

Unilateralism vs. Multilateralism:



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Many American allies say they resent the excessive unilateralism of the Bush administration's foreign policy. Ironically, in the 2000 election campaign, candidate George W. Bush aptly made the best case for a multilateral approach: "If we are an arrogant nation, they'll view us that way, but if we're a humble nation, they'll respect us." International rules bind America and limit its freedom of action, but they serve U.S. interests by binding others as well. And opportunities for foreigners to raise their voice and influence American policies constitute an important incentive for alliance.

U.S. membership in a web of multilateral institutions ranging from the United Nations to NATO reduces U.S. policy autonomy. But, seen in the light of a constitutional bargain, the multilateralism of U.S. preeminence reduces the incentives for constructing alliances against America.

Multilateralism is a matter of degree, and not all multilateral arrangements are good. Like other countries, the United States should occasionally use unilateral tactics. So how to choose?

No country can rule out unilateral action in cases that involve vital survival interests. Self-defense is permitted under Article 51 of the UN Charter. Bush's military action in Afghanistan was largely unilateral, but was carried out against a backdrop of support from NATO allies and UN resolutions.

Even when survival is not at stake, unilateral tactics sometimes help lead others to compromises that advance multilateral interests. During the Reagan administration, trade legislation that threatened unilateral sanctions if others did not negotiate helped create conditions that prodded other countries to move forward with the World Trade Organization and its dispute settlements mechanism. Some multilateral initiatives are recipes for inaction, or are contrary to American values. For example, the "new international information order" proposed by Unesco in the 1970s would have helped authoritarian governments to restrict freedom of the press.

More recently, Russia and China prevented Security Council authorization of intervention to stop the human rights violations in Kosovo in 1999. Ultimately the United States decided to go ahead without Security Council approval. Even then the American intervention was not purely unilateral but carried out with strong support from allies in NATO.

Some transnational issues are inherently multilateral and cannot be managed without the help of other countries. Climate change is a perfect example. The United States is the largest source of greenhouse gases, but three-quarters of the sources originate outside its borders. Without cooperation, the problem is beyond American control.

The same is true of a long list of items: the spread of infectious diseases, the stability of global financial markets, the international trade system, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, narcotics trafficking, international crime syndicates, transnational terrorism. In addition, multilateralism is a means to get others to share the burden of providing public goods. Sharing also helps foster commitment to common values.

Even militarily, the United States should rarely intervene alone. (Polls show that two-thirds of Americans prefer multilateral actions.) It pays a minority share of UN and NATO peacekeeping operations, and the legitimacy of a multilateral umbrella reduces collateral political costs.

In choosing between multilateral and unilateral tactics, Washington should consider the effects of the decision on U.S. soft power, which can be destroyed by excessive unilateralism and arrogance.

In balancing whether to use multilateral or unilateral tactics, or to adhere to or refuse to go along with particular multilateral initiatives, Americans have to consider how to explain their actions to others and what the effects will be on their soft power.

In short, American foreign policy should have a general preference for multilateralism, but not all multilateralism. At times, America will have to go it alone. When it does so in pursuit of public goods which benefit others as well as Americans, the nature of the ends may substitute for the means in making U.S. power acceptable in the eyes of others.

If America first makes an effort to consult others and try a multilateral approach, its occasional unilateral tactics are more likely to be forgiven. But if it succumbs to the unilateralist temptation too easily, it invites the criticisms that the Bush administration now faces. Moreover, America will often fail because of the intrinsically multilateral nature of transnational issues in a global age, and there will be costly effects on U.S. soft power.

In general, even a sole superpower should follow the rule of thumb "Try multilateralism first."

The writer is dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and author of "The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone." He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.

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