

Tradition, Trump, and the Future of US Participation in Multilateralism

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Before turning more directly to the United States (US), several observations might be made regarding multilateralism. First, in its intergovernmental context, the term has come to embrace almost any cooperation among states involving more than two parties, as contrasted with unilateral action and bilateral cooperation. This is a little analogous to the language of a Brazilian tribe that is said to have just three numbers—one, two, and a whole lot—to the detriment of their conceptual reasoning. To try to sharpen our reasoning, the broad term of “multilateralism” has spawned subcategories, such as tri-lateral, quadrilateral, regional, minilateral, plurilateral, and “coalitions of the willing” that distinguish geographically, functionally, and common interest specific forms of multilateralism from the universal form.

Second, all nations are selective in their choices from the menu of multilateral groupings available to them and in this sense, “multilateralism à la carte” is standard practice. For the most part, these national choices reflect interests (and the geopolitical situations underlying them), values, and traditions (and the domestic politics often associated with them). For example, Norway joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), but not the European Union (EU) (following a referendum). On the other hand, Sweden and Finland did not join NATO because of geopolitical concerns, but they did become EU members for economic reasons. Switzerland, with its strong tradition of neutrality and ability to free ride, has not joined either NATO or the EU, and, despite the presence of United Nations (UN) agencies in Geneva, it did not even join the UN until 2002.

Third, size is an important variable. Smaller countries tend to favor multilateralism in the hopes of constraining larger ones and ensuring a safer, more

predictable international environment. Big countries, however, tend to favor multilateral arrangements in which they are dominant and to be wary of those that will constrict their freedom of action. Like smaller countries, larger countries also want a safe and predictable environment, but they tend to believe that this requires that they have freedom of action. For example, although 164 countries have acceded to the Ottawa Convention intended to outlaw the use of anti-personnel landmines, large powers China, India, Russia, and the United States are all among the few non-signatories.

Finally, selectivity can be exercised in ways other than not formally joining an organization or ratifying a convention, for example, in formally accepting a multinational obligation but then not enforcing or reinterpreting it. China, for example, is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, but it develops novel interpretations to protect its claims and interests in its own neighborhood. As Richard Fontaine and Mira Rapp-Hooper have noted, China “can contest regional rules while buttressing global ones and will do so as its interests dictate.”¹ Other countries, especially in the developing world, may not have the capacity to enforce their commitments and regard their obligations as more aspirational and a work in progress. In contrast, most European and North American countries, with strong legalistic traditions and domestic interest groups that can challenge non-compliance, prefer not to make the commitments in the first place. However, any country can ignore treaty obligations when domestic politics or perceived national interests dictate otherwise, and the United States is certainly no exception.

MULTILATERALISM AND AMERICA’S FOREIGN POLICY TRADITIONS

The US today is a party to more than 600 multilateral conventions and organizations. But historically, neither its geopolitical situation nor ideals encouraged an orientation toward multilateralism.² Protected by two oceans, having no rivals in its hemisphere, and believing that the US itself represented an exceptional and superior form of governance, the earliest generation of

¹ Richard Fontaine and Mira Rapp-Hooper, “The China Syndrome,” *The National Interest*, no. 143 (May/June 2016): 10-18.

² See Joel H. Westra, “International Order the American Way: Selective Multilateralism and European Consternation,” in *The United States and Europe in a Changing World*, ed. Robert E. Kanet, 2009, 2-24.

American leaders saw little need for multilateral, or even bilateral, alliances that might entrap or sully their country. At the end of the 18th century, George Washington terminated the revolutionary alliance with France, and in his Farewell Address warned against “permanent alliances,” with any part of the world.³ In his first Inaugural Address in 1801, this was echoed and extended by Thomas Jefferson, who promised “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none.”⁴ James Monroe in 1823 unilaterally declared the famous “Monroe Doctrine” warning European countries against meddling with the Americas. At the beginning of the 20th century, when the United States was far more powerful, Theodore Roosevelt urged the United States to “speak softly and carry a big stick.”

Aside from political and security issues, however, the United States recognized a national interest in joining some multilateral endeavors of a more technical and cultural nature; indeed, it played a leading role in the establishment of the International Postal Union⁵ and the predecessor to the Organization of American States (OAS) in the 1890s.

It was not until World War I, however, that multilateralism became controversial in American foreign policy following Woodrow Wilson’s call for a League of Nations. Although the United States entered the war in its later phases and operated quite independently of its partners, Wilson played a large role in the post-war governance arrangements. The League idea, however, was rejected in the US Congress as unrealistic and contrary to Washington’s dictum. In the interwar period, the United States remained ambivalent toward multilateral engagement, sometime engaging in it for self-interest (Washington Naval Conference on Pacific Ocean navies) or ideals (the Kellogg-Briand Pact to outlaw war). But even the latter was an effort to reduce the likelihood of entangling alliances, and the country retreated into isolation as the European crisis of the 1930s deepened.

³ The US did not enter a formal alliance with a foreign power again until World War II.

⁴ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/jefinau1.asp.

⁵ Originally postal arrangements were handled by bilateral treaties. The US called for an international postal conference in 1863, 11 years before the organization was founded.

THE COLD WAR CONSENSUS AND EMERGING TRENDS

It was only the twin disasters of the contraction of international trade (spurred by the unilateral Smoot-Hawley Tariff) and World War II (to which pre-war isolationism was widely thought to have contributed) that the United States appeared to put Washington and Jefferson behind. Writing in the early 1950s, Robert E. Osgood felt that the United States had finally succeeded in bringing its ideals and self-interests together in a lasting way behind a sensible engagement approach. He saw this as a maturation—“no people has had to grow old so fast”—as the fall of France in 1940 had presented Americans with a real external threat to their survival for the first time.⁶ The earlier stage of engagement involved the design of global post-war architecture, including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, and International Trade Organization (ITO).⁷ At the time, with about half the world’s gross product, the United States felt it was in a position to influence this architecture to largely reflect its values and interests. But when global cooperation was frustrated by the onset of the Cold War, Americans readjusted to building “free world” architecture instead. This include the support for western Europe reconstruction through the Marshall Plan (originally intended to include eastern Europe), NATO, the OAS, the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty (ANZUS), the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), and even the short-lived Central Treaty Organisation (CENTO) along the southern central Asian border of the Soviet Union.

Osgood may have been right that the American view had changed regarding “entangling alliances,” as the US-led alliance system, both multilateral and bilateral, has been strongly and consistently supported in both the Executive branch and the Congress, and by majorities in both parties, even if deployments and “burden sharing” have at times been issues. But aside from these security arrangements, multilateralism remained controversial in US Cold War and post-Cold War foreign policy. There was a strong streak of “isolationism” and “American exceptionalism” that influenced even the

⁶ Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in American's Foreign Relations*, University of Chicago Press, quote from 452. Others saw the Pearl Harbor attack as the turning point.

⁷ Because the ITO was not accepted by the Congress, which feared it would affect domestic economic policy, the provisional General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was the far less ambitious arrangement through which further trade barrier reductions and trade rules making was conducted until it was succeeded by the World Trade Organization in 1994.

security arrangements (most of which were qualified), but more so economic and social cooperation.

Throughout the Cold War and afterward, a pattern persisted of the Executive branch (under both Republican and Democratic presidents) pursuing multilateral endeavors and having to fight skepticism within the Congress. The boundary between “executive agreements,” which did not require two-thirds Senate ratification (a very high barrier), and “treaties,” which did, also became a matter of conflict. A potent expression of the latent Washington-Jefferson tradition in the 1950s was “the Bricker amendment,” encompassing various proposals for a Constitutional amendment to ensure that US domestic law was not over-ridden by treaty provisions and that neither the Congress or the Executive would become too powerful in establishing international obligations.⁸ Those who supported the Bricker amendment were deeply wary of overseas commitments and their costs, and more inclined to believe that the United States could protect its interests unilaterally. Thus, even in the Cold War period, there was always a strong cross-current of opposition to international engagement and obligation, particularly of the multilateral kind. This is important in understanding the US position today, but so too are a number of trends taking place over the Cold War and post-Cold War decades.

Narrowing of the American Vision. At the beginning of the Cold War, the United States arguably aligned its interests with “free world” systemic interests. Its standing alliances, the Marshall Plan for European recovery, and other assistance programs to allies and developing countries were regarded as essential to its own well-being. But as the US share of world product declined and it felt increasingly burdened by overseas commitments, the perception of its interests tended to shrink from stewardship of the international system as a whole towards a narrower view of its own interests or, in other words, more like any other country within the system. Associated with this was an increasing emphasis on military power as opposed to other forms of projecting American influence.

Disillusionment with Globalism. After World War II, the US strongly supported the UN system, seeing it as a hopeful tool to prevent war. A Gallup poll in 1946 showed 54% favored the notion that the UN should control

⁸ US Constitutional requirements for amendments are exceedingly difficult, and the Bricker amendment was never adopted despite passage in the US Congress. Eventually the concern, first given visibility by activists in the American Bar Association, was addressed through domestic legislation and Court interpretation.

the armed forces of all nations, including those of the US. In 1955, another Gallup poll suggested that 60% thought the UN was doing a good job. Gallup has tracked this measure over the years, and by early 2017, it had declined to 37%.⁹ The largely symbolic votes criticizing Israel, a politically sensitive issue in the US, have hurt the image of the UN in the United States from the 1970s onward (and caused the most recent withdrawal from UNESCO), while the vast expansion of the membership made the organization appear bloated, cumbersome, and expensive. Americans consistently over-estimate their contribution to the UN and under-estimate their influence. Despite the criticism, however, the vast majority of Americans appear to accept the UN as an important part of the international system and believe their country should be engaged.¹⁰ The specialized agencies, especially those associated with technical mandates and health, fare better.

Rise of Plurilateralism. With the disillusionment with globalism, the US increasingly valued smaller groupings of nations with like-minded interests (such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership—TPP) or with the greatest stakes (e.g., the Six Party Talks on North Korea, and the P5+1 on Iran). It also increasingly favored regional groupings, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum and the Arctic Council for dialogue and actions in areas of common concern that are largely voluntary in nature.

This was particularly pronounced in the trade arena, where the prolonged negotiations and stalemate in the World Trade Organization Doha Round led the US to seek other venues, bilateral as well as plurilateral, to push negotiations forward on emerging issues. Both the TPP and the counterpart, the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), should be seen in this light. A key consideration was the US Constitutional arrangements that made approval of trade agreements especially difficult. The smaller groups, where more specific gains might be achieved, were seen as more promising for Congressional support.

Evolving Domestic Political Alignments and Partisanship. During the Cold War, at least until the Vietnam War, the phrase that “partisan politics

⁹ For historical data, see: <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/seventy-years-us-public-opinion-united-nations/> and for the Gallup measure over the years, see: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116347/united-nations.aspx>.

¹⁰ For a recent poll by the Better World Campaign, see: <https://betterworldcampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/October-2017-BWC-USUN-Poll.pdf>.

stops at the water's edge," was widely accepted.¹¹ This applied, however, mainly to security alliances, which enjoyed strong bipartisan support. The American political system purposefully divided power and provided vetoes on action ("checks and balances") that weakened the presidency and inhibited free exercise of foreign policy. Trade agreements remained controversial in Congress, approval of implementing legislation for each successive GATT Round was with the barest of majorities. Other agreements requiring two-thirds votes simply languished. Although a leader in negotiating both the Genocide Convention and the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the US took 40 years to ratify the first, and the second has not yet been approved. Conservatives of both parties were deeply suspicious of such agreements. The Genocide Convention was strongly opposed by conservative Democratic Senator Sam Ervin (who chaired the Senate's Watergate Investigation committee) on grounds that it had lower standards than American law, and that since a treaty would become "the supreme law of the land," this was unacceptable.¹² UNCLOS was strongly supported by successive Administrations and the Defense Department, but the management of seabed resources in the high seas by a Seabed Authority was regarded by conservatives as a step too far toward international governance.

The political parties gradually shifted into ideological blocks with the disappearance of Republican liberals and Democratic conservatives and with this came progressively more bitter partisanship. Republican conservatives favored "market forces," and Democratic liberals were more supportive of the ideals behind multilateralism and globally encompassing human rights and environmental agreements. Multilateralism in trade and investment was largely favored by the Republican party in Congress, which believed such arrangements reduced political barriers to market forces and increased US economic growth. But Democratic liberals feared such arrangements would undercut domestic regulations to protect workers and the environment. The trilateral North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), negotiated by the Republican Bush 41 and Democratic Clinton Administrations, had 3:1 support among Republicans but was opposed by the large majority of

¹¹ This phrase was used by Republican Senator and Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Arthur Vandenberg, to explain his cooperation with the Truman Administration at the beginning of the Cold War. Vandenberg's posture permitted the US commitment to NATO.

¹² Lawrence J. LeBlanc, *The United States and the Genocide Convention* (Duke University Press, 1991), 132.

Democrats in the lower House despite their President's support. In contrast, multilateral human rights and environmental agreements were mainly supported by Democratic presidents and Congressional members, and opposed by Republicans, who regarded them as liberal projects, intended to extend international governance and regulation to the detriment of the market.

In sum, the pattern became:

Existing multilateral security arrangements (e.g., NATO, OAS): bipartisan support from the Executive branch and in the Congress.

Multilateral trade arrangements (GATT-WTO Rounds, NAFTA, TPP): Executive branch support, but in the Congress, Republican support and Democratic opposition.

Global human rights and environment arrangements (International Criminal Court [ICC], Kyoto Accords): Executive branch support during Democratic administrations, and in the Congress, Democratic support and Republican opposition.

With this general alignment, the United States successfully concluded and the Congress approved the Uruguay Round agreement and creation of the WTO as well as the NAFTA (these require implementing legislation with majority support in both houses, but not ratification). Democratic administrations put much effort into the ICC and the Kyoto Convention, neither of which received sufficient support in the Congress. In recognition of this alignment, the Obama administration sought to expand the use of executive agreements to achieve international ends; the 2015 Paris Agreement on Climate Change was carefully worded so as not to require formal ratification. The Obama Administration also expanded upon the prior Bush Administration's TPP proposal to pursue plurilateral trade agreements with both Asia-Pacific countries and European countries for which it knew it would have significant Republican support.

THE TRUMP REVOLUTION

Based on the above, Donald Trump's "America First" approach is an expression of a strong and long-existing undercurrent of foreign policy thinking rather than a startling new development. Trump's rhetoric echoed the weariness of a large segment of the American public with what they saw as the burdens of international engagement and, with globalization, the loss of control over their environment. Similar outlooks have been associated with

some prominent politicians in the past (notably Patrick Buchanan, and to a lesser extent, Newt Gingrich) as well as the Tea Party movement in 2010. It also harkens to the isolationist, American exceptionalism tradition of the 19th and earlier 20th century.

Despite these roots, Trump is a revolutionary figure in that no post-World War II president has embraced this perspective as mainstream, and it is profoundly at odds with post-war foreign policy tradition. Global leadership and multilateralism, whether US-led or involving the United States as part of the team, has been seen as an essential tool in building a “rules-based order,” a key phrase for American foreign policy. Some presidents have been more selective about multilateralism than others, but Trump is an outlier. As a candidate, he showed almost complete disdain, questioning even the US alliance system. “We will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs,” he said, sounding like a less eloquent version of the Founding Fathers.¹³ One of his first actions in office was to cancel US participation in the TPP.

Naturally, Washington’s foreign policy establishment hoped that the new president would become more conventional once in office. Other presidents throughout the post-war years had adjusted their post-election views and rhetoric when confronted with new information and a broader, more complicated set of interests. But Trump appears to believe his own campaign rhetoric, and he has had few around himself willing to challenge his underlying beliefs. This is partly by choice; prizing loyalty, he was mostly unwilling to bring into his team experienced foreign policy hands who had worked for other Republican candidates or who had signed letters during the primary campaigns vowing not to work for him. This has meant that he has had limited access to foreign policy talent.

In office, he did set aside some of his doubts about burden-sharing in NATO, reassured other long-time bilateral allies, and committed himself to participate in the essential multilateral meetings such as the G7, the G20, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), and APEC. But Trump’s US has generally stood out as a strident voice in such meetings, the President using them to pitch his America First approach and being unwilling to agree with the rhetoric in favor of international cooperation that was standard in the past. He is obviously more comfortable in bilateral settings (as with his reciprocal

¹³ Quoted in Charles A. Kapchan, “The Clash of Exceptionalisms: A New Fight over an Old Idea,” *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2018): 144.

visits with China's Xi Jinping) or unilateral actions (such as the shift of the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem or the steel and aluminum tariff hikes). His withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change put him out of step with every other country in the world.

Bilateralism fits the Trump administration model of a world of deal-making, and unilateralism, with extreme positions threatened for bargaining purposes, appears to be part of Trump's strategy to gain leverage. What is missing, however, is an international framework of laws and enforcement mechanisms. Trump's policies seemed entirely tactical rather than strategic, and to have little regard for order-building. Ironically, this may stimulate multilateral order-building, but without rather than with the United States.

THE PERSISTENCE OF SELECTIVE MULTILATERALISM

Donald Trump's election is widely regarded as a fluke, caused by the nature of the US electoral system (he had 46 percent of the vote, more than 2 percent less than his rival), an unlikely series of breaks going his way in the states where voting was close, Hillary Clinton's baggage as a candidate, strategic mistakes by her campaign, and idiosyncratic elements including Russian social media meddling and an unusual gambit by the FBI director that harmed Clinton. Nonetheless, Trump was elected and having charted a significantly different course, the question arises whether his approach will be transformative in the long term.

The President has never yet had net positive approval ratings, and a majority of the public (as throughout most of the Obama period) feels that the country is headed in "the wrong direction."¹⁴ These gross measures of public dissatisfaction, however, mask attitudes toward more specific issues, and even toward foreign policy as a whole. For example, Trump's willingness to link economic and security relations, regardless of international practice, may be abhorrent to the foreign policy mainstream, but seems quite reasonable to the public. In the end, the longevity of the Trump revolution depends on how well it succeeds in making people feel America is great again.

In this, the revolution seems unlikely to succeed. Mr. Trump's understanding of the place of the United States in the international system is rooted

¹⁴ The President's approval rating and the direction of the country are continuously monitored by several polling agencies. These polls and a rolling average is reported daily by the website www.realclearpolitics.com.

in an earlier era when the US had more leverage based on its economic weight as well as considerable moral authority based on its policies and projection of system-wide interests. Today, it seems unable to significantly coerce or cajole other countries on a bilateral basis, particularly if they appear to be sacrificing their interests under pressure. While the initial reaction to Trump from other governments was to be cautious in the hopes that his bark would be worse than his bite, it is hard to accommodate escalating demands. Unilateral actions that harm other countries, such as the steel and aluminum tariffs and trade sanctions on China, are increasingly likely to result in retaliation.

Moreover, bilateralism in place of multilateralism is not a formula for American influence in the 21st century. Two main trends will place a premium on multilateral ordering arrangements: the relative decline of American power and the increasing fragmentation of global power. If the US objective is to maximize its influence and to continue to seek a rules-based order (as the Trump administration claims), the only effective means will be to build coalitions of like-minded countries. Many countries, because of power inequities, will resist bilateral negotiations, and even if not, bilateral deals do not create a system of rules favorable to economic growth. The TPP, which would have had difficulty passing in the US Congress even if Trump had not been elected, is the best recent model of potentially effective rules-making multilateralism. It comprised a small and like-minded enough group of countries for effective negotiations, but it had enough critical economic mass that its provisions would be benchmarked by non-member economies. Without the United States, it no longer has that critical mass.

Building an international order not just to prevent war, but to address critical threats of existential significance, such as climate change, remains essential for the health of the system as a whole. This can only be done multilaterally, beginning with coalitions and ending with a global consensus. The United States will find that its interests in the long term will dictate its participation and leadership in this global task.

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