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US unilateralism and its dangers

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Since the end of the Cold War, many of America's closest allies have complained about the rise of American unilateralism, a tendency in Washington to take decisions without much regard for the interests or views of its own allies or the rest of the world. Prime examples of what most offends America's partners would be the restrictions America has attempted to apply to allied trade with Cuba or Iran, in clear violation of traditionally understood rules of international law.

However the charge of unilateralism goes deeper. Others, including some of America's closest friends, were dismayed by the American decision to stand alone, through the use of its veto, in denying Boutros-Boutros Ghali a second term as Secretary General of the United Nations. They are increasingly troubled by the American unwillingness to fund its fair share of the budget of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations family. They also question whether one member of an alliance should be able to impose its views on the others regarding such an important issue for European security as the expansion of NATO.

There is, of course, no doubt that unilateralism has a long and honourable past in American history. One of the advantages of isolationism is that it permits unilateralism. Since America's traditional foreign policy has been one of isolationism, its traditional pattern of diplomatic behaviour has been that of unilateralism.

In a spirit of honesty, we should also acknowledge that unilateralism is not a uniquely American diplomatic practice. It is embedded in the international system, which consists of sovereign states that accept few absolute restrictions on their freedom of independence. Indeed, in recent years, many states have engaged in unilateral acts to get their way.

We also must acknowledge that in a multilateral world, unilateralism is often necessary to force the pace of action. Multilateral bodies are not by nature dynamic. They often require the threat of unilateral action by a powerful member if an issue is to be joined.

The issue is often whether this unilateral action constitutes leadership or bullying. It is not always clear:

- Is the US leading or bullying when it tries to force other states to take action against Iranian terrorism?
- Were the Germans leading or bullying when they forced the rest of the European Union, against their will, to recognize the Croatian Government against the advice of many key world leaders?
- Are the French leading or bullying when they fight to prevent Germany from controlling the leadership of the new European Central Bank?

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- Have the many British delaying actions within the European Union been examples of leadership or bullying?

Often one's answer to these questions depends on where one stands substantively. If one shares Mrs. Thatcher's vision of the European Union, then the British actions constitute leadership. If Iran is the terrorist threat that the United States contends, then the United States is demonstrating leadership.

In this regard, we also must remember that there is a respectable intellectual case that can be made for unilateralism. The American philosopher Michael Walzer has recently pointed out that the argument against unilateralism is often based on a false analogy between the domestic order and the international order. In the domestic order, a citizen is constrained from acting unilaterally because all citizens are under the restraints of the role of law. In Walzer's words:

'With regard to domestic society, the democratic state possesses a monopoly on the legitimate use of force and a near-monopoly on the actual use of force. It holds the ring, so to speak, so that political conflicts can be fought to their conclusion with the guarantee that losing won't mean massacre or imprisonment. Indeed, the losing parties have a better guarantee: they will be able to rejoin the conflict whenever they are ready to do so. Nothing absolutely awful will happen in the interim'. A UN majority, he points out, cannot hold the ring. It cannot guarantee that something 'absolutely awful' will not happen.

Against this background, why then is everyone so concerned about contemporary American unilateralism? The reasons are four: its lack of restraint, its growing sweep, its intrusive character, and its ahistorical thrust. Let's deal with each one.

Lack of restraint

Most states that engage in unilateral acts internationally do so to protect national security or defend their dignity. Consequently, their unilateral acts are rare because the need to act is rare. A state's normal pattern of behaviour is to consult with allies and friends before acting. A state is normally concerned about the views of its friends and allies. It is usually worried when those states express concern. One reason for the more prudent behaviour of most states in acting unilaterally is that they know that what they withdraw from others today, others can withdraw from them tomorrow.

America, however, is now in such a dominant position internationally that the normal restraints on state behaviour no longer apply. Probably not since classic Rome or ancient China has a state so towered over its known or potential rivals in so many dimensions of power. Militarily, America is the only state on the planet that can deploy military forces to the far ends of the world within days. Economically, at least for the time being, the American economy is the envy of the world.

Politically, American consultants roam the world on contract to shape the politics of countries whose language they do not speak and whose culture they do not understand. Nevertheless, they are welcome as political high priests of the contemporary world's most successful nation state.

Finally, culturally, unless the British discover a replacement for the Beatles, American pop culture reigns supreme. Madonna may be one of the heavier burdens of current American supremacy.

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It may be an iron law of international politics, however, that all states, even democratic states, develop a certain sense of hubris if they always get their way. There are certainly signs of hubris in some of the attitudes now developing in the United States. During a recent crisis involving Iraq, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright was asked why so few states agreed with the American analysis of the crisis. Her answer, which almost any senior official in Washington would have given in all but identical words was: '. . . it is because we are America, we are the indispensable nation, we stand tall—we see further into the future'.

Former National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his latest book on geostrategy urges fellow Washington policy pundits, only partly tongue-in-cheek, to embrace an imperial geostrategy whose purpose is, 'to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together'. America must be the only Western country where a senior strategist could describe allied states as 'vassals'.

Another example of rising hubris can be seen in the writings of a former senior official of the Clinton Administration. Shortly after leaving the Clinton White House, he penned an article urging that 'Americans not deny the fact that of all the nations in the earth, theirs is the most just and the best model for the future'. This is the kind of language that the European governments used in the last century as they enjoined their young men to strive to dominate others in the name of civilization.

Sweep

As American dominance internationally largely rules out effective counter-reactions, in recent years American unilateralism has acquired extraordinary scope, which is another reason for growing international concern. In mentioning scope, we are not just speaking of the Helms-Burton legislation or America's increasingly unpopular effort to bar others from trading with Iran. Since 1993 the US has imposed new unilateral economic sanctions, or threatened legislation to do so, 60 times on 35 countries that represent 40 per cent of the world's population; and virtually every week, another proposal to sanction a new country surfaces in the Congress. During the recent monetary crisis in Asia, the United States has attempted to compel those seeking international assistance to embark on a number of difficult internal reforms, long sought by previous US administrations. This effort has in turn triggered a vigorous debate among several of America's most distinguished economists, many of whom argue that the US is trying to exploit the current crisis to impose a unilateral agenda on much of Asia and that this is a misuse of the IMF.

Intrusive character

Ever since World War II, international law has been developing in a direction that puts an increasing number of restraints on states in terms of how they may treat their citizens. Jimmy Carter created an international firestorm when, upon becoming president, he claimed that from that moment no state could maintain that its human rights record was an internal matter. Up until that statement, the official position of

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most states, including democratic states, was that, even though international commitments said that Carter's position was correct, diplomatic practice dictated that states be allowed to treat their citizens as they wished.

Fortunately, a growing number of democratic states have come to accept the Carter position. The United States, however, continues to push the envelope further than most of its allies. In attempting to turn a new page in trade relations with Africa, the Clinton administration and the Congress wish to impose a whole series of domestic reform conditions on African states, leading South African President Nelson Mandela to declare publicly during President Clinton's 1998 trip to South Africa, 'We resist any attempt by any country to impose conditions on our freedom of trade'.

In the case of Iraq, both this and the previous administration have stated that they wish to use the United Nations' sanctions regime to overthrow the government, even though the resolutions adopted by the Security Council after the Gulf War do not call for the regime's overthrow. More recently, there have been authoritative calls for the United States to use its veto at the United Nations to prevent a lifting of sanctions on Iraq until the regime there agreed to deport all of its leading scientists. Even the victorious allies in World War II saw the folly of the Morgenthau Plan, which would have attempted to reduce Germany to a pastoral society.

Ahistorical thrust

The final charge that can be made against current American unilateralism is that it is ahistorical. Yes, it is true that the international system still consists of a collection of sovereign nation states and that each of these states retains the right to act unilaterally to defend its security and welfare. It is also true that the history of this century has been punctuated by one unwise unilateral act of a powerful state after another.

Nevertheless, alongside this history is a parallel effort to try to work for a more peaceful and predictable world by encouraging states to cooperate for the common good rather than compete for national advantage. Through the development of international law, common engagements, and shared responsibilities, we are trying slowly but surely to reduce the times when states will feel compelled to resort to the law of the jungle to protect their interests.

The effort to build up the norms and institutions of cooperation has been common. Enormous progress has been made in many parts of the world, although the achievement remains fragile. It can easily be dismantled, yet all will benefit if the effort proves successful.

It would be an act of diplomatic vandalism to tear these international structures of law and cooperation for some temporary and largely evanescent national advance. Yet that is precisely what the United States at times risks doing by its current impulse toward unilateralism. One must therefore hope that America's friends will be able to persuade it to proceed more carefully in the future than it has in the recent past in trying always to get its way.

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