

Is American Multilateralism in Decline?

By G. John Ikenberry

American foreign policy appears to have taken a sharp unilateral turn. A half century of U.S. leadership in constructing an international order organized around multilateral institutions, rule-based agreements, and alliance partnerships seems to be giving way to an assertive unilateralism. But how deeply rooted is this unilateral turn? Is it an inevitable feature of America's rising global power position? This article argues that the United States is not doomed to shed its multilateral orientation. Unipolar power provides new opportunities for the United States to act unilaterally, but the incentives are actually quite complex and cross-cutting; and these incentives arguably make multilateralism more rather than less desirable for Washington in many policy areas.

American foreign policy appears to have taken a sharp unilateral turn. A half century of U.S. leadership in constructing an international order around multilateral institutions, rule-based agreements, and alliance partnerships seems to be giving way to a new assertive—even defiant—unilateralism. Over the last several years, the Bush administration has signaled a deep skepticism of multilateralism in a remarkable sequence of rejections of pending international agreements and treaties, including the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC), the Germ Weapons Convention, and the Programme of Action on Illicit Trade in Small and Light Arms. It also unilaterally withdrew from the 1970s Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which many experts regard as the cornerstone of modern arms-control agreements. More recently, spurred by its war on terrorism, the Bush administration has advanced new, provocative ideas about the American unilateral and preemptive use of force—and under this go-it-alone-if-necessary banner, it defied allies and world public opinion by launching a preventive war against Iraq. “When it comes to our security,” President Bush proclaimed, “we really don’t need anybody’s permission.”¹

Unilateralism, of course, is not a new feature of American foreign policy. In every historical era, the United States has shown a willingness to reject treaties, violate rules, ignore allies, and use military force on its own.² But many observers see today’s U.S. unilateralism as something much more sweeping—not an occasional ad hoc policy decision, but a new strategic orientation. Capturing this view, one pundit calls it the “new unilateralism”:

After eight years during which foreign policy success was largely measured by the number of treaties the president could sign and the number of summits he could attend, we now have an administration willing to assert American freedom of action and the primacy of American national interests. Rather than contain power within a vast web of constraining international agreements, the new unilateralism seeks to strengthen American power and unashamedly deploy it on behalf of self-defined global ends.³

Indeed, Richard Holbrooke, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has charged that the Bush administration threatens to make “a radical break with 55 years of a bipartisan tradition that sought international agreements and regimes of benefit to us.”⁴

America’s “new unilateralism” has unsettled world politics. The stakes are high because in the decade since the end of the Cold War, the United States has emerged as an unrivaled and unprecedented global superpower. At no other time in modern history has a single state loomed so large over the rest of the world. But as American power has grown, the rest of the world is confronted with a disturbing double bind. On the one hand, the United States is becoming more crucial to other countries in the realization of their economic and security goals; it is increasingly in a position to help or hurt other countries. But on the other hand, the growth of American power makes the United States less dependent on weaker states, and so it is easier for the United States to resist or ignore these states.

Does this Bush-style unilateralism truly represent a major turn away from the long postwar tradition of multilateralism in American foreign policy? It depends on whether today’s American unilateralism is a product of deep structural shifts in the country’s global position or if it reflects more contingent and passing circumstances. Does American unipolarity “select” for unilateralism? Do powerful states—when they get the chance—inevitably seek to disentangle themselves from international rules and institutions? Or are more complex considerations at work? The answers to these questions are relevant to determining whether the rise of American preeminence in the years since the end of the Cold War is ultimately consistent with or destined to undermine the post-1945 multilateral international order.

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This article makes three arguments:

First, the new unilateralism is not an inevitable reaction to rising American power. The international system may give the United States more opportunities to act unilaterally, but the incentives to do so are actually complex and mixed. And arguably, these incentives make a multilateral approach more—not less—desirable for Washington in many areas of foreign policy.

Second, despite key officials' deep and ideologically driven skepticism about multilateralism, the Bush administration's opposition to multilateralism represents in practical terms an attack on specific types of multilateral agreements more than it does a fundamental assault on the "foundational" multilateralism of the postwar system. One area is arms control, nonproliferation, and the use of force, where many in the administration do resist the traditional multilateral, treaty-based approach. Likewise, some of the other new multilateral treaties that are being negotiated today represent slightly different trade-offs for the United States. In the past, the United States has embraced multilateralism because it provided ways to protect American freedom of action: escape clauses, weighted voting, and veto rights. The "new unilateralism" is in part a product of the "new multilateralism," which offers fewer opportunities for the United States to exercise political control over others and fewer ways to escape the binding obligations of the agreements.

Weaker states have responded to the rise of American unipolarity by seeking to embed the United States further in binding institutional relationships (in effect, to "tie Gulliver down"), while American officials attempt to get the benefits of a multilateral order without accepting greater encroachments on its policy autonomy. We are witnessing not an end to multilateralism but a struggle over its scope and character. A "politics of institutions" is being played out between the United States and the rest of the world within the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and other postwar multilateral fora.

Third, the circumstances that led the United States to engage in multilateral cooperation in the past are still present and, in some ways, have actually increased. In particular, there are three major sources of multilateralism: functional demands for cooperation (e.g., institutional contracts between states that reduce barriers to mutually beneficial exchange); hegemonic power management, both to institutionalize power advantages and, by reducing the arbitrary and indiscriminate exercise of power, to make the hegemonic order more stable and legitimate; and the American legal-institutional political tradition of seeing this domestic rule-of-law orientation manifest in the country's approach to international order.

I begin by looking at the logic and dimensions of multilateralism. Next, I present and critique the structural, power-based explanation for the new unilateralism. I then look at three

theoretical traditions that offer explanations for continued multilateralism. To be sure, unipolarity creates opportunities for unilateralist foreign-policy officials to push their agenda, particularly in the areas of arms control and the use of force, where multilateral rules and norms have been weak even under the most favorable circumstances. The incentives and pressures for multilateralism are altered but not extinguished with the rise of American unipolarity.

What Is Multilateralism?

Multilateralism involves the coordination of relations among three or more states according to a set of rules or principles. It can be distinguished from other types of interstate relations in three ways. First, because it entails the coordination of relations among a group of states, it can be contrasted with bilateral, "hub and spoke," and imperial arrangements. Second, the terms of a given relationship are defined by agreed-upon rules and principles—and sometimes by organizations—so multilateralism can be contrasted with interactions based on ad hoc bargaining or straightforward power politics. Third, multilateralism entails some reduction in policy autonomy, since the choices and actions of the participating states are—at least to some degree—constrained by the agreed-upon rules and principles.⁵

Multilateralism can operate at three levels of international order: system multilateralism, ordering or foundational multilateralism, and contract multilateralism. At the most basic level, it

is manifest in the Westphalian state system, where norms of sovereignty, formal equality, and legal-diplomatic practice prevail.⁶ This is multilateralism as it relates to the deep organization of the units and their mutual recognition and interaction; this notion is implicit in both realist and neoliberal theories of international order. At a more intermediate level, multi-

lateralism can refer to the political-economic organization of regional or international order. John Ruggie notes that "an 'open' and 'liberal' international economic order is multilateral in form."⁷ The overall organization of relations among the advanced industrial countries has this basic multilateral characteristic. As Robert Keohane observes, "Since the end of World War II, multilateralism has become increasingly important in world politics, as manifest in the proliferation of multinational conferences on a bewildering variety of themes and an increase in the number of multilateral intergovernmental organizations from fewer than 100 in 1945 to about 200 in 1960 and over 600 in 1980."⁸ At the surface level, multilateralism also refers to specific intergovernmental treaties and agreements. These can be thought of as distinct "contracts" among states.

Multilateralism can also be understood in terms of the binding character of the rules and principles that guide interstate relations. In its loosest form, multilateralism can simply entail general consultations and informal adjustments among states.⁹ This form of

Does American unipolarity "select" for unilateralism? Do powerful states—when they get the chance—inevitably seek to disentangle themselves from international rules and institutions? Or are more complex considerations at work?

Figure 1
Types of Multilateral Relations

system	sovereign state system: constitution of legal actors; principles of mutual recognition, formal equality, diplomatic practice
ordering	basic organizing principles and features of the international order indivisibility of economic and security areas
contract	individual agreements/treaties among groups of states

multilateralism can be traced back to the diplomatic practices of the Concert of Europe, where the great powers observed a set of unwritten rules and norms about the balance of power on the continent. For instance, no major power would act alone in matters of diplomacy and territorial adjustments, and no great power could be isolated or humiliated.¹⁰ This loose, nonbinding type of multilateralism can be found today in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), which was established in the early 1990s to promote regional economic cooperation. The WTO and other multilateral economic institutions entail more formal, treaty-based agreements that specify certain commitments and obligations. But the binding character of these multilateral agreements is still qualified: escape clauses, weighted voting, opt-out agreements, and veto rights are all part of the major post-1945 multilateral agreements. The most binding multilateral agreements are ones where states actually cede sovereignty in specific areas to supranational authorities. The European Union is the most important manifestation of this sovereignty-transferring, legally binding multilateralism.¹¹

Multilateralism (as well as unilateralism) can also be understood in terms of its sources. It can emerge from the international system's structural features, including the distribution of power (i.e., the rise or decline of American dominance), the growth of complex interdependence, and the emergence of non-state violent collective action. Incentives for multilateralism can also come from the independent influence of preexisting multilateral institutions. For example, the postwar multilateral order might in various ways put pressure on the United States to maintain or even expand its commitments. Incentives for multilateralism may also come from inside a state, manifest in national political identity and tradition or more specific factors such as fiscal and manpower costs and election cycles. Finally, multilateralism can be traced to agentic sources, such as the ideologies of government elites, the ideas pressed upon government by nongovernmental organizations, and the maneuvering of elites over treaty conditions and ratification.

When deciding whether to sign a multilateral agreement, a state faces a trade-off. In choosing to abide by the rules and norms of the agreement, the state must accept a reduction in its

policy autonomy. That is, it must agree to some constraints on its freedom of action—or independence of policy making—in a particular area. But in exchange, it expects other states to do the same. The multilateral bargain will be attractive to a state if it concludes that the benefits that flow to it through the coordination of policies are greater than the costs of lost policy autonomy. In an ideal world, a state might want to operate in an international environment in which all other states are heavily rule-bound while leaving itself entirely unencumbered by rules and institutional restraints.¹² But because all states are inclined in this way, the question becomes one of how much autonomy each must relinquish in order to get rule-based behavior out of the others.

A state's willingness to agree to a multilateral bargain will hinge on several factors that shape the ultimate cost-benefit calculation. One is whether the policy constraints imposed on other states (*states b, c, and d*) really matter to the first state (*state a*). If the "unconstrained" behavior of other states is judged to have no undesirable impact on *a*, then *a* will be unwilling to give up any policy autonomy of its own. It also matters if the participating states can credibly restrict their policy autonomy. If *a* is not convinced that *b, c, and d* can actually be constrained by multilateral rules and norms, it will not be willing to sacrifice its own policy autonomy.¹³ Likewise, if the agreement is to work, *a* will need to convince the other states that it too will be constrained. These factors are all continuous rather than dichotomous variables, so the states must make judgments about the degree of credibility and relative value of constrained policies.¹⁴

When multilateral bargains are made by states with highly unequal power, the considerations can be more complex. The more that a powerful state is capable of dominating or abandoning weaker states, the more the weaker states will care about constraints on the leading state's policy autonomy. In other words, they will be more eager to see some limits placed on the arbitrary and indiscriminate exercise of power by the leading state. Similarly, the more that the powerful state can restrain itself in a credible fashion, the more that weaker states will be

Figure 2
Sources of Multilateralism

system	complex interdependence, unipolarity, the rise of nonstate violent collective action
institutional	autonomous influence of preexisting multilateral institutions
domestic	American identity, limiting domestic fiscal and manpower costs, election cycles
agentic	ideologies of foreign policy elites, nongovernmental organizations, how specific treaties get structured

interested in multilateral rules and norms that accomplish this end. When both these conditions hold—when the leading state can use its power to dominate and abandon, and when it can restrain and commit itself—the weaker states will be particularly eager for a deal. They will, of course, also care about the positive benefits that accrue from cooperation. Of course, the less important the policy behavior of weaker states—and the less certain the leading state is that weaker states can in fact constrain their policies—the less the leading state will offer to limit its own policy autonomy.

Varieties of Multilateralism

In this light, it is easy to see why the United States sought to build a post-1945 order around multilateral economic and security agreements such as the Bretton Woods agreements on monetary and trade relations and the NATO security pact. The United States ended World War II in an unprecedented power position, so the weaker European states attached a premium to taming and harnessing this newly powerful state. Britain, France, and other major states were willing to accept multilateral agreements to the extent that they also constrained and regularized U.S. economic and security actions. American agreement to operate within a multilateral economic order and make an alliance-based security commitment to Europe was worth the price: it ensured that Germany and the rest of Western Europe would be integrated into a wider, American-centered international order. At the same time, the actual restraints on U.S. policy were minimal. Convertible currencies and open trade were in the United States' basic national economic interest. The United States did make a binding security guarantee to Western Europe, and this made American power more acceptable to Europeans, who were then more eager to cooperate with the United States in other areas.¹⁵ But the United States did not forswear the right to unilaterally use force elsewhere. It supported multilateral economic and security relations with Europe, and it agreed to operate economically and militarily within multilateral institutions organized around agreed-upon rules and principles. In return, it ensured that Western Europe would be firmly anchored in an Atlantic and global political order that advanced America's long-term national interest.

The United States was less determined or successful in establishing a multilateral order in East Asia. Proposals were made for an East Asian version of NATO, but security relations quickly took the shape of bilateral military pacts. Conditions did not favor Atlantic-style multilateralism. Europe had a set of roughly equal-sized states that could be brought together in a multilateral pact tied to the United States, while Japan largely stood alone.¹⁶ But another factor mattered as well: the United States was dominant in East Asia yet wanted less out of the region, so the United States found it less necessary to give up policy autonomy in exchange for institutional cooperation there. In Europe, the United States had an elaborate agenda of uniting European states, creating an institutional bulwark against communism, and supporting centrist democratic governments. These ambitious goals could not be realized simply by exercising brute power. To get what it wanted, the United States had to bargain

with the Europeans, and this meant agreeing to institutionally restrain and commit its power. In East Asia, the building of order around bilateral pacts with Japan, Korea, and other states was a more desirable strategy because multilateralism would have entailed more restraints on policy autonomy. As Peter Katzenstein argues: "It was neither in the interest of the United States to create institutions that would have constrained independent decision making in Washington nor in the interest of subordinate states to enter into institutions in which they would have minimal control while forgoing opportunities for free-riding and dependence reduction. Extreme hegemony thus led to a system of bilateral relations between states rather than a multilateral system than emerged in the North Atlantic area around the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Community."¹⁷

Despite these regional variations, the international order that took shape after 1945 was decidedly multilateral. A core objective of American postwar strategists was to ensure that the world did not break apart into 1930s-style closed regions.¹⁸ An open system of trade and investment—enshrined in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Bretton Woods agreement—provided one multilateral foundation to the postwar order. The alliance ties between the United States and Europe provided another. NATO was not just a narrow security pact but was seen by its founders as an extension of the collective self-defense provision of the UN Charter. The security of Europe and America are bound together; the parties thus have substantial consultative and decision-making obligations to each other. This indivisibility of economic and security relations is what has given the Western-centered international order a deep multilateral character. The United States makes commitments to other participating states—that is, it provides security protection and access to its markets, technology, and society in the context of an open international system. In exchange, other states agree to be stable political partners with the United States and offer it economic, diplomatic, and logistical support.

This is multilateralism as Ruggie has described it—as an organizational form.¹⁹ The parts of this Western order are connected by economic and security relationships that are informed by basic rules, norms, and institutions. The rules and institutions are understood by participating states to matter, reflecting loosely agreed-upon rights, obligations, and expectations about how "business" will be done within the order. It is an open system in which members exhibit "diffuse reciprocity."²⁰ Power does not disappear from this multilateral order, but it operates in a bargaining system in which rules and institutions—and power—play an interactive role. At this foundational or ordering level, multilateralism still remains a core feature of the contemporary Western international system, despite the inroads of the "new unilateralism."

On top of this foundational multilateral order, a growing number and variety of multilateral agreements have been offered up and signed by states. At a global level, between 1970 and 1997, the number of international treaties more than tripled; and from 1985 through 1999 alone, the number of international institutions increased by two-thirds.²¹ What this means is that an expanding number of multilateral "contracts" is being proposed

and agreed to by states around the world. The United States has become party to more and more of these contracts. This is reflected in the fact that the number of multilateral treaties in force for the United States steadily grew during the twentieth century. There were roughly 150 multilateral treaties in force in 1950, 400 in 1980, and close to 600 in 2000. In the most recent five-year period, 1996 through 2000, the United States ratified roughly the same number of treaties as in earlier postwar periods.²² Other data, summarized in Figure 3, indicate an increase in bilateral treaties passed by the Congress and a slight decrease in the number of multilateral treaties from 1945 through 2000.²³ Measured in these rough aggregate terms, the United States has not significantly backed away from what is a more and more dense web of international treaties and agreements.²⁴

Two conclusions follow from these observations. First, in the most general of terms, there has not been a dramatic decline in the propensity of the United States to enter into multilateral treaties. In fact, the United States continues to take on multilateral commitments at a steady rate. But the sheer volume of “contracts” that are being offered around the world for agreement has steadily expanded—and while the American “yield” on proposed multilateral treaties may not be substantially lower than in earlier decades, the absolute number of rejected contracts is necessarily larger. The United States has more opportunities to look unilateral today than in the past, even though it is not more likely when confronted with a specific “contract” to be any less multilateral than in earlier years. Second, even if the United States does

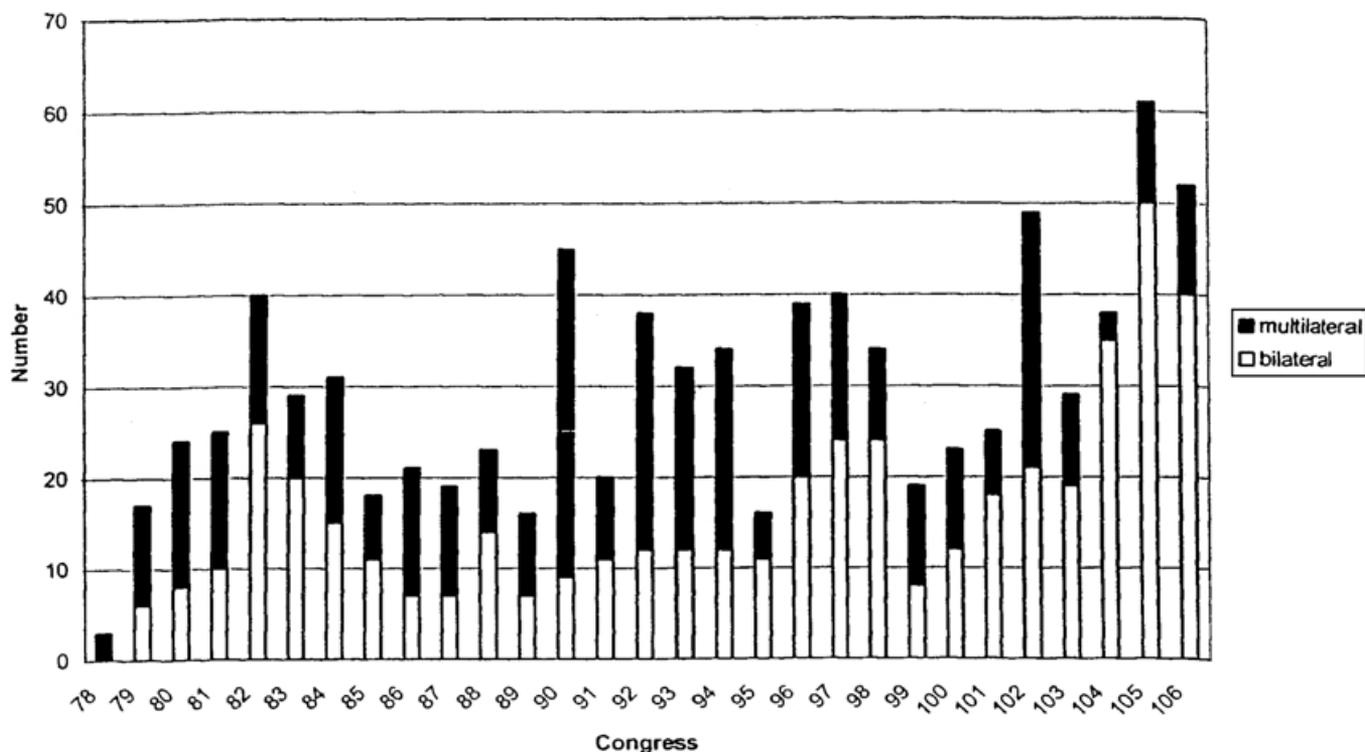
act unilaterally in opposing specific multilateral treaties that come along, it is important to distinguish these rejected “contracts” from the older foundational agreements that give the basic order its multilateral form. There is no evidence of “rollback” at this deeper level of order. But it is necessary to look more closely at the specific explanations for American multilateralism and the recent unilateral turn.

Unipolar Power and Multilateralism

The simplest explanation for the new unilateralism is that the United States has grown in power during the 1990s, thereby reducing its incentives to operate within a multilateral order. As one pundit has put it: “Any nation with so much power always will be tempted to go it alone. Power breeds unilateralism. It is as simple as that.”²⁵ This is a structural-realist explanation that says, in effect, that because of the shifting distribution of power in favor of the United States, the international system is increasingly “selecting” for unilateralism in its foreign policy.²⁶ The United States has become so powerful that it does not need to sacrifice its autonomy or freedom of action within multilateral agreements. Unipolar power gives the United States the ability to act alone and do so without serious costs.

Today’s international order, then, is at the early stage of a significant transformation triggered by what will be a continuous and determined effort by a unipolar America to disentangle itself from the multilateral restraints of an earlier era. It matters little who is president and what political party runs the

Figure 3
Treaties Completed by Congress, 1945–2000



Source: Schocken and Caron 2001.

government. The United States will exercise its power more directly—less mediated or constrained by international rules, institutions, or alliances. The result will be an international order that is more hegemonic than multilateral, more power-based than rule-based. The rest of the world will complain, but will not be able or willing to impose sufficient costs on the United States to alter its growing unilateral orientation.

This explanation for the decline of American multilateralism rests on several considerations. First, the United States has turned into a unipolar global power without historical precedent. The 1990s surprised the world. Many observers expected the end of the Cold War to usher in a multipolar order with increasingly equal centers of power in Asia, Europe, and America. Instead, the United States began the decade as the world's only superpower and proceeded to grow more powerful at the expense of the other major states. Between 1990 and 1998, the United States' gross national product grew 27 percent, Europe's 16 percent, and Japan's 7 percent. Today, the American economy is equal to the economies of Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany combined. The United States' military capacity is even more in a league of its own. It spends as much on defense as the next 14 countries taken together. It has bases in 40 countries. Eighty percent of world military research and development takes place in the United States.²⁷ What the 1990s wrought is a unipolar America that is more powerful than any other great state in history.²⁸

Second, these massive power advantages give the United States opportunities to resist entanglements in multilateral rules and institutions. Multilateralism can be a tool or expedient in some circumstances, but states will avoid or shed entanglements in rules and institutions when they can.²⁹ This realist vision of multilateralism is captured by Robert Kagan, who argues that multilateralism is a "weapon of the weak." He adds: "When the United States was weak, it practiced the strategies of indirection, the strategies of weakness; now that the United States is powerful, it behaves as powerful nations do."³⁰

Put another way, power disparities make it easier for the United States to walk away from potential international agreements. Across the spectrum of economic, security, environmental, and other policy issues, the sheer size and power advantages of the United States make it easier to resist multilateral restraints. That is, the costs of nonagreement are lower for the United States than for other states—which gives it bargaining advantages but also a greater ability to forgo agreement without suffering consequences.³¹

According to this view, the American willingness to act multilaterally during the postwar era was an artifact of the bipolar struggle. The United States needed allies, and the construction of this "free world" coalition entailed some American willingness to agree to multilateral commitments and restraints. Yet even during the Cold War decades, realists note, multilateral economic and security commitments did not entail great compromises on American policy autonomy. Voting shares, veto power, and escape clauses have been integral to American multilateralism during this earlier era. Today, even these contingent multilateral commitments and restraints are unnecessary.

Third, the shifting power differentials have also created new divergent interests between the United States and the rest of the world, a fact that further reduces possibilities for multilateral cooperation. For example, the sheer size of the American economy—and a decade of growth unmatched by Europe, Japan, or the other advanced countries—means that U.S. obligations under the Kyoto Protocol would be vastly greater than those of other states.³² The United States has global interests and security threats that no other state has. Its troops are the ones most likely to be dispatched to distant battlefields, which means that it is more exposed than other states to the legal liabilities of the ICC. The United States must worry about threats to its interests in all major regions of the world. Such unipolar power is a unique target for terrorism. It is not surprising that Europeans and Asians make different assessments of terrorist threats and rogue states seeking weapons of mass destruction than American officials do. Since multilateralism entails working within agreed-upon rules and institutions about the use of force, this growing divergence will make multilateral agreements less easy to achieve—and less desirable in the view of the United States.

This structural-power perspective on multilateralism generates useful insights. One such insight is that the United States—as well as other states—has walked away from international rules and agreements when they did not appear to advance American interests. This helps to explain a lot about American foreign policy over many decades. For example, when the U.S. intervention in Nicaragua was brought before the International Court of Justice on the grounds of a violation of Nicaragua's sovereignty, the court ruled in Nicaragua's favor. The U.S. response was immediately to move to rescind the court's jurisdiction over the United States. In this sense, Kenneth Waltz is surely correct when he argues that "strong states use institutions, as they interpret laws, in ways that suit them."³³

But the more general claim about unipolarity and the decline of multilateralism is misleading. To begin with, at earlier moments of power preeminence, the United States did not shy away from multilateralism. As Fareed Zakaria notes:

America was the most powerful country in the world when it proposed the creation of an international organization, the League of Nations, to manage international relations after the First World War. It was the dominant power at the end of the Second World War, when it founded the United Nations, created the Bretton Woods system of international economic cooperation, and launched most of the world's key international organizations.³⁴

During the 1990s, the United States again used its unrivaled position after the end of the Cold War to advance new multilateral agreements, including the WTO, NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement), and APEC. There is no necessary or simple connection between a state's power position and its inclinations toward multilateralism, a tool that weak and strong alike can use.³⁵

What is most distinctive about American policy is its mixed record on multilateralism. The United States is not rolling back its commitments to foundational multilateralism, but it is picking

and choosing among the variety of multilateral agreements being negotiated today. Power considerations—and American unipolar power—surely are part of the explanation for both the calculations that go into American decisions and the actions of other states. The United States has actively championed the WTO but is resisting a range of arms control treaties. One has to look beyond gross power distributions and identify more specific costs and incentives that inform state policy.

The chief problem with the structural-power explanation for America's new unilateralism is that it hinges on an incomplete accounting of the potential costs of unilateralism. The assumption is that the United States has become so powerful that other countries are unable to impose costs if it acts alone. On economic, environmental, and security issues, the rhetorical question that the United States can always ask when confronted with opposition to American unilateralism is this: they may not like it, but what are they going to do about it? According to this view, the United States is increasingly in the position that it was in East Asia during the early Cold War: it is so hegemonic that it has few incentives to tie itself to multilateral rules and institutions, and it can win on issues that it cares about by going it alone or bargaining individually with weaker states. This view—as we shall see below—is a very superficial reading of the situation.

Unipolarity and unilateralist ideologies

One source of the new unilateralism does follow—at least indirectly—from unipolar power. The United States is so powerful that the ideologies and policy views of a few key decision makers in Washington can have a huge impact on the global order, even if these views are not necessarily representative of the wider foreign policy community or of public opinion. In effect, the United States is so powerful that the structural pressures associated with anarchy—which lead to security competition and relative gains calculations—decline radically. The passing views of highly placed administration elites matter more than in other states or international structural circumstances.³⁶

Indeed, the Bush administration does have a large group of officials who have articulated deep intellectual reservations about international treaties and multilateral organizations.³⁷ Many of America's recent departures from multilateralism are agreements dealing with arms control and proliferation. In this area, American policy elites are deeply divided on how to advance the nation's security—a division that dates back to right-wing opposition to American arms control diplomacy with the Soviet Union during the Nixon-Kissinger era.³⁸ The skeptical view of arms control made its appearance during the Reagan administration in the embrace by hard-liners of the Star Wars missile defense program. It reappeared in the 1990s, when conservative Republicans again championed national missile defense. When asked why missile defense was part of the Republican "Contract with America" campaign in 1994, Representative Newt Gingrich remarked: "It is the difference between those who would rely on lawyers to defend America and those who rely on engineers and scientists."³⁹

The circumstances of the post-Cold War era also complicate arms control and nonproliferation agreements. The arms control of the Soviet era had a more immediate and reciprocal character.

The United States agreed to restraints on its nuclear arsenal; but in return, it got relatively tangible concessions from the Soviets, and the agreements themselves were widely seen to have a stabilizing impact on the global order—something both sides desired.⁴⁰ The arms-control agenda today is more diverse and problematic. New types of agreements are being debated in a more uncertain and shifting international security environment. With the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty and the Land Mines Treaty, for example, the United States accepts restraints on its military capabilities without the same degree of confidence that they will generate desired reciprocal action.⁴¹ The realms of arms control—along with the calculations of costs and benefits, at least among some American elites—have changed. This helps explain why American unilateralism today is so heavily manifest in this policy area.⁴²

Some observers contend that the Bush administration has embraced a more ambitious unilateralist agenda aimed at rolling back and disentangling the United States from post-1945 foundational multilateral rules and institutions. Grand strategic ideas of this sort are circulating inside and outside the administration. One version of this thinking is simply old-style nationalism that sees international institutions and agreements as a basic threat to American sovereignty.⁴³ Another version—increasingly influential in Washington—is advanced by the so-called neoconservative movement, which seeks to use American power to single-handedly reshape entire countries, particularly in the Middle East, so as to make them more congenial with American interests.⁴⁴ This is a neo-imperial vision of American order that requires the United States to unshackle itself from the norms and institutions of multilateral action (and from partners that reject the neo-imperial project).

It is possible that this neo-imperial agenda could undermine the wider and deeper multilateral order. Given sufficient time and opportunity, a small group of determined foreign policy officials could succeed in subverting multilateral agreements and alliance partnerships—even if such steps were opposed by the wider foreign policy community and the American public. This could be done intentionally or it could happen indirectly if, by violating core multilateral rules and norms, the credibility of American commitment to the wider array of agreements and norms becomes suspect and the entire multilateral edifice crumbles. The possibility of unilateral action against self-interest does exist. Great powers have often in the past launched themselves in aggressive directions (often unilateral) that appear in retrospect to have not been in their interest. Examples include Wilhelmine Germany (1890–1918), Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, the Soviet Union during most of its history, France and Britain in the Crimean War, ancient Athens' expedition to Syracuse, and the United States in Vietnam.⁴⁵

It is extremely doubtful, however, that a neo-imperial foreign policy can be sustained at home or abroad. There is no evidence that the American people are eager for or willing to support such a transformed global role. It is not clear that the country will even be willing to bear the costs of rebuilding Iraq, let alone undertake a global neo-imperial campaign to overturn and rebuild other countries in the region. Moreover, if the neoconservative agenda

is really focused on promoting democracy in the Arab and Muslim world, the unilateral use of force will be of limited and diminishing importance, while the multilateral engagement of the region will be critical. In the end, a determined, ideologically motivated policy elite can push the United States in dramatic new directions, but electoral cycles and democratic politics make it difficult for costly and self-destructive policy orientations to be sustained over the long term.⁴⁶

Multilateral rule breaking and rule making

Even if the United States takes advantage of its unipolar power to act unilaterally in various policy areas, the action can lead to multilateralism—no matter what the United States intended. Britain used its position as the leading naval power of the nineteenth century to suppress piracy on the high seas, which eventually led to agreements and concerted action among the major states to protect ocean shipping.⁴⁷ President Nixon unilaterally “closed the gold window” of the Bretton Woods monetary regime in the early 1970s, which upset Japan and European countries but eventually led to the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the G-8 summit process. President Reagan pursued unilateral trade policies in some instances during the 1980s, but this led to the establishment of the GATT dispute settlement mechanism. Rule breaking can lead to rule making.⁴⁸

Unilateralism leading to new multilateral rules is a dynamic that is particularly likely to emerge when new issues and circumstances alter the interest calculations of leading states. In the 1990s, the United States and other states showed a willingness to go beyond long-standing UN norms about sovereignty in the use of force in humanitarian crises. This experience appears to be leading to new multilateral understandings about when the UN Charter sanctions international action in defense of human rights.⁴⁹ Further, the United States has recently advanced new ideas about the preemptive—and even preventative—use of force to combat terrorism. This unilateral assertion of American rights has triggered a world debate on UN principles regarding the use of force, and the result could well be a new agreement that adapts existing rules and norms to cope with the new circumstances of global terrorism.⁵⁰ So it is useful to look more closely at the factors that give rise to multilateralism.

Sources of Multilateralism

The United States is not structurally destined to disentangle itself from the multilateral order and go it alone. Indeed, there continue to be deep underlying incentives for the United States to support multilateralism—incentives that in many ways are increasing. The sources of U.S. multilateralism stem from the functional demands of interdependence, the long-term calculations of power management, and American political tradition and identity.

Interdependence and functional multilateralism

American support for multilateralism is likely to be sustained, even in the face of resistance and ideological challenges to multilateralism within the Bush administration, in part because of a simple logic: as global economic interdependence grows, so does the need for multilateral coordination of policies. The more eco-

nomically interconnected states become, the more dependent they are on the actions of other states for the realization of objectives. “As interdependence rises,” Keohane argues, “the opportunity costs of not co-ordinating policy increase, compared with the costs of sacrificing autonomy as a consequence of making binding agreements.”⁵¹ Rising economic interdependence is one of the great hallmarks of the contemporary international system. Over the postwar era, states have actively and consistently sought to open markets and reap the economic, social, and technological gains that derive from integration into the world economy. If this remains true in the years ahead, it is easy to predict that the demands for multilateral agreements—even, and perhaps especially, by the United States—will increase.

One theoretical tradition, neoliberal institutionalism, provides an explanation for the rise of multilateral institutions under these circumstances. Institutions perform a variety of functions, such as reducing uncertainty and the costs of transactions between states.⁵² Mutually beneficial exchanges are missed in the absence of multilateral rules and procedures, which help states overcome collective action, asymmetrical information, and the fear that other states will cheat or act opportunistically. In effect, multilateral rules and institutions provide a contractual environment within which states can more easily pursue joint gains. Likewise, as the density of interactions between states increases, so will the demand for rules and institutions that facilitate these interactions. In this sense, multilateralism is self-reinforcing. A well-functioning contractual environment facilitates the promulgation of additional multilateral rules and institutions. As Keohane points out, the combination of growing interdependence and successful existing institutions should lead to the expansion in the tasks and scope of multilateralism in the relevant policy area.⁵³

This argument helps explain why a powerful state might support multilateral agreements, particularly in trade and other economic policy areas. To return to the cost-benefit logic of multilateralism discussed earlier, the leading state has a major interest in inducing smaller states to open their economies and participate in an integrated world economy. As the world’s leading economy, it has an interest in establishing not just an open system but also a predictable one—that is to say, it will want rules, principles, and institutions that create a highly stable and accessible order. As the density and sophistication of these interactions grow, the leading state will have greater incentives for a stable, rule-based economic order. What the dominant state wants from other states grows along with its economic size and degree of interdependence. But to get weaker states to commit themselves to an open and increasingly elaborate rule-based regime, it must establish its own reliability. It must be willing to commit itself credibly to the same rules and institutions.⁵⁴ It will be necessary for the dominant state to reduce its policy autonomy—and do so in a way that other states find credible.

The American postwar commitment to a multilateral system of economic rules and institutions can be understood in this way. As the world’s dominant state, the United States championed GATT and the Bretton Woods institutions as ways of locking other countries into an open world economy that would ensure massive economic gains for itself. But to get these states to organize their post-

war domestic orders around an open world economy—and accept the political risks and vulnerabilities associated with openness—the United States had to signal that it too would play by the rules and not exploit or abandon these weaker countries. The postwar multilateral institutions facilitated this necessary step. As the world economy and trading system have expanded over the decades, this logic has continued. It is reflected in the WTO, which replaced the GATT in 1995 and embodies an expansive array of legal-institutional rules and mechanisms.⁵⁵ The United States demands an expanding and ever-more complex international economic environment, but to get the support of other states, the United States must itself become more embedded in this system of rules and institutions.

This perspective is particularly useful in identifying specific policy realms—such as trade—where multilateralism is an attractive tool to advance American interests. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the Bush administration has succeeded in gaining “fast track” authority from Congress and led the launch of a new multilateral trade round. This view does acknowledge that American support for multilateralism will be uneven across policy realms. But it is not clear how American support for trade multilateralism may or may not spill over to other policy realms, such as the environment or the use of force.

Hegemonic power and strategic restraint

American support for multilateralism also stems from a grand strategic interest in preserving power and creating a stable and legitimate international order. This logic is particularly evident at major historical turning points—such as 1919, 1945, and after the Cold War—when the United States has faced choices about how to use power and organize interstate relations. The support for multilateralism is a way to signal restraint and commitment to other states, thereby encouraging the acquiescence and cooperation of weaker states.⁵⁶ The United States has pursued this strategy to varying degrees across the twentieth century—and this reflects the remarkably durable and legitimate character of the existing international order. From this perspective, multilateralism—and the search for rule-based agreements—should increase rather than decrease with the rise of American unipolarity. Moreover, the existing multilateral order, which itself reflects an older multilateral bargain between the United States and the outside world, should rein in the Bush administration, and the administration should respond to general power management incentives and limit its tilt toward unilateralism.⁵⁷

This theoretical perspective begins by looking at the choices that dominant states face when they are in a position to shape the fundamental character of the international order. A state that wins a war, or through some other turn of events finds itself in a dominant global position, faces a choice: it can use its power to bargain and coerce other states in struggles over the distribution of gains, or, knowing that its power position will someday decline and that there are costs to enforcing its way within the order, it can move toward a more rule-based, institutionalized order in exchange for the acquiescence and compliant participation of weaker states. In seeking a more rule-based order, the leading state is agreeing to engage in strategy restraint—it is acknowledging

that there will be limits on the way in which it can exercise its power. Such an order, in effect, has “constitutional” characteristics. Limits are set on what a state within the order can do with its power advantages. Just as in constitutional polities, the implications of “winning” in politics are reduced. Weaker states realize that the implications of their inferior position are limited and perhaps temporary; operation within the order, despite their disadvantages, does not risk everything, nor will it give the dominant state a permanent advantage. Both the powerful and weak states agree to operate within the same order, regardless of radical asymmetries in the distribution of power.⁵⁸

Multilateralism becomes a mechanism by which a dominant state and weaker ones can reach a bargain over the character of international order. The dominant state reduces its “enforcement costs” and succeeds in establishing an order where weaker states will participate willingly rather than resist or balance against the leading power.⁵⁹ It accepts some restrictions on how it can use its power. The rules and institutions that are created serve as an “investment” in the longer-run preservation of its power advantages. Weaker states agree to the order’s rules and institutions. In return, they are assured that the worst excesses of the leading state—manifest as arbitrary and indiscriminate abuses of state power—will be avoided, and they gain institutional opportunities to work and help influence the leading state.⁶⁰

Arguably, this institutional bargain has been at the heart of the postwar Western order. After World War II, the United States launched history’s most ambitious era of institution building. The UN, the IMF, the World Bank, GATT, NATO, and other institutions that emerged provided the most rule-based structure for political and economic relations in world history. The United States was deeply ambivalent about making permanent security commitments to other states or allowing its political and economic policies to be dictated by intergovernmental bodies. The Soviet threat during the Cold War was critical in overcoming these doubts. Networks and political relationships were built that made American power farther-reaching and durable but also more predictable and restrained. As a former State Department official (now a Special Trade Representative) described this postwar bargain: “The more powerful participants in the system—especially the United States—did not forswear all their advantages, but neither did they exercise their strength without substantial restraint. Because the United States believed the Trilateral system was in its interests, it sacrificed some degree of national autonomy to promote it.”⁶¹

In its most extreme versions, today’s new unilateralism appears to be a violation of this postwar bargain. Certainly this is the view of some Europeans and others around the world. But if the Bush administration’s unilateral moves are seen as more limited—and not emerging as a basic challenge to the foundations of multilateralism—this observation might be incorrect. The problem with the argument about order built on an institutional bargain and strategic restraint is that it reflects judgments by decision makers about how much institutional restraint and commitment by the dominant state is necessary to secure how much participatory acquiescence and compliance by weaker states. The Bush administration might calculate that the order is sufficiently stable that

the United States can resist an entire range of new multilateral agreements and still not trigger costly responses from its partners. It might also *miscalculate* in this regard and do great damage to the existing order. Yet if the thesis about the constitutional character of the postwar Western order is correct, a basic turn away from multilateralism should not occur. The institutionalized order, which facilitates intergovernmental bargaining and “voice opportunities” for America’s weaker partners, should have some impact on American policy. The multilateral processes and “pulling and hauling” within the order should, at least to some extent, lead the United States to adjust its policies so as not to endanger the basic postwar bargain. And the Bush administration should act as if they recognize the virtues of strategic restraint.

The struggle between the United States and its security partners over how to deal with Iraq put American strategic restraint and multilateral security cooperation to the test. Governments around the world were extremely uncomfortable with the prospect of American unilateral use of force. Reflecting this view, a French diplomat recently noted: “France is not interested in arguing with the United States. This is a matter of principle. This is about the rules of the game in the world today. About putting the Security Council in the center of international life. And not permitting a nation, whatever nation it may be, to do what it wants, when it wants, where it wants.”⁶² During the run-up to the Iraq war, the Bush administration insisted on its right to act without the multilateral approval of the United Nations—but its decision to take the issue of Iraq back to the United Nations in September 2002 is an indication that the administration sensed the costs of unilateralism.⁶³ By seeking a UN Security Council resolution that demands tough new weapons inspections and warning that serious consequences will flow from an Iraqi failure to comply, the United States acted to place its anti-Saddam policy in a multilateral framework.⁶⁴

In the end, the Bush administration went to war with Iraq almost alone, ignoring an uproar of international opposition, and without an explicit Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force. Governments that opposed the war had attempted to use the Security Council as a tool to restrain the American unilateral and preemptive use of force, while the Bush administration had attempted to use it to provide political cover for its military operations aimed at regime change in Baghdad. The episode reveals a search by the United States for a modicum of legitimacy for its provocative act, but also a willingness to incur political costs and go it alone if necessary. Still, the administration sought to wrap itself in the authority of the United Nations. In making the case for war, President Bush and UN Ambassador John Negreponce did not refer to the administration’s controversial National Security Strategy, which claimed an American unilateral right to use force at any time and place in anticipation of future threats.⁶⁵ Rather, they defended the intervention in terms of the continuing authority of UN resolutions and the failure of the Iraqi regime to comply with disarmament agreements. The Bush administration pulled back from the extreme unilateral brink: instead of asserting a new doctrine of preventive force, it couched its actions in terms of UN authority.

The diplomatic struggle at the United Nations over the American use of force in Iraq reflects a more general debate among major states over whether there will be agreed-upon rules and principles to guide and limit the exercise of U.S. power. The Bush administration seeks to protect its freedom to act alone while giving just enough ground to preserve the legitimacy of America’s global position and garner support for the practical problems of fighting terrorism. The administration is again making trade-offs between autonomy and gaining the multilateral cooperation of other states in confronting Iraq.

The pressure for multilateralism in the American use of force is weaker and more diffuse than in other policy areas, such as trade and other economic realms. The incentives have less to do with the realization of specific material interests and more to do with the search for legitimacy—which brings with it the possibility of greater cooperation by other countries and a reduction of the general political “drag” on the American exercise of power. But the Iraq war episode shows how these considerations can give way when a president and his advisers are utterly determined in their policy agenda.

Finally, this same basic struggle has been played out in the controversy over the ICC. European governments are moving forward to establish a world court with universal jurisdiction and strong independent judicial authority in the area of war crimes. This necessarily entails an encroachment on American sovereignty in cases where crimes by its own citizens are alleged. The U.S. position during the Clinton years, when the treaty was being negotiated, was that the UN Security Council should be able to veto cases that were brought before the ICC. The United States sought to adopt the traditional postwar approach for multilateral agreements—that is, to give the major powers special opt-out and veto rights that make the binding obligations more contingent and subject to state review.⁶⁶ The proponents of contingent multilateralism calculated that escape clauses made the signing of such agreements more likely and that rules and norms promulgated by the agreements would nonetheless have a long-term impact even on powerful states. The ICC represents a newer style of multilateralism in which the scope of the agreement is universal and the binding character is law-based and anchored in international judicial authority.⁶⁷ The Europeans offered compromises in the ICC treaty: the court’s statutes, framed to meet American concerns about political prosecutions, provide explicit guarantees that jurisdiction lies first with national governments.⁶⁸ This suggests that the gap between the “old” and “new” multilateralism is not inherently unbridgeable.

Political identity and multilateralism

Another source of American multilateralism emerges from the polity itself. The United States has a distinctive self-understanding of its political order, and this has implications for how it thinks about international political order. To be sure, there are multiple political traditions in the United States that reflect divergent and often competing ideas about how the United States should relate to the rest of the world.⁶⁹ These traditions variously counsel isolationism and activism, realism and idealism, aloofness and engagement in the conduct of American foreign affairs. But behind these

political-intellectual traditions are deeper aspects of the American political identity that inform the way the United States seeks to build order in the larger global system. The enlightenment origin of the American founding has given the United States a political identity of self-perceived universal significance and scope.⁷⁰ The republican democratic tradition that enshrines the rule of law reflects an enduring American view that polities—domestic or international—are best organized around rules and principles of order. America's tradition of civic nationalism also reinforces this notion that the rule of law is the source of legitimacy and political inclusion. This tradition provides a background support for a multilateral foreign policy.⁷¹

The basic distinction between civic and ethnic nationalism is useful in locating this feature of the American political tradition. Civic identity is group identity composed of commitments to the nation's political creed. Race, religion, gender, language, and ethnicity are not relevant in defining a citizen's rights and inclusion within the polity. Shared beliefs in the country's principles and values embedded in the rule of law is the organizing basis for political order, and citizens are understood to be equal and rights-bearing individuals. Ethnic nationalism, in contrast, maintains that individual rights and participation within the polity are inherited—based on ethnic or racial or religious ties.⁷²

Civic national identity has several implications for the multilateral orientation of American foreign policy. First, civic identity has tended to encourage the outward projection of U.S. domestic principles of inclusive and rule-based international political organization. The American national identity is not based on ethnic or religious particularism but on a more general set of agreed-upon and normatively appealing principles. Ethnic and religious identities and disputes are pushed downward into civil society and removed from the political arena. When the United States gets involved in political conflicts around the world, it tends to look for the establishment of agreed-upon political principles and rules to guide the rebuilding of order. And when the United States promotes rule-based solutions to problems, it is strengthening the normative and principled basis for the exercise of its own power—and thereby making disparities in power more acceptable.

Because civic nationalism is shared with other Western states, it tends to be a source of cohesion and cooperation. Throughout the industrial democratic world, the dominant form of political identity is based on abstract and juridical rights and responsibilities that coexist with private ethnic and religious associations. Just as warring states and nationalism tend to reinforce each other, so do Western civic identity and cooperative political relations. Political order—domestic and international—is strengthened when there exists a substantial sense of community and shared identity. It matters that the leaders of today's advanced industrial states are not seeking to legitimate their power by making racial or imperialist appeals. Civic nationalism, rooted in shared commitment to democracy and the rule of law, provides a widely embraced identity across most of the American hegemonic order. At the same time, potentially divisive identity conflicts—rooted in antagonistic ethnic, religious, or class divisions—are dampened by being relegated to secondary status within civil society.⁷³ The notion that

the United States participates in a wider Western community of shared values and like-minded states reinforces American multilateralist impulses.⁷⁴

Third, the multicultural character of the American political identity also reinforces internationalist—and ultimately multilateral—foreign policy. Ruggie notes that culture wars continue in the United States between a pluralistic and multicultural identity, and between nativist and parochial alternatives, but that the core identity is still “cosmopolitan liberal”—an identity that tends to support instrumental multilateralism: “[T]he evocative significance of multilateral world order principles—a bias against exclusive bilateralist alliances, the rejection of discriminatory economic blocs, and facilitating means to bridge gaps of ethos, race, and religion—should resonate still for the American public, insofar as they continue to reflect its own sense of national identity.”⁷⁵ U.S. society is increasingly heterogeneous in race, ethnicity, and religion. This tends to reinforce an activist and inclusive foreign policy orientation and a bias in favor of rule-based and multilateral approaches to the conduct of American foreign policy.⁷⁶

To be sure, American leaders can campaign against multilateral treaties and institutions and win votes. But this has been true across the last century, manifest most dramatically in the rejection of the League of Nations treaty in 1919, but also reflected in other defeats, such as the International Trade Organization after World War II. When President George W. Bush went to the United Nations to rally support for his hard-line approach to Iraq, he did not articulate a central role for the world body in promoting international security and peace. He told the General Assembly: “We will work with the U.N. Security Council for the necessary resolutions.” But he also made it clear that “[t]he purposes of the United States should not be doubted. The Security Council resolutions will be enforced . . . or action will be unavoidable.”⁷⁷ In contrast, just 12 years earlier, when the elder President Bush appeared before the General Assembly to press his case for resisting Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, he offered a “vision of a new partnership of nations . . . a partnership based on consultations, cooperation and collective action, especially through international and regional organizations, a partnership united by principle and the rule of law and supported by an equitable sharing of both cost and commitment.”⁷⁸ It would appear that American presidents can articulate quite divergent visions of American foreign policy, each resonating in its own way with ideas and beliefs within the American polity. If this is true, American presidents do have political and intellectual space to shape policy—and they are not captives of a unilateralist-minded public.

Recent public opinion findings confirm this view and actually suggest that the American public is quite willing and eager to conduct foreign policy within multilateral frameworks. In a comprehensive poll of American and European attitudes on international affairs, the German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations found that a clear majority of Americans actually favored joining the European Union in ratifying the Kyoto accord on global warming and the treaty creating the ICC. American public attitudes reveal a general multilateral bent. When given three alternatives about the role of the United States in solving international problems, most Americans (71 percent) said that

the United States should act to solve problems together with other countries, and only 17 percent said that “as the sole remaining superpower the United States should continue to be the preeminent world leader in solving international problems.” There is also high—and increased—support for strengthening the United Nations, participating in UN peacekeeping operations, and using diplomatic methods to combat terrorism. When asked if the United States should or should not take action alone if it does not have the support of allies in responding to international crises, 61 percent said that the United States should not act alone. Only a third of the American public indicated that the United States should act alone.⁷⁹

Conclusion

The rise of unipolarity is not an adequate explanation for recent unilateralism in American foreign policy. Nor is the United States doomed to shed its multilateral orientation. The dominant power position of the United States creates opportunities to go it alone, but the pressures and incentives that shape decisions about multilateral cooperation are quite varied and crosscutting. The sources of multilateralism—which can be traced to system, institutional, and domestic structural locations—still exist and continue to shape and restrain the Bush administration, unilateral inclinations notwithstanding.

Multilateralism can be manifest at the system, ordering, and contract levels of international order. The critical question is not whether the Bush administration is more inclined than previous administrations to reject specific multilateral treaties and agreements (in some instances, it is), but whether the accumulation of these refusals undermines the deeper organizational logic of multilateralism in the Western and global system. At the ordering or foundational level, multilateralism is manifest in what might be termed “indivisible” economic and security relations. The basic organization of the order is multilateral in that it is open and tied together through diffuse reciprocity and cooperative security. But there is little or no evidence that ordering multilateralism is eroding or under attack.⁸⁰

The sources of unilateralism are more specific and contingent. The United States has always been ambivalent about multilateral commitments. Political judgments about the costs of reduced policy autonomy and the benefits of rule-based order are at the heart of this ambivalence. The dominant area of American unilateralism is arms control and the use of force. The Bush administration has brought into office a policy elite that represents the skeptical side of a long-standing debate within the foreign policy community about the merits and limits of arms control. The shift from Cold War arms control to the more uncertain and unwieldy world of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and nonproliferation reinforces these biases. But even in the area of WMD proliferation, the United States has incentives to develop multilateral mechanisms to pursue sanctions, inspections, and the use of force.

Beyond these conclusions, three questions remain in the debate over the future of multilateralism. First, what precisely are the costs of unilateralism? The unilateralists in the Bush administration act under the assumption that they are minimal. If

aggrieved states are not able to take action against the United States—such action ultimately would entail the threat of some sort of counterhegemonic coalition—then the costs of unilateralism will never truly threaten the American global position. This is particularly true in the area of world politics that has been historically the most immune to binding multilateral rules and institutions—namely, arms control and the use of force. But in areas such as trade, other countries can impose tangible costs on the United States. This helps explain why the United States has been more multilaterally forthcoming in trade than in other areas. The economic gains that flow from the coordination of economic relations also reinforce multilateralism. Additionally, a less tangible cost of unilateralism is when such foreign policy actions threaten the overall legitimacy of American global position. When the United States exercises its power in ways generally seen around the world as legitimate, its “costs of enforcement” go down. But when legitimacy declines, the United States must engage in more difficult and protracted power struggles with other states. Other states cannot fundamentally challenge the United States, but they can make its life more difficult. Threats to the international legitimacy of the United States can register within the American polity as a violation of its own political identity. The United States wants to act abroad in a way that is consistent with its self-image as a law-abiding, responsible country. How, when, and to what extent the costs of unilateralism matter is an ongoing puzzle.

Second, to what extent does the existing multilateral order reinforce current choices about multilateralism? I have pointed out that the United States created a web of multilateral rules and institutions over the last half century that has taken the shape of a mature political order—and the United States is now embedded in this order. A vast latticework of intergovernmental processes and institutional relationships exists across the advanced industrial democracies. This multilateral complex ultimately serves to reduce the uncertainties and worries that weaker states would otherwise have about operating in a system dominated by a singularly powerful America. But questions linger: How powerful are the effects of this multilateral complex on American foreign policy? Does the “pulling and hauling” that is set in motion by this multilateral order actually discipline American power and its unilateral temptations?

Third, how significant is the challenge of the “new multilateralism” to the older-style postwar multilateralism that the United States championed? I argue in this paper that Washington’s resistance to new multilateral agreements has something to do with the new *type* of multilateralism. The older multilateralism came with escape clauses, veto rights, and weighted voting mechanisms that allowed the United States and other major states to protect their interests and gave room for maneuvering. The new multilateralism is more legally binding in character. The ICC is perhaps the best example. But how much “new multilateralism” is really out there? Is this a clash that is primarily centered on the ICC but not on the wider range of policy areas, or is it a more basic and serious emerging divide? How wide is the gap? Some experts argue that the exceptions and protections built into the Rome Treaty of the ICC did

move in the direction of the old multilateral safeguards. Moreover, although the WTO manifests “new multilateralism” characteristics, the United States has been one of its major champions. So it is not clear how wide the divide is between old and new multilateralism or even if the conflict over these types of multilateralism pits the United States against the rest of the world. We need to know more about the sources of the new multilateralism. Is it a result of functional adjustments to more complex socioeconomic relations—as the WTO would seem to suggest—or a result of new issues, such as human rights and norms of justice, that make escape clauses and exceptions more difficult to countenance?

What is certain is that deep forces and incentives keep the United States on a multilateral path—rooted in considerations of economic interest, power management, and political tradition. To ignore these pressures and incentives would entail a revolution in American foreign policy that even the most hard-line unilateralist in Washington today does not imagine. The worst unilateral impulses coming out of the Bush administration are so harshly criticized around the world because so many countries have accepted the multilateral vision of international order that the United States has articulated over most of the twentieth century.

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in Balz 2003, A1. This unilateral turn did not begin with the Bush administration. Although the Clinton administration articulated a foreign policy strategy of “assertive multilateralism,” its record was more mixed. In June 1997, the Clinton administration declined to join most of the world’s countries in signing the Ottawa Convention on the Banning of Land Mines. In 1999 the Senate rejected the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, ignoring warnings from experts that such a move would weaken global nonproliferation norms, and it signaled its opposition to the Kyoto Protocol and the ICC. The Clinton administration did not await UN Security Council approval for its 1998 bombing of Iraq, nor did it seek such approval in the American-led North Atlantic Treaty Organization bombing campaign against Serbia in the spring of 1999. For an excellent summary of recent multilateral agreements rejected by the United States, see Patrick 2002.
- 2 Schlesinger 2000.
- 3 Krauthammer 2001, A29.
- 4 Purdum 2002, 1.
- 5 This definition of multilateralism draws on Keohane 1990 and Ruggie 1993. See also Van Oudenaren 2003.
- 6 Bull 1977. The norm of sovereign equality is what Philpott 2001 calls the “side by side” principle. See also Reus-Smit 1997.
- 7 Ruggie 1993, 12.
- 8 Keohane 1990, 731.
- 9 This distinction points to what might be called informal manifestations of multilateralism. The United States has at least four routes to take action: (1) it can go it alone, without consulting others; (2) it can consult others, but then go it alone; (3) it can consult and take action with others, not on the basis of agreed-upon rules and principles that define the terms of its relationship with those others, but rather on the basis of the current situation’s needs; or (4) it can take action with others, on the basis of agreed-upon rules and principles. The first route is clearly unilateral. The second and third can be coded as multilateral, even though action is not taken in accord with formal multilateral rules and institutions. In areas such as the use of force, where formal and binding multilateral rules and principles are least evident, the difference between unilateral and multilateral action will likely fall between the first route and the second and

- third. For a discussion of formal and informal institutions, see Koromenos et al. 2001.
- 10 Schroeder 1994; Elrod 1976.
 - 11 Goldstein et al. 2001.
 - 12 This is the story told by Crozier 1964 about politics within large-scale organizations. Each individual within a complex organizational hierarchy is continually engaged in a dual struggle: to tie his colleagues to precise rule-based behavior, thereby creating a more stable and certain environment in which to operate, and to retain as much autonomy and discretion as possible for himself.
 - 13 Fearon 1997.
 - 14 I sketch this logic in Ikenberry 2003.
 - 15 On the way in which NATO multilateralism restrained American exercise of power, see Weber 1993.
 - 16 For discussions of America's divergent postwar institutional strategies in Europe and East Asia, see Grieco 1997 and Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002.
 - 17 Katzenstein 1997, 37.
 - 18 This is emphasized by Leffler 1992 and Pollard 1985.
 - 19 Ruggie 1993.
 - 20 Keohane 1986.
 - 21 National Intelligence Council 2000.
 - 22 State Department data, reported in Patrick 2002.
 - 23 The rise in bilateral treaties reflects a post-Cold War surge in tax, investment, and extradition agreements with countries that previously were part of the Soviet bloc. Multilateral treaties—which most often deal with human rights protections, international organizations, and environmental protections—tend to be more regulatory and politically contested. Treaties submitted to the Senate have increasingly been passed with reservations, understandings, and conditions. This shows that the United States has more reservations about multilateral commitments, but it provides a way for the country to join international agreements that it does not fully agree with and that it might not otherwise join. See Schocken and Caron 2001.
 - 24 Since 1945 the U.S. executive has submitted 958 bilateral or multilateral treaties to the Senate. Of these treaties, 505 are bilateral and 453 are multilateral. These do not include executive agreements, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement and other multilateral trade agreements. There have been approximately 11,000 executive agreements signed during the postwar period. (Interestingly, the only complete record of these executive agreements is contained on green index cards at the State Department, presided over by an elderly official who appears to be the only person who knows where each is located.)
 - 25 Boot 2002, A29.
 - 26 The classic statement of structural realism is Waltz 1979. The legal scholar Lassa Oppenheim argued that a balance of power among states is “an indispensable condition of the very existence of international law. . . . If the Powers cannot keep one another in check, no rules of law will have force, since an overwhelming State will naturally try to act according to discretion and disobey the law.” Oppenheim, 1912, 193.
 - 27 Economic comparisons calculated from Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development statistics (July 1999 Web edition). Gross national product measures are figured at 1990 prices and exchange rates. For military capacity, see International Institute for Strategic Studies 1999.
 - 28 The best description of American unipolarity is Wohlforth 1999.
 - 29 Realists differ on the uses and importance of multilateral institutions. See Schweller and Priess 1997 and Jervis 1999.
 - 30 Kagan 2002, 4.
 - 31 Odell 2000.
 - 32 Victor 2001.
 - 33 Waltz 2000, 24.
 - 34 Zakaria 2002, 76.
 - 35 Brooks and Wohlforth 2002 argue that unipolar power enables the United States to act unilaterally, but they go on to say that this does not mean that unilateralism is an optimal strategy for unipolar America. Indeed, unipolarity gives the United States the ability to think about long-term security, for which they argue a multilateral—or “benevolent”—approach is best.
 - 36 In this regard, there is a tension in the neorealist account of unipolarity. Those who argue that unilateralism is unavoidable because of overwhelming American power do so because in the absence of an effective countervailing coalition, there is no “restraint” on U.S. foreign policy. But neorealist mechanisms of selection and competition are premised upon the need for the state to worry about relative power. If the United States does not need to care about relative power, the structural effects of anarchy are actually quite unimportant to American behavior. This suggests that domestic, ideological, and other factors are stronger determinants of U.S. foreign policy in the current era.
 - 37 As one journalist reports, “The Bush administration is stocked with skeptics of international treaties and multilateral organizations.” Kessler 2002, A1.
 - 38 This split in American strategic thinking about the efficacy of arms control as it broke into the open over the failed SALT II treaty during the Carter and Reagan years is detailed in Graham 2002.
 - 39 Fidler 2001, A6.
 - 40 On the logic of cooperation in U.S.-Soviet arms-control negotiations, see Weber 1992.
 - 41 The Bush administration's rejection of the Convention on Trade in Light Arms appears to be a more straightforward deferral to the National Rifle Association.
 - 42 Because of America's unrivaled military power, it is also true that the costs of cheating by other states have been reduced. For this reason, the explanation of shifting costs and benefits is inadequate without an appreciation of how elite ideologies and policy ideas color such calculations.

- 43 For example, Undersecretary of State John Bolton, prior to joining the administration, argued that a great struggle was unfolding between what he calls Americanists and globalists. Globalists are depicted as elite activist groups who seek to strengthen “global governance” through a widening net of agreements on environment, human rights, labor, health, and political-military affairs and whose not-so-hidden agenda is to enmesh the United States in international laws and institutions that rob the country of its sovereignty. Americanists, according to Bolton, have finally awoken and are now seizing back the country’s control over its own destiny. This is a view that evinces not just a healthy skepticism of multilateral rules and agreements, but sees American resistance to the encroachment of those rules and agreements as a patriotic duty. Bolton 2000.
- 44 For a general characterization of this unilateral—or neo-imperial—thinking, see Ikenberry 2002. Its grand strategic agenda is discussed in Baker 2003 and Ricks 2001.
- 45 Snyder 1991; Kennedy 1987; Kupchan 1994.
- 46 Snyder 2003.
- 47 Nye 2002.
- 48 For a discussion of international regime creation that distinguishes between imposed and consensual processes, see Young 1991.
- 49 Chinkin 2000; Reisman 2000.
- 50 Indeed, some commentators worry precisely that the American position will lead to a new principle about the use of force. Henry Kissinger said to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “It cannot be either the American national interest or the world’s interest to develop principles that grant every nation an unfettered right of pre-emption against its own definition of threats to its security.” Quoted in Harding 2002, 10.
- 51 Keohane 1990, 742.
- 52 Keohane 1984.
- 53 Keohane 1990.
- 54 There is an expanding line of research exploring the logic of credible commitment. For an important statement of this problem, see North and Weingast 1989.
- 55 Vernon 1995; Jackson 1994; Winham 1998.
- 56 This argument is developed in Ikenberry 2001.
- 57 The larger literature on hegemonic stability theory argues that the presence of a single powerful state is conducive to multilateral regime creation. The hegemonic state—by virtue of its power—is able to act on its long-term interests rather than struggle over short-term distributional gains. This allows it to identify its own national interest with the openness and stability of the larger global system. The classic statement of this thesis is Gilpin 1981. In Keohane’s formulation, the theory holds that “hegemonic structures of power, dominated by a single country, are most conducive to the development of strong international regimes whose rules are relatively precise and well obeyed.” Such states have the capacity to maintain regimes that they favor through the use of coercion or positive sanctions. The hegemonic state gains the ability to shape and dominate the international order, while providing a flow of benefits to smaller states that is sufficient to persuade them to acquiesce. See Keohane 1980, 132.
- 58 For a discussion of constitutional logic and international relations, see Ikenberry 1998.
- 59 For sophisticated arguments along these lines, see Martin 1993 and Lake 1999.
- 60 Ikenberry 2001, chapter 3.
- 61 Zoellick 1999, 5.
- 62 Farley and McManus 2002, A1.
- 63 A new investigative report by Bob Woodward shows in detail how the multilateral approach to Iraq won out in administration policy circles. See Woodward 2002.
- 64 Wright and McManus 2002; Preston 2002; Peel 2002.
- 65 National Security Council 2002.
- 66 Schense and Washburn 2001.
- 67 The ICC is treaty-based, and its jurisdiction is only over citizens/subjects of signatory parties and citizens/subjects of nonstate signatories that commit crimes on the territory of signatory parties. It aims to universalize this jurisdiction.
- 68 Stephens 2002.
- 69 See surveys in McDougall 1997 and Mead 2001.
- 70 Huntington 1983.
- 71 There are, of course, political ideas and traditions in the American experience that support unilateral and isolationist policies, which flourished from the founding well into the 1930s and still exist today. But these alternatives to multilateralism, as Legro 2000 argues, were discredited in the face of World Wars I and II and opened the way to internationalist and multilateral ideas and strategies. These multilateral ideas and strategies, in turn, are given support by the deeper American rule of law and civic national traditions.
- 72 This distinction is made by Smith 1986.
- 73 Deudney and Ikenberry 1999.
- 74 While Woodrow Wilson sought to justify American postwar internationalism on the basis of American exceptionalism and a duty to lead the world to democratic salvation, advocates of internationalism after World War II emphasized that the United States belonged to a community of Western democracies that implied multilateral duties and loyalties; see Stephanson 1995. For the claim that this wider Western community has reinforced American internationalism and multilateral commitments, see Risse-Kappen 1995 and 1996; Hampton 1996; Nau 2002. This insight about Western community has also been used to explain the rise of NATO in the Atlantic and the absence of a similar postwar multilateral security organization in East Asia; see Hemmer and Katzenstein 2002.
- 75 Ruggie 1996, 170.
- 76 On the ways in which American ethnic groups encourage foreign policy activism, see Smith 2000.
- 77 Bush 2001, 4.
- 78 Bush 1990, 3.
- 79 Chicago Council and German Marshall Fund 2002, 27.

80 In this sense, for the system to become less multilateral, there would need to be evidence that economic and security ties were becoming more divisible: an erosion of ties

in the direction of separate regional spheres, a decline in mutually agreed-upon rules and principles of order, and a lessening of open economic and societal interaction.