

unilateralism

is it necessarily bad?

by Jeffrey Fields

A

Council on Foreign Relations report finds that the rest of the world sees the U.S. government as "arrogant, self-indulgent, hypocritical, inattentive, and unwilling or unable to engage in cross-cultural dialogue." The report found negative stereotypes about the United States pervasive not only in the Middle East but in Europe, Latin America, and Asia as well. The term *du jour* when speaking of American insolence is *unilateral*; the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, unilaterally seeks to topple the Iraqi regime, and unilaterally "unsigned" the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court (ICC). Other nations see unilateral action on the part of the United States as a sign that the United States is interested in integrating itself into a global community except when it serves its own interests. It signals that the United States wants to pontificate and at the same time play by its own rules.

Unilateralism in and of itself isn't necessarily bad. The United States, an unparalleled economic and military power, must sometimes use its status to take action on its own and engage amidst difficult circumstances, often when others can't or are unwilling. When Yugoslavia disintegrated in the early 1990s and a morally empowered Europe realized it didn't have the military might to intervene to stop Serb atrocities, the United States didn't wait for consensus to emerge about what action should be taken. First, George Bush the elder in 1992 and then Bill Clinton in 1993 scoffed at the "no dog in this fight" critics and went at it alone to prevent a greater number of deaths from occurring. The United States immediately sent ground troops to seize Sarajevo, protect Bosnian Muslims, and pound Serb artillery positions with airstrikes. Despite being a country most Americans couldn't place on a map, Sierra Leone captured the attention of U.S. policymakers who were appalled at the brutality of rebels killing and maiming thousands of civilians in the mid-1990s. The United States independently eased tensions by deploying a sizeable peacekeeping force and eventually brokered a peace deal. This "unilateral" action saved perhaps 50,000 lives.

In April 1994 the United States learned of the murder of ten Belgian peacekeepers in Rwanda and feared the worst when the

Belgian government suggested that the United Nations send peacekeepers. The United States threw caution to the winds, sniffed at the other Western powers that were busy using their troops to evacuate their own nationals, and rapidly mobilized a force sufficient to prevent a mass killing of Tutsis. So what if Rwanda was a sovereign nation. There was a moral imperative at play, and there was no time to entertain a debate of U.S. unilateralism or the United States playing the global gendarme. Of course it didn't really happen this way in any of these cases. Sarajevo was under siege for almost four years, tens of thousands of civilians had died, and a quarter of the population was displaced in Sierra Leone's ten-year civil war. Also, 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were slaughtered in Rwanda while U.S. officials debated use of the word genocide. But this demonstrates that it isn't unilateral action that is inherently selfish, self-serving, or arrogant. What makes it difficult to defend some unilateral American policies is their tendency toward slippery-slope absurdity and illogic.

The ICC is one example. The Bush administration and the U.S. Congress worked itself into a frenzy as the date neared for the Rome statute to enter into force. On May 6, 2002, the administration, in a terse letter, notified UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan that the United States had no intention of becoming a party to the ICC and was under no legal obligations from the treaty signed by Bill Clinton and established in December 2000. Congress rushed to pass legislation that would prevent any cooperation with the court lest any American service members be dragged off to the Hague to stand trial. House legislation that was worked into an appropriations bill authorized the president to use force to rescue any American held by the ICC, leading some amazed officials in the Netherlands to dub the legislation the "Hague Invasion Act."

Congress is fearful that a runaway court will entertain from America haters frivolous accusations of war crimes and genocide committed by U.S. troops. The Bush administration threatened to withdraw U.S. peacekeepers from Afghanistan and Bosnia unless they received blanket immunity from prosecution by the new court. And while the administration was quick to leak word that British peacekeepers had already secured such an arrangement, it wasn't as eager to note that the Brits had ratified the ICC treaty. What is absurd is the irrational fear that U.S. soldiers would face any real danger from the court. The treaty establishing the court clearly indicates that its mandate is to investigate and try cases of the most serious nature. These include war crimes and crimes against humanity and genocide only in cases when a state is unwilling or unable to investigate or prosecute the case itself. Critics of the court either ignore this provision or brush it aside as an insufficient protection. If the United States had a legitimate concern with the mandate of the court, its proponents suggest that it should endorse the court in principle, ratify it, and work from the inside to ensure that its concerns are addressed.

The unilateralist approach sends the wrong message, especially when it comes from the world's only superpower.

The arguments for such an approach are egregious and don't really hold up to closer inspection. The administration's abandonment of the ABM treaty demonstrates the same faulty logic; it wants to build a missile defense system to protect the United States from missiles launched from rogue states. But if the United States truly faced a threat with the potential to devastate parts of its territory, who would balk if it walked away from this "relic of the Cold War" in the name of self-preservation? Would that be considered unilateralism in the strictest sense? Perhaps. But it would be an attempt to protect the United States from a verifiable threat.

The problem is that the threat doesn't exist, at least not in the way it is presented by proponents of abrogating the ABM treaty. There are only two countries which possess missiles with a range capable of reaching the continental United States, Russia and China. Not North Korea, not Iran, not Iraq (Bush's original axis of evil). Russia and China have no interest in lobbing inter-continental ballistic missiles this way. North Korea is the closest to having a missile that might be able to strike the United States, but currently it can't. And it's not as simple—as advocates of missile defense would have you believe—to transform a medium- or long-range missile into an ICBM and put a nuclear warhead on it, which is essential to really threaten the United States.

Additionally, North Korea is still adhering to a self-imposed moratorium on flight-testing any missiles until 2003, which was inherited from the Clinton administration's engagement policy, and this is more than enough time for the Bush administration to straighten out its nonexistent North Korea policy. Again, if we are to believe the rhetoric, the United States pursues policies that appear isolationist and unilateral because of its clear vision and its imperative to protect its citizens. But many of those policies are formulated out of paranoia, unwillingness to make truly difficult concessions to the world community, and surrender to domestic conservative interests. However, the United States often attempts to disguise its true motives and concerns by making arguments that don't stand up to scrutiny. The United States should act independently when no one else can or will act in circumstances so serious that the consequences of inaction are profound—as in the example of the Balkans and Rwanda. But the slight of hand currently employed depends on no one asking tough, logical questions about why certain policies are necessary. This only breeds resentment and anti-American attitudes. No one should blame the world's only superpower for acting when others can't or won't.

The United States should set an example by using its power to be a truly global player, acting unilaterally to preserve its strategic interests only when all other options fail. It is difficult, however, to make the case that any of those criteria are met when examining a number of U.S. policies that affect the international community. If the United States cares about its image abroad (as it apparently does), it must take a hard look at its policies rather than simply at how to better explain them. □

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