends in U.S. Foreign Policy

There is a growing view that American foreign policy has tended to be more assertively unilateral in recent years. America's refusal to join the international ban on antipersonnel land mines, its rejections of the Kyoto treaty on global warming and an inspection and verification protocol for the Biological Weapons Convention, and its withdrawal from the International Criminal Court and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty are offered as evidence of a policy of avoiding international commitments that might constrain America's freedom of action. Critics argue that the United States pursues its own international agenda without regard for the interests, views, or concerns of the rest of the world. The response is that the United States is acting, as all states should and must, in its own self-interests.

In spite of its overwhelming power, in the spring of 2003 the United States found itself embarking on a war with Iraq. While Saddam Hussein was undoubtedly one of the world's great villains, the United States found itself diplomatically at odds with important traditional allies, politically outmaneuvered and stymied at the United Nations, and opposed by public majorities in virtually every nation in the world. How did the United States, with all its advantages, become so politically isolated? One answer lies in the perception that the United States is using its national power more unilaterally than in the past. International opposition did not prevent the United States from going to war. However, the absence of allies has caused the United States to bear the overwhelming burden of post-conflict operations in Iraq. In contrast, in Bosnia and Kosovo NATO allies and other partners provided the bulk of peacekeeping troops following U.S.-led campaigns.

The perceptions and reality of the extent to which the United States pursues unilateralist policies will undoubtedly affect America's strategic choices in the future. There are clear trade-offs between sacrificing freedom of action and lowering costs and adding the capabilities of other nations. Considering these trade-offs should be part of the strategic decisionmaking process for the United States as it wages a GWOT and confronts a range of critical global interests and issues. The United States cannot limit its options by clinging to notions about whether it should act unilaterally or multilaterally. There are times and circumstances for both approaches. The art is to recognize them and select the proper tool.

Notes - Chapter 2

1 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment." *Foreign Affairs, America and the World 1990/91*, 70, No. 1. Available from Lexis/Nexis Academic Universe. Accessed 16 January 2003.

2 Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go it Alone*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 40.

3 The World Bank, "Total GDP 2001." Available at www.worldbank.org/data/databytopic/GDP/pdf. Accessed 23 June 2003.

4 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "The 15 major spender countries in 2002." Available at www.projects.sipri.se/milex/mex_major_spenders.pdf. Accessed 23 June 2003.

5 Nye, 154.

6 Charles Krauthammer, "Unilateral? Yes, Indeed." *The Washington Post*, 14 December 2002, A45.

7 The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States* (Washington, DC: The White House, Sep. 2002), 3.

8 G. John Ikenberry, "Getting Hegemony Right." *The National Interest* (Spring 2001). Available from Lexis-Nexis Univers. Accessed 16 January 2003.

9 Nye, 159.

10 Ibid., xiii-xiv.

11 Ikenberry, "Getting Hegemony Right."

12 Ibid.