

**The US and the International Political System:
What Model for the Future?**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to discuss the negative effects of unipolarity both for the United States and the rest of the world. The main thesis here is as follows: the unipolar political system with the U.S. in a dominant role of the U.S. can no longer be preferable nor profitable for the interests of either the U.S. or the rest of the International Community.

Domestically, the cost of sustaining the role of the biggest superpower became too high in all major aspects of life within the U.S. These include the largest number of civilians lost as a result of September 11 attacks, an economic slowdown and a budget deficit, some restrictions of traditional freedoms, and a drift toward “the imperial presidency”.

Internationally, the biggest challenge to the dominant role of the U.S. is a steady deterioration of the positive image of the country as a traditional democracy, and growing resentment toward U.S. led economic, political and cultural expansion in societies dominated by extremist religions and ideologies.

Since U.S. foreign policy is predominantly driven by realist considerations, expectations for the nation’s willingness for the transition to more interdependent and collective security has weak chances to succeed. On the contrary, “real politics” policies have already signaled their ineffectiveness, and if not changed to a consensual and cooperative security alternative, they could lead to a major confrontation most frightening for humanity to consider. The consequences of this “clash of civilizations” would be hard to predict.

“Real politics” thinking is a legacy of the post cold war period and it must be changed for much more reflective, flexible and prudent policy- making mechanisms to allow for global survival and development in the 21st century.

Introduction

In discussions between idealists and realists, both recognize that the world has been in a persistent state of anarchy since 1648. The latter admits that realism is far from being the perfect form of foreign policy, while the former seems to passively acknowledge that realism remains the actual means to secure a state’s position in the international arena. Historically, a trend toward realism has often been visible in dominant countries, or at least in those aspiring to domination. Idealist considerations, on the other hand, have more often been found in countries, which had no intentions to dominate the others, and have elected to rely on international institutions, rules and procedures rather than on their own power. Following the logic of realism, those in dominant positions have more often than not tended to employ unilateral actions to achieve or sustain their domination. Unilateralism is the practical embodiment of the basic premises of realism, just as realism is the theoretical foundation of unilateral policies. Thus, unilateralism and realism correspond, and reversing their order in the equation would produce the same effect.

The point that I am going to discuss in this paper is as follows: traditional realist thinking, dominating U.S. foreign policy in at least the current and previous administrations, is a legacy of the post Cold War period and must be

changed to a much more reflective, flexible, and prudent policy-making mechanisms to allow for global stability in the 21st century. Having this premise in mind, I will, firstly, argue that unilateral actions are inherently egocentric and anti-democratic in principle, and thus are harmful to the interests of both the U.S. and the rest of international community, secondly, present a reflective realism perspective toward foreign policy making, and finally, work out some prognosis as to the possibilities of a transformation of the international political system in the 21st century.

Defining Unilateralism

U.S. behavior in the international arena has often been portrayed as unilateral. Unilateralism can be defined as a form of foreign policy that solely pursues one's own national interests outside of international law, rules, and institutions. As Ian Robinson has put it, "State policies are often dubbed 'unilateral' if they (a) are undertaken by a single state, (b) have significant impacts on people in other states, and (c) are not governed by bilateral or multilateral treaties."¹ Unilateralism, then, is a strategy adopted by the state to promote a unipolar political system. This strategy is best characterized by what is known as political realism.² Since the U.S. is the only superpower left from the period of the Cold War, unilateralism became a synonym for U.S. foreign policy in the last decade.

More serious arguments against unilateralism can be made if it is redefined as "actions by one or more states that have significant 'external' impacts, undertaken without the agreement of the government whose citizens are affected by these actions."³ If a state unilaterally pursues its national interests at the cost of the interests of other states, it is no longer accountable to the international community, and potentially poses a threat to any weaker country. From this perspective both Iraq's intervention in Kuwait and most U.S. military interventions abroad are of the same nature.

The opponents of this comparison could argue that the U.S. is a democracy, one of the key principals of which is to promote democratic institutions worldwide, while Iraq is an undemocratic country ruled by a dictatorial leader. Following this logic the U.S. had a legitimate right to attack Iraq in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, and will have the right to do the same to any non-democratic country as long as it inhibits democracy and promotes terrorism. However, Iraq's intervention in Kuwait was labeled aggressive, because it violated international norms and treaties.

This illustration aims not to whitewash Iraq or debate that there are double standards in assessing deeds of "right" and "wrong" states; double

standards will always exist. It rather aims to emphasize that unilateral actions are inherently undemocratic in the sense that they are not accountable before the people of other countries affected by these actions. Interestingly enough, the discussion of the international dimension of democracy has been rarely extended to the arena of international relations. The question of whether democracy is inherently peaceful or belligerent is a fundamental one to be addressed by international relations theorists. How many interventions should democracies really undertake in order to make the world peaceful and democratic? Democratic peace theory does not say much about it. The central premise of the theory that democracies do not fight each other does not explain why democracies fight the others, particularly non-democracies. If we look at the international system through the lens of realism, democracy, in order to protect itself from different “isms,” has to act proactively. This question has not yet been seriously discussed either by realists or by idealists. My answer to this question is that democracy as a concept relates to the internal structure of a state. It has rarely, if ever, been applied to the structure of international political relations. Overall, this problem demands a separate analysis that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Before I proceed to discuss the negative effects of U.S. unilateralism, a note of clarification is needed. There is a growing tendency both in scholarly research and media coverage to describe the international political system as unipolar. Since the end of the Cold War, which was marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has remained the only superpower in the world. This makes most American theorists and politicians believe that the bipolar system of the Cold War has been changed to one that is unipolar. The U.S., of course, remains the sole superpower, but there are also several major regional powers playing significant parts in the configuration of power relationships in different parts of the world. These are the European Union with the German-France condominium in Europe, Russia in Eurasia, China in East Asia, India in South Asia, Brazil in South America and Nigeria and South Africa in Africa. Their strength and overall potential to influence world politics differ significantly, but they are indispensable in defining any significant political action in their regions. Thus, the contemporary international system, as political scientist S. Huntington has accurately pointed out, remains “a strange hybrid, a uni-multipolar system with one superpower and several major powers.”⁴

The problem of some Washington officials is that they believe the U.S. is the only major power capable of undertaking political action unilaterally, without the cooperation of major regional powers. This provokes criticism domestically and discontent internationally with U.S. foreign policy.

Traditional versus Reflective Realism

My aim here is to look at U.S. unilateralism through what I call a reflective realist perspective. Government and military officials, who tend to focus exclusively on their own national interests, would be described as having a traditional realist perspective. The reflective realist perspective can expand to analyze not only the priorities of all realists, including national security and domestic stability, but also possible implications and outcomes of unilateral actions on the international level.

Criticizing US unilateralism in a liberal fashion for being too egocentric and ignorant of the rest of the international community is a salient trend in recent international relations theory and international policy analysis discussions.⁵ Traditional realism is egocentric because it primarily focuses on national interests and national security. While being aware of the security dilemma, traditional realists usually try to balance power, or the threat of using this power, in order to preserve the status quo or alter it in a preferable way. The threat posed by counter power normally is measured by the capacity of one's own power to protect national security, or in the case of a war, to retaliate adequately. Since the beginning of the atomic era the possibility of "Mutual Assured Destruction" (MAD) has served as a factor for preserving a balance of power in a bipolar system. However, since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the U.S. is facing more complex challenges posed by emerging international constellations. In order to balance those less predictable players, the current and previous U.S. administrations, driven by traditional realist objectives, have chosen to enhance their own security by acting proactively. They have been more enthusiastic in employing "missile diplomacy" aimed at preventing "rogue" regimes, leaders or groups from inflicting damage on American soil, and protecting American interests worldwide. The September 11 attacks are the empirical proof of the inadequacy and shortsightedness of such a policy.

Reflective realism, by contrast, would allow reflective realists to balance not only threats coming from hostile regimes or leaders, but also to calculate possible implications and predict outcomes of strategies chosen to counter balance the threat. In other words, it would allow for developing a prognosis for possible outcomes, emerging from a country's particular behavior in the international arena.

Reflective realism is not a subtle version of idealism. The concern of the latter is global security, while the former is national security. The difference between idealism and reflective realism can be found in their value orientations. While both traditional and neo-idealists share the belief that a conflict-free world is possible, reflective realists emphasize the necessity to reflect on one's own actions and their implications for one's national security. Thus, reflective

realism is a less goal-oriented, but more process-and means-oriented form of foreign policy than traditional realism.

One additional difference between traditional and reflective realism consists in the vision of the image of the state. Since traditional realists are not really concerned about the means used in achieving the ends, they are equally unconcerned with side effects that may negatively influence the international image of the state. Reflective realists pay much attention to the means as well as the processes, and consequently, the international image of the state.

U.S. Unilateralism: Origin and Directions

The September 11 attacks are being proclaimed as a landmark event in U.S. history, but they have not caused much change in U.S. foreign policy. The drift toward unilateralism was already visible in the Clinton era, but it is really in the Bush administration that you see an explicit drive for permanent global supremacy.

Since the breakdown of the Soviet Union, the U.S. has found itself as the sole superpower left from the period of the Cold War. On the one hand, it was a pleasant reward for the long-lasting competition with the Soviet Union. On the other hand, the U.S. became the biggest challenger to several major regional and local powers and the object of resentment, jealousy, or hatred in the rest of the world. To secure and profit from its dominant position, the U.S. administration has used all means possible, ranging from diplomatic maneuverings to economic sanctions and “missile diplomacy.” It is the logic of a superpower, whose aim is power, influence and control that is steering the process.

Having tremendous economic, political and military capacities, it is very difficult for the current U.S. administration to constrain itself, as there are no visible counterbalances and constraints. While domestically the system of checks and balances ensures that no single branch of power could dominate the others, internationally this is not the case. The new agenda of the Bush administration is the reassertion of American power in the world by a greater willingness to use force, with or without the support of U.S. allies, even at the cost of American casualties. As Evan Thomas of “Newsweek” has pointed out, “some of Bush’s top advisers believe that after the Vietnam War the pendulum swung too far in the directions of multilateralism and anti-interventionism. Now they are trying to shove it back.”⁶

The September 11 attacks have not only changed the way U.S. foreign policy is conducted, but they also strengthened it. By attacking the U.S., Al-Qaeda leaders have actually helped the Bush administration to pursue its

interests more overtly than ever before. Iraq, or more probably some less stable regime in East-Central Asia or in North-West Africa will be the next step in establishing U.S. military dominance under the convenient label of the “global war on terrorism.” The label indeed is really convenient as it provides both legitimacy for the current and some new interventions abroad, and puts very limited constraints on the administration as to the terms, weaponry or tactics of the war.

Many officials in Washington believe that establishing unconditional dominance of the U.S. over the rest of the world will make the U.S. invulnerable and the world itself more predictable, better controlled and hence, more peaceful. This misleading belief stems from the logic of traditional realist thinking. Not only will major regional powers constantly challenge the U.S., but what is more serious is that the U.S. will be facing new kinds of threats in the forms of cultural, ideological, and religious intolerance to American domination, of which the recent terrorist attacks are an alarming example. Of these new threats, the current major threat to U.S. unilateralism is Islamic fundamentalism. The U.S. administration traditionally tries to balance this threat by labeling some Islamic countries politically and geographically as “rogue” nations. The problem here is that Islamic fundamentalism is a new form of a religious and cultural institution that has no definite political or geographical boundaries. It differs significantly from traditional political institutions like states, which have long been primary players on the international map. The aim of Islamic fundamentalism is to preserve traditional Islamic culture, religion and values from the influence of the West. Some extremist leaders like Osama bin Laden employ terrorist tactics that make fundamentalism not only a conservative, but also an aggressive phenomenon.

To denounce several authoritarian regimes as an “axis of evil” cannot stop terrorism, and can hardly prevent others from aiding and abetting them. The specific trait of extreme form of Islamic fundamentalism is that it is primarily a religious movement whose legitimacy rests primarily on opposition to Western political values and institutions. Proclaiming total war on terrorism can only trigger a new phase of anti-American actions by mobilizing several targeted nations and deepening the resentment toward the West in the rest of the Muslim world.

Since U.S. foreign policy is predominantly centered on securing its national interests throughout the world, the growing contradictions with a rapidly developing religious institution like Islamic fundamentalism have already resulted in violence, of which the September 11 attacks are a disturbing example.

Given the current situation, the U.S. will never be the same as it was before September 11. Having declared a global war on terrorism by military means, the U.S. put on itself both domestic and international pressures. Domestically, there is a drift toward “imperial presidency,” restrictions in accessing some information, a new phase of economic slowdown, budget shortfalls for social programs, fear of bio-terrorism, tightened security, and new sparks of xenophobia. Taken together these pressures do not make life for ordinary Americans any easier. However, the most troubling among the domestic problems is that by continuing a spiral of “missile diplomacy,” the U.S. has made itself a target for new acts of terrorism.

Internationally, the U.S. is losing support for overseas actions and consequently obtaining an image of an arrogant nation. It has provoked a number of Muslim extremists to declare a new Jihad. The last one was against the Soviets in Afghanistan; this time it is against the U.S. and the whole Western world. The prospects of a “Clash of Civilizations” like that described by S. Huntington are evident now more than ever before.

Models for the Future

The following are three possible scenarios of reconfiguration of the world political system. To some extent they reflect the major challenges the U.S. will be facing in the upcoming decade.

1. The smooth transition from the hybrid uni-multipolar system to one that is truly multi-polar. The U.S. first initiates the process.
2. The U.S. will be pressed by other major powers and will have to yield to the demands for multi-polarity. The process may be accompanied by local confrontations and conflicts.
3. The U.S. will try to retain its dominant position by acting unilaterally. This could
 provoke a major confrontation with nations whose religious and cultural values
 are influenced by the extremist ideologies and practices.

Which of these three scenarios will prevail will depend on numerous factors. The first scenario is the most preferable for the peaceful transition to an interdependent and cooperative international political system of the 21st century, but it is the least probable. In order to transform a uni-multipolar system to a truly multi-polar and to improve the image of the country on the international map, several essential steps both in international and domestic affairs would be necessary.

1. Foreign policy and security interests. The system of unilateral international security with the U.S. dominating the rest of the world should be

changed into dispersed or multilateral security to make it less competitive and more cooperative.

2. Military policy and national interests. Instead of investing tremendous amounts of money into the ironically called “defense” budget that is actually used to finance military interventions abroad, the U.S. should direct appropriate resources into constructing cooperative security programs.

3. Economic policy and development. Instead of considering third world countries as a source of cheap brains, natural resources and a labor force, the U.S. should design a more cooperative international economy, empowering the weak and further strengthening the strong. The construction of a more cooperative economic order in relationship between the hemispheres dissolving the differences between the “rich North” and the “poor South” would certainly prevent a growing dissatisfaction in economically unstable regions and deprive extremists of desperate followers in new acts of terrorism.

4. Media and journalism. Instead of doing “war journalism,” presenting U.S. overseas military interventions as humanitarian relief actions, and a war of “good against evil,” the U.S. media should provide room for “peace journalism,” encouraging self-reflection and criticism in their coverage of both international and domestic issues.

Considering previous and current U.S. policy, the first scenario has few chances, if any, to be put into practice. Most likely the U.S. administration will continue to act in terms of “real politics,” trying to stop terrorism by violent means and to retain the domination of the U.S. on the “Great Chessboard.” The next targets of the U.S. war on terrorism could be Iraq, Sudan, Libya, Syria, or some other country depending on its position and attitudes toward the issue of terrorism.

The second scenario is less preferable for the U.S. and the rest of the international community. Given the current drift of the U.S. administration toward unilateralism, one may not expect that a new multi-polarity will be created through the pure good will of the U.S. or the international community. A new balance of power most probably will be established as the result of a political, military and economic confrontation between the U.S. and major regional powers. Three of them - the European Union in Europe, Russia in Eurasia and China in East Asia- will try to challenge U.S. domination in different areas. The form of this confrontation will depend in part on the result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and current U.S. “war on terrorism,” and especially on the future war with Iraq. In this scenario the U.S. “war on terrorism” is an intervening variable that will greatly influence the process.

The third scenario is the least preferable, but unfortunately, the most probable. Traditional realist thinking might lead the Bush administration to

enter a new phase of confrontation with the Muslim world in which extremist practices would take a lead. The results of this confrontation would be hard to predict.

In reality, according to President Bush's statement soon after the September 11 attacks: "...there will be no neutral party in this war," every country that has not declared its support for America could be considered a potential target for U.S. missiles. In addition, the borderline between the Western world and the Muslim world is highly instable and fragile. The chain of tensions beginning from India and Pakistan continuing through the Middle East and up to the Caucasus will remain the area of local ethno-religious conflicts in which the U.S. tries to play a part. It is difficult to predict what will come out of this situation.

Conclusion

Having defined these three scenarios, there are more grounds to argue that the future model of the international political system will be confrontational, rather than cooperative. The U.S. will play a major role in determining this model. If continued in the current fashion, the traditional realist thinking of the U.S. that shapes its unilateral quest for global supremacy will produce quite the opposite effect. Most probably unilateral foreign policy actions will provoke serious international confrontations, which are desirable neither for the U.S. nor for the rest of the international community.

If switched to reflective foreign policies, the U.S. has a unique chance to sustain a global peace, support international security and significantly improve its image in the international stage. In total, such a transition would allow for the more cooperative and interdependent international order that has long been anticipated by humanity for most of its history.

Endnotes

¹ Ian Robinson, "Progressive Unilateralism? U.S. Unilateralism, Progressive Internationalism and Alternatives to Neoliberalism." *Foreign Policy in Focus*. Discussion Paper #3, November 15, 2000. Retrieved March 3, 2002 from website http://www.foreignpolicy_infocus.org/papers/unilateralism_body.html

² See classical works on political realism, Hans W. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York:Knopf, 1986).; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979)., and works of some neo-realists, Randall L Schweller, and David Priess. "A Tale of Two Realism: Expanding the Institutions Debate." *Mershon International Studies Review* v.4, 1997, pp.927-930; Fareed Zakaria, "Is Realism Finished?" *National Interests* v. 32, 1993,pp.21-32.

³ Ian Robinson, "Progressive Unilateralism? U.S. Unilateralism, Progressive Internationalism and Alternatives to Neoliberalism." *Foreign Policy in Focus*. Discussion Paper #3, November 15, 2000. Retrieved March 3, 2002 from website http://www.foreignpolicy_infocus.org/papers/unilateralism_body.html

⁴ S.Hantington, "The lonely Superpower." (US military and cultural hegemony resented by other powers.) *Foreign Affairs* v.78, March 1999, p.35.

⁵ Danger of U.S. Unilateralism. Conference highlights. A conference on the Trend Toward Unilateralism in U.S. Foreign policy, Washington. May 21, 1999. Retrieved March 3,2002 from website <http://www.ciponline.org/africa/archives/riia.htm>.; Steven E. Miller, " The end of Unilateralism or Unilateralism Redux?" *The Washington quarterly*, Winter 2002, pp.15-29; Sebastian Mallaby, "The Reluctant Imperialist" (United States foreign policy), *Foreign Affairs* v.81, March-April 2002.

⁶ Evan Thomas, "Bush Has Saddam in His Sights." *Newsweek*, March 4, 2002.