INDEPENDENCE
IN AN AGE OF EMPIRE:
ASSESSING UNILATERALISM AND
MULTILATERALISM

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THIRTY-SEVEN OF THE WESTERN WORLD'S FOREMOST journalists, policy practitioners and academics provide their commentaries on one of the most pressing issues facing the world of international relations today: the “unstoppable” unilateralism of American foreign policy and the “immovable” adherence to multilateralism practiced by the rest of the world. Compiled from the “uniquely Canadian perspective,” the volume addresses the issue of independence in the face of an ideologically driven “hyperpower” and how multilateralism and unilateralism are (and should be) employed to both influence America and fight the plague of terrorism.

“One of the great foreign policy challenges facing Canada is staying independent in an age of empire... In Washington, Canada is a kind well-meaning Boy Scout. We are not taken seriously... You can't believe in multilateralism, international law, unless you are prepared also to believe that occasionally you have to step up to the plate and defend it.”

MICHAEL IGNATIEFF

“Canadians subscribe to the view that they are peacekeepers, not war-makers. This is sadistic because at the same time as we pretend to uphold our celestial moral principles we are also aware of the facts... we are thirty-fourth in the order of contributors to peace-keeping operations, behind even the allegedly unilateralist United States.”

BARRY COOPER

“Today, there is a distinct possibility that the ‘War on Terrorism’ could metamorphose into a religious war between Christianity and Islam. Canada is uniquely blessed with a vast reservoir of good will within the Islamic world, which would enable the possibility of engaging in what I call ‘preemptive peace making.’”

MOHSEN MILANI

“its getting harder to place Michael Ignatieff on the ideological spectrum. Those on the left deride him for his support of the American-led military intervention in Iraq. On the other hand, ‘right-wingers’ are uncomfortable with his critique of the growing concentration of power in Washington... He fits better with another group of political analysts: the opportunists.”

GEORGE MACLEAN

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Power Illusion and the Zen of Power Augmentation

Interestingly, the debate over America’s current unilateralist foreign policy emanates from a shared premise.¹ The one thing that both unilateralism’s defenders and most multilateralist critics have in common is the belief that a greater reliance on multilateralism will mean sacrificing some of America’s power, at least in the short run. Indeed, unilateralists see any such sacrifice as far too risky in the prevailing world of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Multilateralists lament such sacrifices because they increase vulnerability, but are necessary to deliver humankind from an anarchic environment. Both sides are in fact wrong. Indeed, it is the case that multilateralism can actually enhance national power, even in the short run. The mistaken logic on the part of both unilateralists and multilateralists stems from a rather myopic view of power and an insensitivity to the context within which power is exercised. We can call this ‘power illusion.’ Those who suffer from power illusion see power as a static, nominal, and simple phenomenon that is not conditioned by the environment in which it is played out. In fact, power is a far more dynamic and complex phenomenon that is strongly conditioned by its environment. This more complex vision of power suggests that states can willingly accept the constraints against their autonomy which multilateral obligations dictate and still enhance their national power positions: indeed, ‘less
can be more.

The implications for American foreign policy are compelling. In short, the present American unilateralist policy promises only to weaken the United States. Moreover, this policy will be counter-productive with respect to the post-9/11 goals of abating terrorism and reducing the threat of WMD. In fact, the United States can best maximize its power and achieve its principal international goals through invigorating rather than renouncing its multilateral obligations. The following analysis of power illusion systematically outlines the rationale for this position.

The logic of 'the Zen of power augmentation,' as it relates to present American foreign policy, can be conceptualised and presented systematically under four rubrics: unilateral actions and complex systems, direct versus milieu goals, the paradoxes of power, and metapower and international organizations.

**Unilateral Actions and Complex Systems**

Scholars of international relations from the 'complexity tradition' underscore the self-defeating nature of unilateral actions in complex systems. Security dilemmas, stability-instability paradoxes, and counter-balancing processes all suggest negative feedback mechanisms that ultimately make unilateral attempts to augment power a self-defeating process.\(^3\) Robert Jervis, in his *The Compulsive Empire*, avers that negative feedback inheres in "mission creep": i.e., a growing global presence naturally generates hostility towards the dominant nation.\(^4\)

Certainly the militarism, aggressive engagement and confrontational posture of America's 'new unilateralism' has already generated a great deal of negative feedback which compromises U.S. power, with the potential for greater diminution on the horizon.\(^5\) Aside from creating new and greater enemies in nations invaded - Iraq and Afghanistan - the web of fear and vituperation have spread to other Muslim countries. But even more than creating countervailing coalitions that are hostile to America where none existed before, the impact in the key areas of terrorism and WMD proliferation are even more devastating and self-defeating for the United States. Hostility breeds the rise of more 'martyrs' within Muslim populations that are likely to perpetrate the very acts which the unilateralism was supposed eliminate.\(^6\) Moreover, rather than reducing incentives to develop WMD, a confrontational posture on arms control actually
increases the incentive to complete such weapons as fully operational WMD can be used as a greater bargaining chip (if eventually given up) or can be used to deter the U.S. from invading a state if kept: the U.S. has never invaded a country with a fully operational WMD.\(^7\) North Korea has recently vindicated both strategies by making declarations that weapons development could be cut with an ironclad security agreement from the U.S. while also stating that such systems should be developed to deter U.S. military action. In the end, George W. Bush’s militant crusade to deliver America from the threats of terrorism and WMD may make these threats even more acute because of the negative feedback generated by America’s conduct of confrontational unilateralism.

More generally, America’s militant posture carries the potential for manifold alliance effects that compromise America’s global power position even more. Disregard for the Security Council and NATO allies, especially in dealing with Iraq, has sent shockwaves through those constellations of relations as the U.S. has seriously compromised its standing in both. The U.S. is critically dependent on both organizations at present for its principal international goals: post-war stabilization in Iraq, peace in the Middle East, the war against terrorism and WMD proliferation, and peacekeeping/state-building in East Europe. In this respect, America has been left with fewer cards to play when protecting its interests. Such being the case, the U.S. faces the risk of a ‘vicious cycle of unilateralism’: as unilateralism alienates allies and supporters, it may become even more necessary to practice unilateralism because of a diminished recourse to multilateral fora.

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Alliance dynamics in the Middle East and Asia are equally menacing for the U.S. In the Middle East, the present foreign policy may be forging America's worst nightmare: political-strategic solidarity among Muslim nations. The lack of such solidarity over the years has been crucial to America's interest in protecting Israel and influencing the price of oil. Certainly, the confrontational posture toward Iran and Syria over WMD has forged bonds between those states as sisters in the cause against American imposition. Even more frightening is a potential bloc comprising Iran and Iraq, forged in religious solidarity and anti-Western sentiment. While Hussein has been heretofore demonised by America, he has in fact served important functions in promoting American interests in the Middle East: his militarism against Arab nations and secularism had injected a wedge which has prevented the rise of a 'grand alliance' that might menace the U.S. and Israel. Ironically, the war to achieve 'Iraqi freedom' may produce the very outcome which the Gulf War was fought to prevent: a bloc among two of the largest oil producers in the world. An Iraq/Iran bloc forged in Shi'ite politics would be even more troubling than an Iraq/Kuwait bloc because of the greater strength of Iran. Hence, Hussein's removal seems to verify the famous American cliché 'be careful what you wish for.' But even more generally, an invasion void of international legitimacy to usurp a Muslim state has poisoned relations with all Muslim nations, which is dealing a serious blow to American interests in the Middle East as well as in the world at large.

In Asia, of course, the menacing posture toward North Korea has undone much of the progress for better relations on the peninsula, which is itself a mainstay for regional stability. North Korea has retrenched in a way that has gone against American goals in the region: the goals being to integrate communist nations into the global economy and maintain a wedge in potential communist alliances. China, which has shared some of North Korea's vituperation against American confrontationalism, may have been driven to better relations with the latter than otherwise might have developed.

**Direct Versus Milieu Goals**

In his *Discord and Collaboration*, Arnold Wolfers has made a perceptive distinction between direct (which he calls 'possession') and milieu goals in foreign policy.⁸ The former represent outcomes which can be directly and
immediately attained, while the latter represent the shaping of the greater international environment within which a nation-state functions. For Wolfers, it is possible for the attainment of direct goals on the part of a state to be self-defeating if they create an international environment which is antithetical to its interests. Unfortunately, the lessons of Wolfers have been lost on the present U.S. administration as the manner in which the U.S. is trying to attain its goals (through aggressive unilateralism) is creating an environment that is hostile to American foreign interests. In fact, the manner in which the U.S. chooses to affect the direct goal of protecting Americans is dismantling the foundations for its principal milieu goals, thus dealing a significant blow to American interests in the world at large.

The aggressive posturing and compellence targeted toward Muslim nations in the Middle East - Iran, Iraq, Syria - has undermined the power of moderate Muslim regimes by fuelling support for anti-Western extremists in politics. This has retarded possibilities for both democratic state-building and capitalist transition within these states. But even well before the invasion of Iraq, the hard line taken against these states through menacing rhetoric and sanctions has polarized domestic politics in Muslim states with the balance of power skewed to the Conservative side. So in Iraq, the U.S. may have eliminated an erstwhile enemy of the West and democracy in Hussein, but the actions have sown the seeds of discontent that will undermine more favourable regimes in other Middle Eastern states. Tragically, the U.S. is squandering significant opportunities to promote democracy and capitalism in these nations as recent surveys - Inglehart and Norris, 2003 and Pew, 2003 - show that resounding majorities in numerous Muslim nations support the idea of Western-style democracy and capitalism - e.g., Indonesia 64 percent, Jordan, 63 percent, Lebanon percent, 75 percent. No greater opportunity lost is as salient as the case of Iran, where the more moderate regime that replaced the Ayatollah hardliners has from time to time issued overtures for better relations to an American administration which seems intent on maintaining a hostile relationship by continuing sanctions. In addition to the political ramifications of perceived American tyranny, the current policy increases the ranks of extremists who would directly threaten Americans through acts of terrorism.

In terms of global peacekeeping, the pre-emptive policy of the U.S. threatens to unravel the legal fabric of the security regime contemplated under the U.N. Charter. The U.S. has relied heavily on this regime to promote its goal

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of limiting regional and ethnic conflict in the postwar period. While Article 51 of the Charter expressly affirms the right of unilateral militarism, it clearly precludes pre-emptive attacks, allowing military action only in self-defence. The U.S. has in fact made use of this clause in legitimating multilateral and unilateral responses to acts of aggression that went against American interests, from the Korean War to the Balkans and the Gulf War. Setting precedents which undermine this clause can only enhance military action worldwide as states gain greater legitimacy for pre-emptive invasions. Hence, the American desire for a world of fewer regional and ethnic conflicts will be increasingly frustrated.

Specifically with respect to human rights, international law, and the environment; American support for the International Criminal Court and Kyoto Protocol would be classic examples of how moderation in attending to direct goals through multilateral channels can create milieu effects that enhance those goals far more than a recalcitrant unilateral posture. The ICC would better promote international criminal law and concomitantly spread American norms of justice, while Kyoto provides some crucial opportunities for American business that bode well for the American economy in the future.

The Paradoxes of Power

Can attempts to maximize power actually make a nation weaker? Prevailing scholarship which bears on this question suggests that the answer is yes. As noted above, complex systems may make attempts at hegemony self-defeating because of the creation of countervailing alliances that reduce a state’s ‘relative power.’ But such attempts may also decrease a nation’s ‘absolute power.’ The present course of American unilateralism and aggressive engagement increases the tendency for mission creep. This presents a variety of burdens for the U.S. that promise only to weaken it. Such is the nature of mission creep: i.e., a hegemonic presence is self-expanding. So the maintenance costs of involvement in foreign affairs grows along with the size of the stake in the system.

The most obvious consequence of mission creep is the enormous burden that it imposes on the national economy. This problem is growing significantly in the face of the Bush Administration’s fiscal policy: conterminous tax cuts along with pricey domestic and security initiatives, which have already generated
a trajectory toward a two trillion dollar deficit in the near future. The policy is eerily reminiscent of the Reagan Administration, whose combination of tax cuts and profligate tendencies on domestic and security programs coincided with the highest nominal interest rates in American history. The domestic and international economic shock waves left an indelible impression on the American economy in the 1980s. While interest rates are now low and the price tag on the Iraq campaign benefited from the brevity of the war, a continuation of this mix of policies is foreboding. America’s strength derives from its economy, which is fragile at present. Hence any policies that imperil this foundation of American power threaten to weaken rather than strengthen.

Mission generates ‘muscle-creep’ also bound effects.’ Very often, to enhance power weaken a state. Hegemonic world necessitates there is a tendency to unravel initiatives. The unilateralism is clear from the negative impact having on America’s most important milieu goals. Unfortunately, the muscle-bound effect does not end here. A growing military influence and a pronounced military presence throughout the world makes it increasingly difficult to control the conduct of national security. The foreboding possibilities emanating from this tendency is that mistakes in the field may compromise America’s position and interests in more sensitive areas. Hence, unilateral military occupation, such as in Iraq, is always a potential powder-keg for American foreign policy.

The ‘vicious cycle of unilateralism’ also generates muscle-bound effects. An independent posture can limit a state’s flexibility if it removes other sources of power and control. Increasing self-reliance eliminates other forms of leverage embodied in multilateral arrangements and international institutions. As self-reliance continues to estrange the U.S. from these international fora, the U.S. will

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find that it has fewer avenues through which to respond to events that threaten its vital interests. This lack of options can only weaken the U.S. because while some problems are best solved through unilateral responses, others can only be made worse through such recourse. Hence, a victim of the vicious cycle of unilateralism will be more restricted in its ability to protect its interests as many of its diplomatic resources will have been eliminated or rendered less useful. But even more than losing flexibility, unilateralism compromises possibilities for burden sharing. To reiterate a central theme of Nye, the U.S. simply is neither strong nor rich enough to “go it alone” in promoting its international goals. In this respect, the U.S. needs to heed the warning of the famous axiom regarding the death of great empires: they die of suicide rather than murder.

Metapower and International Organizations

By forsaking multilateral fora in a quest to protect its vital interests, the U.S. is missing some extraordinary opportunities to promote the very same such interests. The lesson learned by the Soviets in the early years of the UN, that walking out of the Security Council in protest cost them crucial opportunities to shape important resolutions, has somehow been lost on the present administration. The lesson is clear: while states may gain independence by relinquishing multilateral obligations, they also lose opportunities to shape the agenda in those organizations (i.e., metapower). But such organizations can have considerable influence over the vital interests of those states. In the worst case scenario, absence may cause outcomes in the organization to become more hostile to the interests of the recalcitrant nations, which introduces perhaps the most perverse consequence of the vicious cycle of unilateralism. In short, if you can’t beat them, join them.

Specifically with respect to U.S. security interests, if the U.S. continues to alienate its allies within the context of existing arrangements, the latter may divert to alternative arrangements which do not include America, and may even turn out to generate competition for U.S. interests. There is no question that strong alliance relations are a key to American milieu goals of democratic state-building, economic transformation, and forging regional and ethnic harmony. Ultimately, both in Europe and Asia, all three goals can only be viably pursued within a multilateral framework. The U.S. must act quickly and with resolution.
to consolidate its standing in regional alliances as foreboding harbingers of potential disassociation have recently emerged. The 2003 Pew survey has reported that a majority of Western European populations want more independence from the U.S. in diplomacy and security. In addition, U.S. allies have for the first time refused to re-elect the U.S. to the UN Human Rights Commission.18

The vicious cycle of unilateralism features one final deleterious consequence: undermining the influence of existing international organizations. Not only does over-reliance on unilateralism by hegemons diminish the means of foreign policy for the dominant states, but if hegemonic disassociation from multilateral arrangements (whether alliances or supranational organizations) in fact weakens those arrangements, then the global burden the hegemon assumes may have to increase to fill the void. Should this happen to the U.S. it would significantly compound the costs of foreign policy, thus burdening the straining economy all the more. The Pew survey indeed reports that faith in the UN system is very low across the international arena.

Indeed, the U.S. is squandering significant opportunities to pursue its interests through resort to ‘metapower’ in well-respected multilateral venues that could be energized through U.S. engagement. It somewhat defies reason that the U.S. would spend decades building these institutions to effect its milieu goals and then abandon them when vital interests are at stake. In terms of the goals regarding WMD and terrorism, the institutional framework of the Security Council had provided a compelling problem-solving structure. The Council has passed 16 major resolutions demanding Iraqi disarmament. Security Council Resolution 1368 specifically contemplates a broad and effective mandate to hunt down terrorists throughout the world. More generally, the Council provides extensive latitude to the permanent members - the U.S. and allies - to manage security in the world at large. With respect to state-building, the de-colonization process has cast the UN in the leading role, something that the U.S. is finding difficult to compete with in re-establishing political order in Iraq. While the use of metapower through multilateral venues lacks the speed and directness of unilateral approaches, it may nonetheless prove a greater source of influence over the long run as lasting solutions to international problems must be grounded in legitimate structures of governance. The imposition of illegitimate structures is ultimately self-defeating.
Two Views, One Option

Americans of all foreign policy orientations are faced with stark truths which they must acknowledge. After years of flexing and using American muscle, outcomes in the world at large are no closer to the American ideal than they were when George W. Bush took office. Could the U.S. do any worse with a multilateral approach? It is not inconceivable to suggest they could do significantly better. Much of the failure in attaining its principal goals emanates from the present unilateralist policy itself. To give a market analogy, the U.S. is undersupplying multilateralism and oversupplying unilateralism to its own detriment. At the writing of this article, the U.S. appears to be attaining a modicum of clairvoyance by tempering its unilateralist posture in its policies on WMD, peace in the Middle East, Iraq, and peacekeeping. Should this clairvoyance turn into full-blown revelation, then the U.S. could place itself squarely on a much better path.

So while competing factions continue to present two views of foreign policy, both grounded in mistaken conceptions of American power, they should ponder more upon the real foundations of national strength. Power illusion may be an affliction, but it is hardly terminal. Understanding it will encourage Americans to push the U.S. toward the better option: greater multilateralism. In doing so, the U.S. would be dispelling another common myth, this one being about nice guys: they can indeed finish first!
Endnotes:

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  Martha Crenshaw, Margherita Farrand, Douglas Foyle, Gemma Gallarotti, Arman
  Grigorian, Robert Jervis, Peter Rutland, and John Wyatt.

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  Interest, (Vol. 72, 2003).

2) Robert Jervis, System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life,


8) Arnold Wolfers, Discord and Collaboration, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press,


10) James Wirtz and James Russsell, “U.S. Policy on Preventive War and

11) For an extended analysis of why this is the case, see Giulio Gallarotti and Arik
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    Vol. 4, 1999 and also Giulio Gallarotti, “It Pays to Be Green: The Managerial Incentive
    Structure and Environmentally Sound Strategies” Columbia Journal of World Business,


14) In late 2003, Congress approved President Bush’s request of 87 billion dollars
    for his Iraq-Afghanistan program.

15) Stephen Walt, “Muscle-Bound: The Limits of U.S. Power” Bulletin of the
Recommended Reading List:
