

The United States and Coalition Building in the New International Order

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Abstract

In the new international order of the post-Cold War, post-9/11 world, the United States, now the hyperpower of the world, has embarked upon a unilateralist policy in defense of its national security interests. Such an approach is flawed in the new international order, as American military might and diplomatic arrogance threatens to sideline multilateral frameworks and marginalize well-established alliance systems. The United States must rethink its approach to world affairs, reevaluate its use of hard power, and consider utilizing soft power strategies in order to maintain its national security.

Introduction

The purpose of this Oxford Round Table is to examine the new international order through the lens of history – to see how the United States can cope in this new international order, one in which China and Europe loom large as major economic, military, and diplomatic players, and American national security policy is filtered through the sieve of the War on Terror. The Oxford Roundtable is well known for its provocative presentations and vigorous discussion – it is my hope that my remarks this morning will contribute to that tradition.

In 2002, Oxford University Press published a methodical yet modest volume by Joseph Nye, an Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Clinton administration, titled *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World's Only Superpower Can't Go It Alone*. Nye argued that in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 international order, in which the United States reigns as the sole superpower, or as some suggest, a hyperpower, the United States faces such a broad range of security threats and foreign policy issues that it cannot isolate itself from the world community by embracing unilateralist strategies in pursuit of national security. These threats and issues are varied – terrorism, failed states, environmental issues, world trade, energy security, cultural extremism, among many others. Indeed, global stability itself has become an objective key to the national security of the United States. For Nye, such an objective in the face of such threats requires multilateral approaches to international relations – alliances, coalitions, transnational

organizations, regional security organizations. The paradox lies in the notion that as the supreme world power, with the only military capable of effective global reach, the United States ironically cannot rely solely upon that “hard power” to assure its national security. The United States must embrace multilateralism in the new international order of the 21st century.¹

How can the United States break its recent reliance upon unilateralism and its own military power so that it can embrace a shared, multilateral military and non-military national security strategy in the hope of securing world stability, and thereby attain national security? The American experience with coalitions shows how difficult this is. If the United States can truly accept multilateralism, it would be a major paradigm shift in the American strategic and diplomatic tradition.

Historical Background of American Coalition Building

The United States spent the first century of its history avoiding alliances and coalitions of any sort, save for the brief alliance with France in the War for Independence. Then, isolationism slowly gave way to a rather comfortable role as hemispheric policeman in the latter third of the 19th century, as the growing nation embraced strategic commercial expansion, the modernization of its military, and made the largely forgotten Monroe Doctrine something more real. When the United States finally and very reluctantly broke with diplomatic tradition and “associated” itself with the Allies in the Great War, it crossed the Rubicon, as it were, to being receptive, if not willing, to engage in alliances and coalitions. The Grand Alliance of World War II, the Cold War alliances like NATO and SEATO, and even the coalitions that participated in the Korean and Vietnam wars would have made George Washington, *et al*, roll in their graves for a variety of reasons.

¹ 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). See also David Callahan, *Between Two Worlds: Realism, Idealism, and American Foreign Policy after the Cold War* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).

Washington's famous warning to shun reciprocal treaties and other alliances, however, is often misunderstood. Far from calling for isolationism and the complete avoidance of such arrangements, Washington was giving sage advice to a young militarily and diplomatically weak state; such alliances in the early years of the Republic would have made the United States the unwilling underling of a great power. In Washington's, perhaps more accurately Hamilton's, mind, once the United States realized its economic potential such arrangements would be unnecessary – in the meantime, the great Atlantic Ocean would protect the fledging nation from European designs. Once the United States had matured, only then could the republic enter into alliances, and preferably only in times of extreme crisis.²

By the end of the Great War, the United States was no underling; rather, the upstart nation had firmly economically, diplomatically, and to a lesser extent militarily, planted itself among the first division of the world's powerful nation states. World War II made the United States undisputed champion of that league. For a few short years after that war, none rivaled the economic and military might of the United States. To evolve from a young nation avoiding the machinations of great powers to being the supreme power in the span of 170 years is extraordinary, not the least of which because it forced the United States as a nation state and Americans as a people to undergo a paradigm shift in how both saw the American role in the world and how that role should be played.³

The strategic landscape of the Cold War demanded alliances and coalitions – thus, the creation of NATO, for example. These alliances, however, were not alliances of equals and it would be naïve to think any of the participants then thought otherwise. Rather, these mostly

² George Washington, Farewell Address to Congress, 1796, Avalon Project of Yale Law School, online: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/washing.htm>, accessed August 10, 2006.

³ Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (New York: Mariner Books, 1997), 199-222.

defensive arrangements consisted of the United States as leader and other participating states as followers. Even after the Cold War, such remained the case.⁴ The much-touted Gulf War coalition, for example, was an American production, pure and simple. There are practical and ideological reasons for this sort of approach to national and global security, but these reasons do not eclipse the downside of what has become a unilateralist American approach to alliances and coalitions.

American Unilateralism and Coalitions of the Willing

Militarily, the United States has dominated its alliances and coalitions since the end of World War II. From Korea forward, the United States has arguably preferred lesser actual contributions from alliance partners when organizing and applying so-called “hard power.” The American military establishment is a very selfishly organized entity. It does not like outsiders. The armed forces of the United States have been since the early Cold War and most certainly are today very systems-oriented. And since the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, they are also more “joint” than ever before. Weapons systems, command and control, and doctrine are focused almost exclusively on the American services and do not allow for the temporary participation of a coalition partner to any great degree. The power of the American armed forces lies in its ability to integrate within its own systems. The militaries of alliance and coalition partners for most practical purposes cannot integrate into such a system. Great Britain arguably is the only military force that the American armed forces can tolerate as a real coalition partner in a military campaign.

This is why in the Gulf War, for example, the American military was happy to only have a coast guard ship from Norway, three small ships from Holland, and three frigates, a corvette,

⁴ Barry R. Rosen and Andrew L. Ross, “Competing U.S. Grand Strategies,” in Barry J. Lieber, ed., *Eagle Adrift: American Foreign Policy at the End of the Century* (New York: Longman, 1997), 118-119.

and eight fighter aircraft from Italy as part of a coalition military force – to put it bluntly, coalition military forces get in the way of American military power. Of course, money does not get in the way, so it is most always welcome. Gulf War coalition partners may have contributed only 24% of the total force, mostly in logistical and support functions, but they paid 88% of the \$90 billion price tag.⁵ The United States prefers coalitions that allow it to exercise unilateral military action with minimal actual participation from coalition partners. This was true during the much of the Cold War, the immediate post-Cold War years, and is the case today in the War on Terror.

Coalition participants have likewise come to accept American-dominated coalitions, and for these participants there is good reason to do so. In order to present a multilateralist front in pursuit of its own national security objectives, the American need to enlist nations as members of coalitions but with minimal actual participation has convinced many nations to demand exorbitant enlistment bounties. In the Iraq War, again for example, the “coalition of the willing” was willing to enlist in exchange for favors, such as aid, trade, and special treatment in getting into exclusive clubs. Turkey wanted \$30 billion in aid; Poland wanted military aid and concrete assurances that its application to join NATO would be rubber stamped; Bulgaria, Albania, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania, and Estonia made minor military, economic, or diplomatic contributions – all want to join NATO; Hungary allowed American use of bases inside its borders – Hungary is a prime candidate for future American bases; Egypt allowed base use in exchange for a massive aid package; Denmark contributed a submarine. Even Tonga signed on to be included in the official list of 46 nations that made up the “coalition of the willing.” In total, 31 coalition partners contributed less than 24,000 troops to the Iraq War.

⁵ “Makin’em Pay,” *Economist* Vol. 318, Issue 7691 (January 26, 1991): 18; Barbara Slavin, “U.S. Builds War Coalition with Favors – and Money,” *USA Today* (February 25, 2003).

Despite the unwillingness of the U.N. Security Council, the U.N. General Assembly, and varying majorities in polls of many coalition member populations to support the war, these nations agreed to minimum participation in exchange for a seat at the American aid table.⁶

The United States uses international organizations when it suits its needs and avoids it when it does not. Having such power allows choice between unilateral and multilateral strategies, almost on an *a la carte* basis. Both approaches have pluses and minuses. Nonetheless, the transnational aspect of globalization has created a myriad of problems that no single state, not even a superpower, can cope with unilaterally; multilateral means through coalitions and international organizations is critical if not fundamental to dealing with today's world. Yet, multilateralism can be constraining, can dilute the political objectives of the individual actor, and can even infringe upon state sovereignty. The United States is in the somewhat enviable position in that it can pick and choose based upon the circumstances whether or not to go it alone or act in concert with coalition partners.⁷

What then are the interests of the United States, and how does the United States rectify its interests with that of potential coalition partners, or does it even try to do so? This is a troubling set of questions. We would like to think that free markets, energy security, global stability, and democracy are universal interests – American interests are the interests of the world. Or, is it more accurately put that these same interests are actually key strategic means to achieve the national political objective of maintaining and preserving the national security of the United States? If one chooses to believe the latter, then how do our alliance and coalition partners feel

⁶ Ian Williams, "Coalition Building *a la* Shakespeare," *Washington Report on the Middle East Affairs* Vol. 22, Issue 4 (May 2003): 23-25; Barbara Slavin, "U.S. Builds War Coalition with Favors – and Money," *USA Today* (February 25, 2003); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 347-348.

⁷ Stewart Patrick, "Beyond Coalitions of the Willing: Assessing U.S. Multilateralism," *Ethics and International Affairs* Vol. 17, No. 1 (2003): 18-55.

about being “used” for such a selfish (certainly understandable from a Bismarckian point of view) end? Consider the notion that the National Security Strategy of the United States, as it has been outlined since the Reagan administration, has become increasingly unilateralist in its approach and arrogant in its expectations, thus promoting demeaning treatment of allies, willing and otherwise. Such has perhaps been the case since the Gulf War, arguably in the Balkans, and more certainly in the War on Terror.⁸

The American Obsession with Hard Power

The United States has unparalleled and unchallenged military power. Russia is no match. Europe is improving but still far off the mark. China might be on par if the United States stood still and the Chinese underwent massive military advancement for twenty years or so. The United States spends more on defense than the EU, Russia, and China combined – about \$350 billion annually. Consider that when the United States, for example, has the money, technology, and procurement capacity to replace the best fighter in the world, the F-16, with an aircraft that might be ten times better than anything anyone else even has on the drawing board, the F-22A (and the Joint Strike Fighter), anyone actually catching up to the military abilities of the United States by mid-century is highly unlikely.⁹

Yet, the United States is in the process of learning a most valuable lesson that other dominant military powers have learned in the past – military capability and exercise of that power does not mean victory or achieving all strategic objectives. The United States has already learned this lesson the hard way in Southeast Asia, and is learning it again right now. Hard power instills complacency and is expensive. The problem for the United States is its unhealthy

⁸ See Nye, *The Paradox of American Power*, and Andrew J. Bacevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁹ T. R. Reid, *The United States of Europe: The New Superpower and the End of American Supremacy* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 177-196.

growth in its infatuation with its military prowess. Yet, why shouldn't it be obsessed with its military might? The Gulf War of 1991 was a stunning feat of combat arms, as was the initial phase of the Iraq War in 2003 and the defeat of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001-2002. The incredibly complex integration of weapons, communications, computer, space, and human assets proved amazingly adaptable and flexible, and lethal, in these American-dominated conflicts. Militarily, coalition partners made only negligible contributions.

Moreover, to further support this obsession, consider that the American military's recovery from the Vietnam debacle has been extraordinary. The transformation from a draft force to the all-volunteer force in the 1970s and 1980s has arguably been an overwhelming success. The transformation from a Cold War-fight-the-Soviets-in-Germany-heavy-land force to a force with flexible joint capabilities has also been successful (and is ongoing). If you're President Clinton, why not use the military that prevailed in the Gulf War to thump the thugs terrifying Mogadishu? Why not use the air assets that in the public's imagination had the ability to conduct surgical strikes with next to no collateral damage in the Gulf War and use it to bring Milosevic to heel in 1999? This force seemed capable of doing anything, from a major conflict to passing out bags of rice. American political leaders became enamored with American military might after the Cold War, and have been increasingly willing to use it not as the last resort, but as the first resort. The Weinberger and Powell Doctrines have been dismissed, replaced by a hasty and arrogant reliance on military force. I agree with Andrew Bacevich – there is a new American militarism and perhaps American political leadership and some elements of the upper

echelon of the American officer corps have been seduced by the use of force as the principal means of projecting American power.¹⁰

Still, such military feats often do not answer the question of “then what?” Post-conflict resolution has not been an American strong point. Reconstruction after World War II, as was the war itself, was arguably an aberration in the American experience. Perhaps this is where a real coalition of soft-power practitioners could have been of great use in Iraq. Many nations agreed to participate in what they thought would be a peacekeeping mission in post-combat Iraq. Post-combat Iraq, however, quickly deteriorated into a deadly combat situation, one in which nations such as Japan, Spain, Italy, Poland and Holland, among others, concluded was not what they had bargained for. They pulled out their admittedly meager forces, taking with them more straw from the strawman – the American-led “coalition” in Iraq.¹¹

Multilateralism and Soft Power

The United States can’t go it alone – it needs to embrace a new paradigm of international relations and national security policy. It needs to lead coalitions of equals instead of coalitions of followers. Peacekeeping operations offer the best evidence of the limits of American military power. Peacekeeping by its very nature demands a coalition, and with American armed forces not well versed in peacekeeping, the United States has often seen the wisdom of letting other nations play more prominent roles in these often-thankless operations. The American role in peacekeeping in the former Yugoslavia offers a good example of this. Still, it did take American-led hard power to ultimately bring Serbia to heel.¹²

¹⁰ See Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans are Seduced by War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) and John Shattuck, *Freedom on Fire: Human Rights Wars and America’s Response* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

¹¹ Ricks, *Fiasco*, 346-347.

¹² Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 297.

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Instead of what has become the traditional American model of coalition action, where the United States plays basically a solo role in the actual military activity, perhaps the East Timor intervention of 1999-2000 might provide a more effective multi-participant coalition model. Under a fairly loose U.N. mandate to restore order in East Timor after the Timorese vote for independence from Indonesia in September 1999, the Australian-led International Force East Timor (INTERFET) deployed in just under one week to the region. INTERFET was not a traditional “blue-helmet” UN-led peacekeeping operation. Rather, the U.N. basically subcontracted the operation to the region, giving Australia operational control of the operation. The force of over 13,000 troops represented a variety of military capabilities from a range of nations, including Australia, Brazil, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Ireland, Italy, Malaysia, New Zealand, Norway, the Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, and the United States, which played an uncharacteristic supportive role.

This “coalition of the willing” was willing to deal with a humanitarian crisis, be led by a regional power, and operate with little U.N. or American interference. Regional interests demanded regional action, and in this case the United States was willing to allow the region to take care of itself. Obviously the operational aspects INTERFET were not perfect and highlighted concerns previously expressed by the American military about coalitions and peacekeeping/use of force. Still, INTERFET might be worth looking to as model to make coalitions more regional and more decentralized, and as a consequence more effective. Perhaps this is similar to community policing-models used by local law enforcement in the United States and Great Britain – give the people who live in the neighborhood a meaningful stake in their neighborhood, and they will take care of the neighborhood. Granted, there will be occasions when broader coalitions and U.N. direction would be necessary – it depends upon circumstances.

So long as the U.N. has no permanent military force, however, INTERFET-like arrangements might be worthwhile.¹³

What of NATO? Could it not take on a wider role in the world? Or, has its time and purpose past? Does it disband and does Europe then turn to a bona fide European defense system? And what international purpose would that serve? NATO has been and remains the premier alliance of the world. The end of the Cold War, however, has removed its principal purpose, and growing disparities in American and European interests threaten its longevity. Even disparity in the interests of the European states threatens the alliance. So, does NATO need to become global in its scope and purpose to remain relevant? Does it do so under dominant American leadership, or American leadership that is more open to power sharing?¹⁴

NATO represents perhaps the best opportunity for American multilateralism to work in the new international order. It arguably already has – witness NATO’s role in Kosovo when the U.N. Security Council failed to act. NATO, in the words of Francis Fukuyama, “provided legitimacy for military intervention in a way that the United Nations could not.” The United States could allow NATO countries to take the lead in liberal democratic nation-building – all of the members of NATO are themselves liberal democracies. Yet, NATO refused to play a prominent role in the Iraq War, and NATO’s cumbersome consensus-based decision-making process (again witness Kosovo), would have to be radically retooled to become a real

¹³ Moreen Dee, “Coalitions of the Willing and Humanitarian Intervention: Australia’s Involvement with INTERFET,” *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 8, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001): 1-20; Alan Ryan, “The Strong Lead-Nation Model in an ad hoc Coalition of the Willing: Operation Stabilise in East Timor,” *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 2002): 23-44; Gary Wilson, “U.N. Authorizes Enforcement: Regional Organizations versus Coalitions of the Willing,” *International Peacekeeping* Vol. 10, No. 2 (Summer 2003): 89-106.

¹⁴ Douglas T. Stuart, “NATO and the Wider World: From Regional Collective Defence to Global Coalitions of the Willing,” *Australian Journal of International Affairs* Vol. 58, No. 1 (March 2004): 33-46.

international multilateral organization to which the United States could give up some of its unilateral baggage.¹⁵

And what of soft power regional organizations? Organizations like the EU, Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, Organization of American States (OAS), Southern African Development Community (SADC), and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to name a few, can, if properly funded by the broader international community, promote regional cooperation, security, and economic development, and thus global security. Europe has many soft power assets that could counter-balance American hard power – trade, development aid, education and cultural programs, as well as a tradition, now, of pan-European approaches to international development.¹⁶

United States, however, seems for the most part unwilling to allow the U.N. and regional coalitions to take the lead when its interests are directly, even indirectly, effected. It has rejected, it seems, the concept of a multipolar world, as evidence in the American refusal to ratify such international agreements like the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Kyoto Accords, and the International Criminal Court, in favor of what could be described as unipolar unilateralism. Such a strategy can be considered selfish and prideful.¹⁷

The renowned historian of American foreign relations, John Lewis Gaddis, recently warned that this “pride” is dangerous – in his words:

The essence of responsibility is remembering what the ancients taught us about the sin of pride. Which is to say that we badly need mirrors. Which is to say we always need to see ourselves as others see us. Which is to say that you can't sustain hegemony without

¹⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 172-174.

¹⁶ John H. Norris, “When Alliance and Self-Interest Collide,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 2003): 359-368.

¹⁷ John Van Oudenaren, “Unipolar versus Unilateral,” *Policy Review* (April/May, 2004): 63-74.

consent. Which is to say that consent requires the existence of an alternative more frightening than your own hegemony.¹⁸

That is why the United States became so powerful in the first place during the Cold War, and why in this world of terror it remains so powerful – but can the United States sustain this position using arrogant and unilateralist strategies?

Moreover, if the United States continues to put together “phony coalitions” in the face of the problems of the new international order, legitimacy suffers. The Cold War and the threat of Soviet domination had given the United States legitimacy as the chief defender of Western Europe. Now that that threat is gone, however, on what grounds does such legitimacy lie? Europe may indeed hold the key to American legitimacy in the new international order, but does it have the will to use it? The United States, the American Central Command, and the American-staffed Coalition Provisional Authority have treated coalition partners, European ones in particular, in the Iraq War with disregard, if not disdain. Europe arguably has good reason to no longer look to the United States for leadership. Is receiving a few nuggets of American aid worth the cost of lost prestige and credibility by being associated with American hegemonic power? Legitimacy, prestige, and trust matter in international relations; how does the United States, then, regain moral leadership in the new international order?¹⁹

Conclusion

The United States must encourage regional security and stability arrangements that lessen its direct participation in favor of regional and international cooperative efforts. Even the use of coalitions of the willing from within alliances and collective security organizations might help

¹⁸ John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 115-118.

¹⁹ Robert Kagan, “America’s Crisis of Legitimacy,” *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 83, Issue 2 (March/April 2004): 65-87; Ricks, *Fiasco*, 432.

overcome the deep divisions that have wracked NATO, for example, because of the Iraq War. Such policies save money, share the burden of casualties, and give the broader international community a stake in regional stability. Even the growing influence and ability of transnational non-governmental organizations must be considered in coalition building in today's world. The United States needs to rethink its rather arrogant approach to coalitions, and many nations need to rethink their motivation for participating.²⁰

If the United States continues on its unilateralist course, then international organizations will become increasingly marginalized, if not obsolete, and many friends around the globe will have been alienated.²¹ I am no Wilsonian, but I would like to see more idealism to balance the selfish realism that has come to characterize coalition building in the new international order, and more *internationalism* and more *regionalism* in state interests and coalition approaches to crisis. The United States once prided itself in reluctant use of force during a period in its history when it was not the supreme military power of the world. Despite being that supreme power in the 21st century, the United States must again be reluctant to use force and listen to the non-military solutions of others if it wants to effectively lead its coalition partners in overcoming the national security challenges of today's world.

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²⁰ Robert E. Hunter, "A Forward-Looking Partnership," *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 83, Issue 5 (September/October 2004): 14-18; John H. Norris, "When Alliance and Self-Interest Collide," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 2003): 359-368.

²¹ Carl Cavanagh Hodge, "The Port of Mars: The United States and the International Community," *Journal of Military Ethics* Vol. 2, No. 2 (2003): 107-121.

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