

17. The Case for Selective Unilateralism

SOME CRITICS OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY spend as much time complaining about its unilateral style as about its substance. To be sure, the line between style and substance is blurred. Branding U.S. policy as unilateral may simply be a way of discrediting, rather than contesting, its substance. U.S. policy and its architects are said by the critics to shun consultation with others, including allies, to ignore divergent opinions, and, when a course of action is decided on, to launch it unilaterally as a *fait accompli*.

That this package of beliefs is remote from reality doesn't prevent its prevalence. Contrary to it and the accompanying rhetoric, U.S. foreign policies typically involve extensive consultation with other countries, as well as receptivity to divergent views. Although "receptivity" implies openness to divergent views, it doesn't signify pliant readiness to trade off putative U.S. national interests—sometimes including major domestic interests—to achieve a wider international consensus.

At this point in the argument, the issue begins to move from criticism of the style of U.S. policies to their substance. To dissect the miscast unilateralist critique, consider three of the most salient policy issues that critics have highlighted and reiterated as

examples of U.S. unilateralism: the Kyoto Treaty on emissions controls and global warming; missile defense and its link to the demise of the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty of 1972; and foreign aid as grants rather than loans.

- Endorsement of the Kyoto Protocol by the Clinton administration was openly and repeatedly disavowed by the Bush team both during the 2000 campaign and afterward. Moreover, the several reasons prompting disavowal were discussed and explained multilaterally, repetitively, and extensively, including that compliance would impose added burdens on a U.S. economy already showing signs of weakness. Another reason was the treaty's technically flawed focus on *gross* emissions of CO₂ rather than *net* emissions, which would allow for absorption of CO₂ by forests and grasslands. Focusing on the proper indicator of *net* emissions would reduce U.S. emissions to very low levels for this alleged source of global warming, whatever the scientific basis for the allegations. A third reason for disavowal was the Senate's earlier passage, by an overwhelming margin, of a resolution that repudiated the protocol—thereby decisively indicating that approval of the treaty wasn't in the cards. So, despite all the international criticism of the U.S. "unilateral disavowal of Kyoto," this outcome had been multilaterally discussed and foreshadowed. It was emphatically not arrived at unilaterally.
- Turning to missile defense and the demise of the ABM Treaty, admittedly many concerns remain about missile defense that warrant further analysis and assessment. But there should be no question about the abundance, openness, and multilateralism of the debate. Before the U.S. decision to proceed aggressively with missile defense, and to withdraw from the treaty as provided for in the treaty itself, the United States held innumerable meetings and discussions on both subjects

with NATO allies, Russia, China, and Japan. Affixing a “unilateral” label to this process or its outcome is contrary to the facts. The distinctly multilateral character of the debate was certified by the formal Treaty of Moscow, signed by Presidents Bush and Putin on May 24, 2002, which combined sharp reductions in nuclear warheads (from 5,000–6,500 on each side to between 1,700 and 2,200 by 2012), together with the possibility of collaboration between the signatories to accelerate development, testing, and deployment of thin national missile defense systems.

- A third instance of supposed U.S. unilateralism has been the administration’s contention that, when foreign aid is provided to poor countries, it should be in the form of grants rather than loans, contrary to the prevailing practice. The logic of this position, which has been presented and discussed in countless international forums, consists of four propositions: first, that foreign aid to poor countries should be conditioned on their improved performance; second, that this improvement should be their ticket for access to the global capital markets to replace foreign aid; third, that a severe and mounting impediment to such access results from the accumulation by these countries of debt owed for foreign aid received by them bilaterally and from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the numerous regional development banks; finally, that the acute difficulty many less-developed countries experience in servicing their accumulated debt often imposes increasingly severe interest charges on further borrowing, thereby indefinitely deferring their access to global capital markets. Although the economic logic is compelling, and has been presented in many multilateral conferences among policymakers and financial experts, thus far it has not elicited multilateral acceptance.

These examples are typical. Other prominent ones cited by unilateralist critics include the frequently expressed U.S. intention to remove Saddam Hussein and the U.S. decision to oppose the new United Nations International Criminal Court and to preclude it from having any jurisdiction over U.S. military forces engaged in peacekeeping activities—a stance the UN has reluctantly accepted. These cases exhibit a similar pattern: extensive and intensive U.S. consultation and interaction with other countries, combined with ample readiness to consider divergent views and to delay action while reaffirming U.S. concerns and interests.

At day's end, the ace-in-the-hole argument adduced by critics of U.S. unilateralism is pragmatic and opportunistic, quite apart from issues of style or substance. The United States, they contend, should be more willing to compromise on substance and on U.S. national interests because it would make allies and friends more disposed toward cooperation and burden-sharing when we need them in the future. Ironically, the war on terrorism provides a strong counterargument. After September 11, 2001, the U.S. war against terrorism in Afghanistan and globally was initiated unilaterally and, in the process, galvanized rather than impeded a remarkable coalition and collaboration among some ninety countries.

In sum, critics of U.S. foreign policy typically use the unilateral label to discredit policies they disagree with, rather than arguing frontally against them. In fact, U.S. policies have more often been multilateral than unilateral in their formulation, although sometimes implementation has involved fewer multilateral contributions than might have been hoped. Finally, and perhaps counterintuitively, unilateral initiatives may sometimes

provide an effective stimulus to promote rather than retard multilateral collaboration.

POSTAUDIT

The argument in this essay and its companion in the following chapters—that much of the inflated rhetoric about U.S. unilateralism is just that, namely inflated rhetoric—is as valid now as when this was written in 2002, although never previously published.