

18. Whether Multilateralism Is Better or Worse than Unilateralism Is, Well, Situation-Dependent

IN FOREIGN POLICY PARLANCE, the media and the punditry typically view multilateralism as laudable and unilateralism—meaning a putative “go-it-alone” policy of the United States—as culpable. For example, during calendar year 2002, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* published 492 and 476 articles, respectively, carrying these terms and their corresponding spins.

This standard treatment is simplistic and misleading. Whether unilateralism or multilateralism is good or bad, appropriate or inappropriate, depends on the circumstances.

In some situations, unilateralism may be better because it provides a timely initiative that multilateralism would delay or preclude. The unilateral U.S. announcement in 2001 of its intention to withdraw from the Antiballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to pursue missile defense more effectively is one example.

In other situations, multilateralism can be ill-advised because of its propensity to reflect lowest-common denominator temporizing. The Kyoto Treaty on global warming and emission controls is an illustration.

In still other situations, a policy that is unilateral at its inception may become multilateral and then still later revert toward

unilateralism. The still-evolving policy toward disarming Iraq and removing Saddam Hussein's regime is a case in point.

In still other circumstances, bilateralism, or a series of bilateralisms—the so-called hub-and-spokes model—may be preferable for both the hub and the spokes. U.S. bilateral understandings with several European as well as Middle Eastern countries concerning the possible use of force in Iraq as well as its subsequent reconstruction are an example.

Consider these situations in more detail:

When Unilateralism Works:

U.S. Withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty

After the Bush administration took office in January 2001, it announced its unilateral intention to proceed aggressively with a thin missile defense and to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, thereby avoiding the constraints in that treaty on the development of ABM technology. The decision, vehemently decried by our European allies, subsequently led to the Treaty of Moscow, signed by Presidents Bush and Putin in May 2002, calling for reductions in nuclear warheads by two-thirds on both sides by 2012, as well as possible collaboration between the signatories to accelerate development, testing, and deployment of thin national missile defense systems. This outcome was widely applauded by many of those who had sharply criticized the initial unilateral U.S. decision.

Where, as in this instance, success emerges from unilateralism, the conventionally negative connotations of unilateralism can be maintained by a convenient semantic adjustment: *unilateralism* is relabeled as *leadership*!

When Multilateralism Doesn't Work: The Kyoto Treaty

What was and remains a symbol of global multilateralism—the Kyoto Protocol Treaty on global warming—actually discredits that process or its outcome.

U.S. disavowal in 2001 of the Kyoto Protocol, which the Clinton administration had previously endorsed, is usually treated as a conspicuous and malign example of unilateralism. In fact, the episode exemplifies the sometimes-wayward consequences of multilateralism that, in this instance, produced a deeply flawed treaty—leading to unilateral U.S. rejection of the Kyoto Treaty.

The first flaw was, of course, the deep uncertainties about the assumptions underlying the treaty's provisions: specifically, the extent to which global warming has actually occurred, how serious it is, its attribution to human rather than natural causes, and its costs and benefits—matters effectively exposed and debated by the Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg in *The Skeptical Environmentalist* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

The second flaw was the added cost burdens that compliance with the treaty would impose on the U.S. and global economies, then as now experiencing weak economic growth.

Still a third flaw was the treaty's misconceived focus on *gross* CO₂ emissions rather than *net* emissions, which would allow for absorption of CO₂ by forests and grasslands. Focusing on the proper net indicator would reduce emissions attributed to the United States to very low levels.

And a final flaw was the treaty's omission of China and India from emission ceilings. Although their current emissions are relatively low, their prospective emissions are likely to be substantial because of their relatively high expected rates of GDP growth in the coming decade.

When Unilateralism Merges with Multilateralism: The Possible War against Iraq

The U.S. animus against Iraq is based on two principal concerns: first, the threat posed by Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction and the technology to produce them and, second, Iraq's current and potential support for international terrorism. Although there is substantial evidence underlying both of these concerns, the evidence that has been publicly available is insufficient to convince much of the international community.

Nevertheless, the Bush administration has managed to link its own unilateral convictions of the validity of these concerns with multilateral efforts to remove the threat posed by Iraq. Reflecting this strategy, both Houses of the U.S. Congress enacted, on October 10 and 11, 2002, by overwhelming majorities, "authorization for the use of U.S. military force against Iraq."

The unilateral U.S. measure decisively influenced and expedited the often-dilatory multilateral processes of the United Nations Security Council, resulting in the council's unanimous endorsement, on November 8, 2002, of a resolution establishing a new UN commission to monitor, verify, and inspect all areas of Iraq with a view to removing or destroying any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq's possession. If Iraq commits a "material breach" of its obligations under the resolution, the council will "convene immediately" to consider further actions.

Although the unilateral U.S. authorization to use force was crucial in enactment of the Security Council resolution, the content of the resolution differs from that of the congressional authorization in two fundamental ways: first, in describing Iraq's threat to international security, the congressional authorization cites both the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction and its prior and continued support for al-Qaeda and international terrorism, whereas the Security Council resolution omits

any reference to Iraq's support for terrorism; second, the Security Council resolution does not authorize the use of force, opting instead to "convene immediately" if anything less than full compliance is forthcoming from Iraq.

How this situation will play out is uncertain. There are several plausible scenarios in this evolving interaction between unilateralism and multilateralism, including (1) manifest noncompliance by Iraq that would trigger an immediate council resolution for collective military action to disarm Iraq; (2) a decision by the United States that, although the Security Council may be dilatory or reluctant to act, the evidence of "material breaches" is sufficient to precipitate unilateral U.S. military intervention; and (3) same as (2), except that, along with U.S. forces, several other coalition members, including the United Kingdom, Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, Romania, and probably others would provide supporting forces and facilities.

Among these possible scenarios, the first and second might be termed *pure multilateralism* and *pure unilateralism*, respectively, whereas the third would be a hybrid—partly unilateral, partly multilateral—a "coalitional" outcome.

When the Mix between Unilateralism and Multilateralism Takes the "Hub-and-Spokes" Form

More frequently than either pure multilateralism or pure unilateralism, U.S. foreign policies entail bilateral efforts with other countries. This "hub-and-spokes" model typically characterizes U.S. security arrangements and operations with Japan, Korea, and Israel, and, in the evolving Iraq situation, with Britain, Turkey, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Romania. Although the U.S. role as a hub is singular, these bilateral undertakings are certainly *not* unilateral.

What these illustrations demonstrate is that reality is more complex than is encompassed by designating multilateralism as

good and unilateralism as bad; depending on the circumstances either may be preferable to the other. In this more complex reality, U.S. security policies typically are more differentiated and nuanced than is suggested by the usual normative distinction between the two.

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Written at the end of 2002, the suggestion that sometimes unilateralism may be preferable to multilateralism as well that, in other cases, the reverse may apply, and that in other situations hybrid forms may be more advantageous, still makes good sense five years later. The examples that are cited, however—particularly concerning Iraq—are less timely, therefore somewhat downgrading the value of the essay.