

After Bush: A Return to Multilateralism in U. S. Foreign Policy?

MICHAEL MASTANDUNO

DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

According to specialists in American politics, the single most important factor in determining the outcome of Presidential elections is the state of the economy. A strong economy helps the incumbent party, and a weak economy helps the challenging party. But in certain elections—1952 and 1968 are good examples—foreign policy takes center stage. Foreign policy matters most when the United States is engaged in controversial wars overseas. The Korean War in 1952 and the Vietnam War in 1968 moved foreign policy to the forefront of presidential debate.

Once again, in 2008, foreign policy is a key electoral issue. The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are of course on the minds of American voters and candidates. But foreign policy matters in 2008 for a more fundamental reason: Americans are debating not just military intervention, but the most appropriate way for the United States to engage the rest of the world. The foreign policy of the Bush administration, perhaps more so than any administration in recent memory, has created considerable controversy at home and abroad.

A central concern has been the unilateral direction of U. S. foreign policy under Bush. Unilateralism has upset many of America's closest friends, particularly its European allies, some of whom offered significant opposition to the U. S. intervention in Iraq in 2003. Unilateralism has also offended many members of what might be called the Washington establishment of foreign policy experts in and out of government in the United States. These experts believe that the Bush administration has needlessly alienated other governments by adopting a series of "go it alone" policies on the environment, in the Middle East, and on the role of international institutions such as the United Nations.

A key question that many people have been asking, in the United States and elsewhere, is whether American unilateralism will remain a typical feature of U. S. foreign policy after the Bush administration. With the upcoming election of a new American president, will we see a return to multilateralism in U. S. foreign policy?

Many critics of the Bush administration in the Washington establishment and in other capitals have a clear answer to that question. It is informed by what might be called the "back to normal" view of American foreign policy. The back to normal argument holds that ever since World War II, the United States has had

a principled commitment to multilateralism in foreign policy. Multilateralism was the defining postwar strategy, embraced by Democrats as well as Republicans. The Bush administration has been the great exception; it made a principled commitment to unilateralism and turned its back on the world, and the consequences have been catastrophic both for American policy and for the international reputation of the United States. Proponents of this view believe that once the United States moves beyond the current President—and does not elect another one like him—it can return to the multilateral path. It is not surprising that the most ardent critics of Bush, and of the neoconservative coalition of Republicans he empowered in foreign policy, believe that the safest solution for returning the United States to normalcy is to elect a Democratic candidate.

Democratic candidates, of course, are responding to and reinforcing this argument by campaigning against the Bush administration's foreign policy and promising a return to normal. In a *Foreign Affairs* essay, Barack Obama calls for a renewal of American leadership: "American cannot meet the threats of this century alone, and the world cannot meet them without America. We can neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission. We must lead the world by deed and by example."¹ Not to be outdone, Obama's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, also wrote in *Foreign Affairs*: "The tragedy of the last six years is that the Bush Administration has squandered the respect, trust, and confidence of even our closest allies and friends... At a moment in history when the world's most pressing problems require unprecedented cooperation, this administration has unilaterally pursued policies that are widely disliked and distrusted... Yet, it does not have to be this way... as President, I will seize the opportunity to reintroduce America to the world."²

"Reintroduce" is a key word here. Democratic candidates have been telling the Washington establishment and the broader international community that America was multilateral in the past, it was taken in the wrong direction by Bush. Once they are elected, America will move back in the proper multilateral direction.

This is a well-intentioned story, and of course it has a happy ending. But I am skeptical of it. I believe that the "back to normal" view gets the history of American foreign policy wrong, and gets the Bush experience at least partly wrong. It sets up too high an expectation for American foreign policy in the future, an expectation that I suspect the United States can not and will not meet.

The United States has always been ambivalent about multilateralism. It will continue to be ambivalent, no matter which candidate, from which party, is elected president in November. If a Democrat is elected, the rhetoric surely will change to place more emphasis on international cooperation and the virtues of multilateralism in foreign policy. Some American policies will likely change as well. But anyone who believes that once the Bush administration is gone, America will somehow move quickly from unilateralism to multilateralism is likely to be disappointed, for reasons having to do with both American power and

American domestic politics.

This essay will make four points. First, I will explore briefly some of historical reasons the United States has always been ambivalent about multilateralism. There are also important intellectual traditions in American foreign policy that are suspicious of international engagement in general and multilateralism in particular.

Second, I will re-examine the post-World War II era. The United States did embrace multilateralism—but more for pragmatic reasons than as a matter of consistent principle. However American governments, both Republican and Democratic, still resorted regularly to unilateralism when it suited U. S. interests. The ‘golden age’ of multilateralism was not nearly as pure as many, looking back from the current era, would like to believe. The United States both embraced and defied multilateralism.

Third, we need to view the Bush experience in this proper historical context. The Bush administration, particularly in its first term, clearly embraced a rhetorical commitment to unilateralism, and it was unilateralism with an attitude, with a western cowboy swagger. But in terms of policy, the Bush record is not as unambiguously unilateral as many of its critics suggest. It is an exaggeration to state that under Bush the United States has turned its back on the world. The administration has maintained a commitment to multilateralism in many areas, and overall there has been a good deal more continuity across American foreign policy than the critics are ready to acknowledge.

Fourth, I will explain why it will be hard for next president—whomever he or she is—to live up to a principled commitment to multilateralism. There are three key factors—American domestic politics, America’s extraordinary power position, and existing American commitments—that will continue to make a principled multilateral approach very difficult for U. S. foreign policy.

AMERICA’S HISTORICAL AMBIVALENCE

It is fair to say that the United States came into the world uncomfortable with the world. In his farewell address to the new nation in 1796, the first American President, George Washington, counseled his countrymen to avoid entangling alliances and stated that it was the new country’s policy to “steer clear of permanent alliances with any part of the foreign world.” Washington’s view was widely shared. The United States had broken away from an old world where political power was centralized and exercised arbitrarily. The leaders of the new nation wanted to disperse political power and they wanted to avoid the routine wars and political controversies that characterized the day to day balance of power politics of Europe. The new United States was blessed geographically; it was separated from Europe (and from Asia) by large oceans, so it could afford not to be involved in Europe’s balance of power. As Washington noted, “Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.”³

For most of nineteenth century the United States did pursue a different course. It believed it had a “manifest destiny” or mission to expand westward, across the North American continent. The United States did just that and by the end of the nineteenth century became a great power. In the Spanish-American War of 1898 the United States drove Spain out of Cuba, occupied the Philippines, and generally expanded its power into the Pacific.

But America was still ambivalent about multilateral engagement, and remained detached from the European balance of power as much as possible. Despite having material capabilities on the scale of a great power, the United States tried to stay out of World War One into very late in the conflict. When it did enter the war, on the side of Great Britain and France, President Woodrow Wilson made clear to the American people that Britain and France were not allies, but just “associated powers.” After the war, Wilson himself, in a fit of American idealism, tried to engage the United States in an ambitious multilateral project to restore European and international order. But the U. S. Congress, reflecting America’s traditional ambivalence about multilateral engagement, rejected U. S. participation in the League of Nations. Despite its formidable power, the United States did not take an international leadership role in either the global economy or the international political system during the interwar years. America only became fully engaged in World War II at the end of 1941, and only after an attack on its military facilities at Pearl Harbor.

The simple point is that the history of U. S. foreign policy did not begin in 1945. Prior to assuming a global role, the United States had a long history of ambivalence about multilateral engagement.

Cultural and intellectual traditions reinforced that ambivalence. Wilsonian internationalism—the intellectual tradition that underlies America’s postwar multilateral commitment—is not the only powerful tradition in American political thought about foreign policy. Consider, for example, two other equally enduring traditions.⁴

What is often called the *Jeffersonian* tradition counsels the United States to be minimally engaged internationally in order to protect democracy at home. The logic of the Jeffersonian position is that an activist foreign policy, to be effective, requires the centralization of power in the domestic political system. In the United States, this has meant an expansion of the power of the President and his close advisors at the expense of the other branches of government. So the more active and engaged the United States is abroad, the more it risks democracy at home. This was a great lesson drawn by many U. S. critics of the Vietnam War, especially during Nixon years when the administration sought to stifle domestic opposition to the war by harassing antiwar activists and monitoring ordinary citizens suspected of being critical of the government’s foreign policy. The Jeffersonian tradition is alive and well today; some critics of the war on terrorism worry that, in the attempt to make the United States more secure from outside threats, the Executive, through measures such as the Patriot Act, is compromising

American civil liberties at home. (Jefferson would say I told you so.) Some realists critics of the Bush administration reflect Jeffersonian perspectives in arguing that the United States today is sufficiently powerful that it should retreat from permanent alliances in Europe and Asia and take up instead a strategy of “offshore balancing.”⁵

What has been called the *Jacksonian* tradition, for President Andrew Jackson, emphasizes a set of traditional American values that do not always co-exist easily with liberal multilateralism. The Jacksonian tradition is one of strong nationalism that embraces the qualities of the rugged American individualist—self-reliance, honor, and patriotism. The motto “don’t tread on me” and the corresponding emblem of a rattlesnake on an early American flag, conveys, in foreign policy terms, that idea that the United States wishes to be left alone, yet if provoked will respond ferociously. Jacksonian thinking informs the western republicanism on Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

The point is not that Jacksonian thinking, or Jeffersonian thinking, are necessarily dominant in contemporary U. S. foreign policy. The point is that these traditions are alive and well and co-exist, sometimes uneasily, with the liberal multilateralist tradition. The Wilsonian tradition of engagement and multilateralism was central during the Cold War, but it is not the only U. S. foreign policy tradition.

THE POSTWAR ERA AND CHANGE IN US FOREIGN POLICY

The end of World War II brought significant change to U. S. foreign policy. The United States moved from a strategy of selective engagement to global engagement. The major source of change was the onset of the Cold War, which convinced American policy makers, by 1947, that containment of the Soviet Union was the proper strategy. In light of the challenge of Communism, containment had to be global in order to be effective. American policy makers also felt that the United States was partly responsible for the catastrophes of the interwar period—the great depression, the collapse of the world economy, and the outbreak of World War II. The United States had become a global power, but had turned its back on the world at a critical time, when the world needed U. S. leadership. America had let the world down, and after the second major war the United States was not going to make the same mistake again.

Multilateralism became a key instrument in the U. S. efforts to rebuild international order and conduct the Cold War. First, the United States provided support and inspiration for the United Nations. The UN was designed to facilitate a concert of the great powers, but one more flexible and thus more realistic than the failed League of Nations. Second, in Western Europe, the United States both encouraged and was pulled into the enduring NATO alliance as the key instrument of containment in Europe. Although NATO was precisely the kind of permanent alliance that President Washington had long ago warned the United

States to avoid, in the context of the Soviet challenge, a permanent transatlantic alliance made strategic sense. The United States also promoted and supported European multilateralism in the form of the nascent European Economic Community. An integrated Europe would be easier for the United States to defend, more capable of defending itself, and more likely to resolve the classic internal European security problem, the Franco-German rivalry.

Third, multilateralism was America's preferred strategy for the reconstruction of the world economy. The interwar world economy, characterized by bilateral deals, regional discrimination, competing economic blocs, and countries setting their own exchange rates to get trade advantages over their neighbors, proved to be destructive economically as well as politically. As Roosevelt's Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, liked to say, enemies in the marketplace eventually became enemies on the battlefield. So U. S. policy makers discouraged regional economic arrangements and promoted the multilateralism of the Bretton Woods system with its supporting multilateral institutions, the GATT, IMF, and World Bank.

Multilateralism gained great prominence in US foreign policy both in rhetoric and in practice. And, because the United States was so powerful internationally, multilateralism became embedded as a norm in international society as well.

Yet, it is important to recognize that for the United States, multilateralism was always more a policy preference than a principled commitment. American policy makers took a pragmatic approach to multilateralism. They preferred it as long as it served U. S. interests, but were willing to dispense with it when it did not. The United States favored whatever worked; multilateralism worked in Europe and in world economy, but not in all aspects of foreign policy

In East Asia, the United States preferred bilateralism to multilateralism in its security policy. It formed "hub and spoke" relationships with key allies such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia. There was no meaningful, multilateral equivalent to NATO in East Asia.

Similarly, in the Middle East and Persian Gulf, the United States placed little or no emphasis on multilateral structures or institutions. Bilateral relations were more important, with one controversial democratic partner (Israel), and several non-democratic ones including Saudi Arabia and Iran at least until the collapse of the Shah in 1979. Rather than multilateral engagement, the United States adopted, until 1990, an offshore balancing strategy, seeking to assure that no hostile state in the region became powerful enough to control oil supplies or significantly threaten Israel.

In Latin America, the United States maintained the appearance of multilateralism through its participation in and support of the Organization of American States (OAS). But multilateralism here was more formality than reality, as the United States continued its tradition of imperial control in what it long considered its regional sphere of influence. U. S. officials, both Republican and Democratic, supported anticommunist, authoritarian leaders such as Somoza

in Nicaragua and Pinochet in Chile, opposed governments with communist or even left leaning credentials such as that of Castro in Cuba and Allende in Chile, and intervened militarily to make regime changes when it considered existing governments to be hostile to American ideological or economic interests, such as in Guatemala in 1954, in the Dominican Republic in 1965, and in Grenada in 1983.

Finally, the strong U. S. multilateral commitment to the United Nations never materialized in the way American officials had hoped at the end of World War II. The plan for a concert of great powers to lead the international system collectively and multilaterally was shattered by the Cold War and subsequent division of the world into competing blocs. The Cold War stalemate meant the UN could not function, on the all-important questions of international security, as a meaningful multilateral instrument. The United States during the Cold War simply used the UN instrumentally, for example by obtaining UN Security Council support for the U. S. -led intervention in the Korean War in 1950 when the Soviet Union and China were not at the table. Over time, the value of the United Nations to American diplomacy became more limited as new states joined the organization out of the process of decolonization and used the UN General Assembly politically against the United States for its support of Israel and its intervention in the Vietnam War.

Thus, in overall terms, the multilateral “golden era” in U. S. foreign policy was actually rather limited, applying primarily to U. S. relations with Western Europe and to the U. S. approach to the world economy.

Even this limited commitment to multilateralism certainly did not preclude American officials from acting *unilaterally* when they it to be necessary for reasons of domestic politics or to maintain their preferred foreign policy strategies. This resort to unilateralism, even during the so-called multilateral era, was frequent, took place across Republican and Democratic administrations, and applied to both security and economic issues.

Allow me to cite just a few examples. The long U. S. intervention in Vietnam—much of it carried out by the Democratic Johnson administration—was never a principled multilateral effort. The United States fought in Vietnam with the support of what later would be called a “coalition of the willing,” against the advice of some of its European allies at the start, and in the face of their opposition as the war progressed. The Nixon shocks of 1971 are of course long remembered in Japan. The Nixon administration brought an end to the international monetary system of cooperation (the fixed exchange rate system, with the U. S. dollar exchanged for gold) that the United States itself created, and it did so abruptly and unilaterally, without even consulting its major allies. Nixon also transformed the global foreign policy strategy of the United States with a unilateral opening of relations with China—an opening the United States undertook secretly and without consulting even its closest ally in the region, Japan.

Some people who consider the unilateralism of the Bush administration to be unprecedented might be too young to remember the first term of the Reagan administration. In the early 1980s, the United States defied its multilateral allies and unilaterally abandoned the pursuit of arms control with the Soviet Union despite an explicit NATO agreement (the “two track” decision of 1979) to pursue it. In the Siberian gas pipeline conflict of 1982, the Reagan administration refused to abide by the NATO consensus and imposed unilateral sanctions against European companies for participating in economic cooperation with Soviet Union.

Reagan also took a unilateral approach to the management of the U. S. dollar. From 1981 to 1983, America’s European allies begged for multilateral coordination of exchange rates because the strong U. S. dollar was pulling investment capital out of Europe and creating recession there as European central banks raised interest rates to match U. S. rates. The United States refused to cooperate, preferring to maintain the autonomy of its domestic economic policy instead. It was only when the dollar became too strong, and began to threaten the American economy, that the United States decided that once again it needed multilateral cooperation. It forced its major allies, West Germany and Japan, into cooperating in what became the multilateral Plaza Agreement of 1985 (which led to the era of the strong yen in Japan). This is a clear example of America’s pragmatic approach, which holds, in effect, that unilateralism is fine for the United States, but that others need to be ready to cooperate if America decides multilateralism is actually better.

The first Bush administration practiced unilateralism in international economic policy. Its most dramatic initiative was the use of “Super 301” trade negotiating authority, which called for the United States to act simultaneously as prosecutor, judge and jury, deciding which countries were the world’s most unfair traders and threatening punitive sanctions against them, all in the name of promoting free trade. U. S. officials consistently argued that they preferred multilateralism, but were also prepared to use bilateral talks, regional agreements, and even unilateral threats and action if necessary to get what they wanted.

The critics of the current Bush administration who look back at the Clinton administration as a high point of multilateral cooperation should reconsider. During the early 1990s, Japan was the target of considerable bilateral pressure from the United States, outside the GATT/WTO framework, to open its markets. America’s NATO allies tried for several years to convince the Clinton administration to accept a multilateral approach to intervention in the Bosnian civil war. The United States only agreed in 1995, and essentially dictated the terms of military intervention in support of the Dayton Peace Accords. The Clinton administration intervened under multilateral auspices in Somalia, but pulled out unilaterally after taking casualties in a firefight with a recalcitrant Somali warlord. The United States refused to intervene in Rwanda despite international pressure to respond to genocide there.

In Kosovo, the Clinton administration defied the UN Security Council when it refused to support intervention, and worked instead through a different multilateral entity, NATO. Similarly, in 1998 the Clinton administration undertook Operation Desert Fox, a bombing campaign against Saddam Hussein's forces in Iraq. The administration bypassed the Security Council and refused to accept limits on its ability to exercise U. S. military power. As Anthony Lake, Clinton's National Security Advisor, had stated earlier, "...only one overriding factor can determine whether the United States should act multilaterally or unilaterally, and that is America's interests. We should act multilaterally where doing so advances our interests, and we should act unilaterally when that will serve our purpose. The simple question in each case is this: What works best?"⁶

If the Cold War was supposed to be the "golden age" of multilateralism, then history tells a different story. The United States certainly had a rhetorical and in some areas policy commitment to multilateralism. But its commitment was neither principled nor consistent.

If the United States claims to prefer multilateralism, why does it resort so frequently to unilateralism? One answer is that the United States accepts the temptation to practice unilateralism because it believes it is powerful enough to get away with it. As a great power, the United States fashions itself as a rule maker, but also believes it has the right to be a privilege taker. American policy makers often feel that because they assume the burdens of maintaining the international system, they are somehow above the rules that constrain other, more ordinary states. The rules that apply to other states in the international system do not apply in the same way to an exceptional America. This attitude is clear in financial policy, where United States runs massive current account deficits without adjusting its domestic and foreign policies, because it believes that other states will continue to hold dollars in their central banks. It is clear in discussions of the international land mines treaty and the international criminal court, where U. S. officials have contended that America's global security role in a special burden which brings with it the right for American military deployments and personnel to be treated differently than those of other states.

Along these lines, U. S. officials have held the expectation that America's allies will remain faithful even when the United States is uncooperative. US policy makers reserve the right to act unilaterally, but then they expect their allies to fall in line behind them—or, at least to cooperate later on when the United States is ready for its own reasons to return to multilateralism. We observed this pattern in the cases of the Nixon shocks and Plaza Accord. It was also evident in the 2003 Iraq war—the United States intervened without the support of some major allies, but subsequently went back to its allies to request support as that war, and the one in Afghanistan, have dragged on.

IS THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION REALLY ALL THAT DIFFERENT?

With this historical context in mind, we can now examine the experience of the current Bush administration. On the one hand, the charges of unilateralism are very well founded. The Bush administration made a clear, public dismissal of multilateral efforts such as the Kyoto accords, the land mines treaty, and the International Criminal Court. It defied both the United Nations Security Council and some of its major allies in NATO in initiating the Iraq war. In the case of Afghanistan, NATO, in the spirit of multilateralism, initially invoked Article 5 of the Treaty after the September 11 attacks, pledging its readiness to come to defense of the United States. The Bush team expressed gratitude at this show of alliance solidarity but chose, in its initial intervention in Afghanistan against the Taliban, to do it essentially on its own.

On other hand, the Bush administration has not simply abandoned multilateralism. On the world economy, Bush administration has been as committed as prior U. S. administrations to multilateral approach to international trade negotiations (e. g., the Doha round) and to US-led multilateral institutions such as IMF and World Bank. In Asia, Bush has maintained bilateral alliances, most importantly with Japan, but also shown preference for multilateral approaches, most obviously in the case of the Six Party talks over North Korea. Bush has promoted multilateral approaches to other security problems, such as the Proliferation Security Initiative to address the spread of weapons of mass destruction. And, despite the conflict over Iraq, during its second term the Bush administration has returned to NATO as a multilateral entity, looking for help in Afghanistan, support for a missile defense initiative, and a commitment to expand NATO eastward, into the Balkans and parts of former Soviet Union such as Ukraine and Georgia.

The Bush team is similar to past U. S. administrations in adopting a pragmatic mix of unilateralism and multilateralism (as well as bilateralism) to satisfy U. S. interests. So why is the Bush mix of unilateralism and multilateralism viewed so differently, as being so much more unilateral?

One reason has to do with style and rhetoric. The Bush administration's practice of unilateralism is what Americans might call "in your face," or without apology. Some Bush administration officials have seemed eager to proceed unilaterally, rather than viewing unilateral action as a reluctant step taken only as a necessary last resort. By demanding to know whether other countries were "for us or against us" in the war on terrorism, Bush administration officials were essentially announcing that the United States would act as it saw fit, and other either had to go along or be treated as part of the problem. A European friend of mine explained the problem in this way: "Clinton acted unilaterally, but at least gave the appearance of consulting, and taking the views of others seriously before he did what he wanted! The Bush people do not even pretend to be listening to

their allies—they simply inform us of what they expect us to do.”

Second, the Bush administration has created a lot of international anxiety because it has preferred certain type of multilateralism—ad hoc coalitions of the willing. Proponents of multilateralism both in the United States and abroad see this as problematic because it seems to represent a move away from established institutions like NATO or UN. Coalitions of the willing reflect a different attitude about collaborative ventures; the United States decides the policy on its own, and then works with whichever states are willing to go along. This is different from believing that the United States is bound by multilateral institutions that require compromise and cooperation as multiple players determine collectively the proper course of action.

Third, during the Cold War U. S. policy makers often tried to suggest that domestic politics should stop “at the water’s edge,” in other words, that American foreign policy should not simply be a function of American domestic politics. The Bush administration, however, has used unilateralism as part of its domestic political strategy. Unilateralism, with its explicit defiance of liberal internationalism, has appealed politically to some of the more extreme elements of the Republican coalition. Its use has been a way to mobilize parts of the Republican base by reinforcing the idea of the United States as a self-reliant nation that is not constrained by big government at home or abroad. The proud and public display of unilateralism has made it appear less as a pragmatic last resort and more as a principled political strategy. Neoconservative interests supported a more unilateral approach for domestic political reasons prior to September 11th, but the tragedy on that day clearly facilitated its use. September 11th created an environment in which the most powerful state in the international system became also a highly threatened one. The Bush administration perceived it did not have the luxury to wait around for a multilateral consensus; it needed instead to strike back at a time and place and in a manner of its own choice.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

In the 2008 Presidential campaign the opposition Democrats clearly decided to make the Bush foreign policy style and record a central issue. So it is sensible to expect some changes if the Democrats win the election in November.

It is reasonable to expect a change in rhetoric. Barack Obama has made a point repeatedly of promising a re-engagement of the United States with the world. Obama has emphasized the importance of diplomacy, as a way to contrast his proposed approach with what he believes has been the over reliance of the Bush administration on the military instrument of statecraft. He claims he will restore America’s international reputation and rebuild relations with America’s friends. He has gone as far as to suggest he would open a dialogue with American adversaries, including Iran. This is a promise of a new course in foreign policy, and is also intended as a repudiation of the Bush administration’s

“axis of evil” approach, which declares certain states to be unworthy of the international community.

A Democratic President will want to back the renewed rhetoric of multilateralism with deeds. So it is reasonable to expect some political initiatives, including powerfully symbolic ones, to emphasize a new era of multilateralism. One possibility would be for the next President to close down the U. S. detention facility at Guantanamo, Cuba, as a way to repudiate the excesses of the war on terrorism. Another strategy would be to initiate some type of multilateral environmental initiative, as a way to amend for the U. S. defiance of the Kyoto Accord. The idea will be to adopt policies that signal a break with the unilateral past. Even the Republican candidate, John McCain, has sought to distance himself from some of the foreign policy rhetoric and practice of the Bush years.

The United States is likely to adopt a more multilateral image in the years ahead. But, anyone who expects a consistent, principled approach to multilateralism is likely to be disappointed. Neither the Democrats nor the Republicans are unlikely to practice the defiant unilateralism of the Bush administration. But, following the traditional pattern, they are also unlikely to usher in some type of golden age of principled multilateralism, for three important reasons.

One has to do with domestic politics. American politics has become polarized. With the Soviet threat gone, there is no longer a bipartisan foreign policy consensus, as there was during the Cold War, to provide basic core agreement on a set of foreign policy principles. Republican politicians have played to their base, most strongly during Bush’s first term, by defying multilateralism publicly. But Democrats also play to their base, which includes labor and environmental interests. The Democratic base is increasingly skeptical of the benefits of multilateral free trade policies. Both Clinton and Obama attacked NAFTA during the presidential primary campaign. Democrats in Congress have denied the President what used to be called fast track trade authorization—in other words, the President no longer has the discretion to negotiate trade agreements, bilateral or multilateral, and submit them to Congress for an up or down vote. Even if we treat some of the free trade bashing of the Democratic primary as political rhetoric, it will be difficult for any Democratic President to defy labor and environmental coalitions and push for progress in complicated multilateral trade negotiations that necessarily require the United States to make compromises and sacrifices in the interest of completing a deal.

The fact that the United States may be entering a period of economic crisis and slower growth will make it all the more difficult for the next administration to foster multilateral trade deals that require the United States to accept further market opening arrangements at home.

Second, the next administration will inherit the commitments of the last one, whether it likes it or not. The war in Iraq and war on terrorism are key examples here. Much of the rest of the world associates them with unilateral America. But

they will be hard for America to abandon. Regardless of their campaign promises, Democrats in power will not have to luxury simply to pull the United States out of Iraq. They will worry, as the current administration does, about whether leaving will create a bigger mess—not to mention a geopolitical victory for Iran—than staying and trying to muddle though. The risk for Democrats should they win the Presidency is that the unilateral Iraq war will become their war, just as Vietnam became the Republicans' war when Nixon inherited the Presidency from Johnson.

The war on terrorism has become an entrenched American security priority even if Democrats are critical of the manner in which the Bush administration has conducted it. The next President will likely have to maintain this foreign policy priority even if other countries think the United States is exaggerating the threat. A second attack on U. S. soil would create renewed pressures for any US administration to deal with terrorism regardless of whether other countries are willing to go along.

U. S. policy towards Russia also holds the potential for renewed unilateralism. Russia's invasion of Georgia in summer 2008 rekindled fears of a return to the Cold War. As in the past, the inclination of America's European allies is to engage rather than confront Russia. U. S. officials, particularly if the Republicans are re-elected, may be more inclined toward containment and confrontation.

Third, and finally, regardless of which candidate is elected, the United States will remain an extraordinarily powerful country that perceives itself as both necessary to preserve world order and privileged to act 'above' world rules if necessary. It was a Democratic Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, who immodestly proclaimed the United States to be the world's "indispensable" country. Although there may be differences in rhetoric and style, Democrats as well as Republicans are accustomed to acting in what they consider to be America's best interests first, and then expecting others to fall into line.

The next administration will have good incentives in the short term to embrace multilateralism. But the world should not expect America's commitment to be either consistent or principled. Rather than expect or hope that the next administration will be different, the sensible strategy for other countries is to find ways to adjust to the fact that the United States is as comfortable acting unilaterally as it is working multilaterally with its economic and security partners.

Notes

1. Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (July-August 2007), p. 4.
2. Hillary Clinton, "Security and Opportunity for the Twenty-first Century," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (November-December 2007), pp. 2-4.
3. "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," reprinted in U. S.

- Congress, Senate, Document 106-21 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 2000), quote at p. 26.
4. Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (London: Routledge, 2002).
 5. Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).
 6. Anthony Lake, "From Containment to Enlargement," *U. S. Department of State Dispatch*, Vol. 4 (39), pp. 658-664, quote at 663.