Unilateralism and ‘America First’?
President George W. Bush’s Foreign Policy

JOHN DUMBRELL

It is reasonable to suggest that, before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, no US President since Ronald Reagan (in his first term) was more unpopular in Europe than George W. Bush. In some respects, this was a matter of rhetoric and political style. Both Reagan and the younger Bush exhibited a home-grown style of presentation—of both policy and self—which travelled poorly. Both Reagan and George W. were and are regarded in Europe as extremely inexperienced in foreign policy, as concerned primarily to address themselves to domestic audiences; even, in some sense, as culturally introverted.

Above and beyond questions of style and inexperience, Bush’s main sin in European eyes—and here again there are parallels with Reagan—has been his failure to work with allies. This article considers, initially, the evidence for seeing the new Bush administration as engaged in a policy of irresponsible, ‘America First’ unilateralism: a policy approach characterised (in the phrase used by Ivo Daalder) by opponents as ‘all take, no give’.1 Having reviewed the prima facie case for Bush’s unilateralism, the article will relate these policies to the inheritance from President Clinton, to the complex circumstances surrounding key policy areas, and to arguments for and against American unilateralism. The article concludes with an assessment of the effect of the 11 September attacks on the trajectory of Bush’s foreign policy and on European attitudes to it.

Bush’s unilateralism

Prima facie evidence of the pre-11 September Bush administration’s immersion in irresponsible unilateralism is not difficult to marshal. The two most controversial actions, at least in European eyes, were the rejection of the Kyoto Protocol on global warming and the commitment to National Missile Defense (including a more or less explicit threat unilaterally to cancel the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, if Russia refused to agree to NMD deployment).

Following the Kyoto Protocol withdrawal, European critics pointed out that the US currently emits about one-third of the world’s greenhouse gases. Projections made in mid-2001 indicated that US emissions would rise by 23 per cent by 2010. America’s refusal to accept emission reduction limits appeared to confirm the irresponsibly unilateral thrust of post-Clinton American foreign policy. As for NMD, the ‘son of Star Wars’ project for laser-based anti-missile defence, the US was widely seen in Europe as about to provoke a new global arms race in pursuit of a technologically dubious dream of national invulnerability. At the extreme, Bush was accused of developing a new ‘counterforce’ strategy, with the US freeing itself to the possibility of waging unilateral nuclear war, possibly on China.

During the early part of 2001, the Bush administration repudiated or declined to support a whole series of international agreements. It opposed enforcement of the 1972 Biological Weapons Treaty, an international pact on small arms, the...
setting up of the International Criminal Court, and any prospect of reviving the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (already defeated in a US Senate ratification vote of 1999). Negotiations over North Korea’s nuclear programme were terminated. The administration cut funds for Russia’s nuclear weapons conversion programme (the Nunn–Lugar programme). It substituted a notion of ‘strategic competition’ with China for Clinton’s concept of ‘strategic partnership’. A mass expulsion of putative Russian spies from the US evoked memories of the Cold War; indeed, regarding Russia more generally, the administration’s policy seemed to be one of continuing marginalisation, even humiliation, of the old enemy. Washington made it clear, for example, that Moscow should have no right of veto over the entry into NATO of the Baltic states. Unilateral declaration, rather than consultative consensus, seemed the order of the day. Where American interests were seen as liable to be compromised, or bogged down in intractable regional complexity, the preference seemed to be for disengagement. In the Middle East, Yasser Arafat was seen as having missed his opportunity with the failure of the 2000 Barak–Clinton proposals. In the Middle East, as in Northern Ireland, the frenetic diplomatic activism of the Clinton era seemed to be giving way to disengaged scepticism about America’s role as international peacemaker. The early bombing of Baghdad indicated a determination to use military power to protect US security.

Personalities, processes and the Clinton legacy

Very early in the history of the new administration, the press developed an image of two camps: one ‘America First’ and unilateralist, the other more inclined to multilateralism and to international cooperation. The three leading figures in the ‘Americanist’ camp were held to be Donald Rumsfeld, Defense Secretary, who had also occupied that role in the Ford administration; Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Defense Secretary and Under Secretary of Defense in the George Bush senior administration; and John Bolton, Under Secretary for Arms Control at the State Department, and a figure close to Republican Senator (and until June 2001 chair of the Foreign Relations Committee) Jesse Helms. Rumsfeld rapidly made huge waves at the Pentagon as a champion of the ‘revolution in military affairs’ and advocate of ‘transformational’ mobile weaponry. The multilateralist camp appeared to centre on Secretary of State Colin Powell, whose allies included Paula Dobriansky at the State Department and Stephen Hadley, Deputy National Security Adviser, at the White House. Richard Haass, initially appointed head of policy planning at the State Department, had been a strong proponent of multilateralism under Bush senior and, as a foreign policy academic, had strenuously opposed the unilateral imposition of sanctions on ‘rogue states’.

Powell was widely reported as suffering major bureaucratic and policy defeats: over plans to withdraw US troops from Sinai peacekeeping, over NMD and Kyoto, over proposals to end the American training of African peacekeepers, and over the breaking off of negotiations with North Korea. Policy outcomes seemed to depend on the stance taken by the two central figures (besides G. W. Bush himself) in the foreign policy team: National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Vice-President Richard Cheney. Rice was reported as giving foreign policy seminars to the President. She was early on identified as leading policy towards Russia, as strongly backing NMD and as evincing extreme scepticism about military intervention for humanitarian ends. Cheney’s obvious lack of conventional political ambition—along with his considerable foreign policy experience—

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made him a congenial and compatible partner for the President. Inclined to strongly ‘America First’ positions, but also sometimes unpredictable in his policy stances, Cheney swiftly emerged (despite his major health problems) as the most powerful Vice-President in recent American history.

A few words of caution about these widely advertised intra-administration configurations are in order. Apparently authoritative journalistic pronouncements on personalities and intra-administration disagreements are not always vindicated when documents are eventually released, and historians give their verdict on how various administrations have conducted themselves. Our view of President Lyndon Johnson’s Vietnam War escalation decisions, for example, now differs considerably from what was for many years the accepted journalistic and academic wisdom. The centrality of the Rumsfeld–Powell, unilateralist–multilateralist, axis dominated the foreign policy reporting of the Bush administration, both before and after 11 September. The reality is inevitably more complex. Rumsfeld the ‘Pentagon revolutionary’ does not entirely fit his journalistic image. His early Pentagon budget requests certainly disappointed many conservatives. After 11 September, the administration arguably utilised the Rumsfeld–Powell tensions as a way of finessing messages about American intentions. On the negative side, it should be noted that widespread perception of intra-administration foreign policy divisions emerged very early in the history of the Bush presidency. Even notoriously divided administrations—Carter’s or Reagan’s, for example—did not exhibit their bureaucratic divisions quite so early.

Of course, presidents should be presented with a choice of foreign policy options; most textbooks on the subject proclaim the virtues of ‘multiple advocacy’. What is essential is clear presidential adjudication, and here, unques-

tionably, George W. Bush was hindered by his inexperience. At least, it could be argued, the President had little to protect in the way of personal expert investment or ego in terms of foreign policy. The President’s main personal commitment was to National Missile Defense. Journalists Carl Cannon and Alexis Simendinger argue that Bush, the only MBA to occupy the Oval Office, has the ‘mentality of a successful CEO, meaning he has no difficulty delegating authority and does not see the success of his aides . . . as threatening; rather, he sees them as complementing his authority’.12

Before 11 September, Bush was subjected to a degree of criticism in Congress over issues ranging from Macedonian policy and the campaign indications of eagerness to withdraw US troops from Bosnia, to NMD and the general unilateralist drift of policy. NMD appropriations were cut and attempts made to build a congressional veto over abrogation of the ABM Treaty. The executive–legislative battlefield, of course, was reconfigured—first, with the switch to a Democratic majority (following the shift in party allegiance by Senator Jeffords of Vermont) in the Senate; and, second, with the September terrorist attacks. Congress did not entirely abdicate power after 11 September: congressional war powers were explicitly reserved in the legislation authorising force in the war on terrorism. Joe Biden, Democratic chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, warned the White House of the dangers of America being perceived as a ‘high-tech bully’.3 An administration request for blanket authority to waive sanctions on nations that co-operated in the war on terrorism was rejected. An early attempt to smuggle ‘fast track’ trade negotiating authority into the package of anti-terrorist measures was also initially rebuffed. (The House of Representatives voted to give the President ‘fast track’ authority in early December.) Democrat leaders in both houses generally gave

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strong verbal support to Bush, and received a degree of access to the foreign policy information flow which would have been unthinkable before 11 September. By early March 2002, however, some Democratic criticism of Bush’s general strategy seemed to be emerging—although still at a very muted level.

One effect of the terrorist attacks clearly was an accretion of authority to the presidency and (to the degree to which Bush deferred to the Joint Chiefs in respect of the Afghanistan campaign) to the military. Bush’s authority was further augmented by the ‘rally around the flag’ effect in public opinion. More generally, controversial stances in the administration’s foreign policy were rooted in a US public mood which, at least until 11 September, was unexcited about events abroad. Public opinion during most of 2001 tended to waver between ‘America First’ and co-operativist positions. It tended drastically to exaggerate the degree of US involvement in international peacekeeping and UN-related activities. Even after the New York and Washington attacks, only 55 per cent of poll respondents judged ‘foreign affairs’ as ‘extremely important’. This compared to a figure of 17 per cent in January 2001.4

On the question of putative discontinuity with the Clinton administration, it should be recognised that US foreign policy had already moved in a unilateralist direction before January 2001. The 1995 Republican takeover of Congress had already altered the administration’s stance, as had the stark emergence and consolidation of America’s apparently unchallenged international power. The US was opposed to the setting up of an International Criminal Court until Clinton declared his support shortly before quitting the White House. US action in Kosovo, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan in Clinton’s second term all exuded more than a whiff of unilateralism. Nevertheless, the Bush team deliberately emphasised its differences with the foregoing administration. The new foreign policy was variously described by its proponents as ‘new realist’ (clearly distinguishing, as Clinton supposedly had not, between allies and competitors); as ‘humble’ (not preaching to other nations); and as embodying ‘American internationalism’. Clinton’s policy towards Russia was dismissed as ‘romantic’. In a different vein, however, George W. Bush did continue the Clintonesque rhetoric of democratising political and economic globalisation. Such nuances aside, European opinion was broadly correct in identifying Bill Clinton as a multilateralist who was forced to trim to the winds of Congressional unilateralism, and George W. Bush as actually concurring with Republican congressional foreign policy preferences on offer after 1995. Like Reagan’s anti-Sovietism, George W. Bush’s unilateralism was developed by conservative think-tanks in conscious opposition to the policies of his Democratic predecessor.

Policy complexity

European condemnation of pre-11 September US unilateralism sometimes failed to take due account of the complex political and policy context surrounding key issues. The exemption of China and India, for example, from the Kyoto Protocol made it virtually politically impossible for any US administration to accept it. The Senate had rejected the agreement 95–0 in 1997, and President Clinton had done nothing to resurrect the treaty. On anti-missile defence, as Lawrence Freedman argued in May 2001: ‘There is nothing wrong in asking whether new circumstances permit a reappraisal of defences against long-range ballistic missiles or whether a treaty signed almost three decades ago must remain beyond dispute.’5 Discussions between Presidents Bush and Putin, following the onset of the war on terrorism, suggested that
Russia’s adherence to the 1972 treaty was not absolute. The announcement, on 13 December 2001, of US abrogation of the ABM Treaty was condemned by Putin, but immediately linked by him to hopes for major cuts in international nuclear stockpiles.

More generally, the administration’s stance towards both Russia and China can be defended as attempting to move beyond the Cold War mindset, as much as it can be condemned as narrowly ideological. By late 2001, the US and Russia were clearly moving into a new phase of their post-communist relationship. Anti-missile defence threatens to make China’s small nuclear capability obsolete. Yet US policy towards China retained a large component of pragmatism—in effect, retaining Clinton’s mixture of integration and containment. Despite US arms sales, pressure on Taiwan not to declare independence continued. China entered the World Trade Organisation in November 2001. The April 2001 ‘spy plane’ incident was resolved pragmatically (reportedly following advice from George Bush senior).

Even before the terrorist attacks, disengagement in the Middle East, and indeed in Northern Ireland, was beginning to break down. Administration disagreements surfaced over Israel’s assassination policies. Even before September, the State Department was edging towards a revived commitment to a viable Palestinian state. In late November, Powell even uttered the word ‘Palestine’. The renewed Israeli–Palestinian bloodletting wrongfooted Washington. However, sustained US disengagement seemed unlikely. In Northern Ireland, in the first week of September—following evidence of IRA involvement with Colombian guerrillas—pressure was applied to republicans to commence disarmament.

By mid-2001, some of the more shrill and dogmatic ‘America First’ positions had already been vacated. Condoleezza Rice admitted that the Kyoto affair had been badly mishandled. ‘National Missile Defense’ became ‘Missile’ or ‘Anti-Missile Defense’. Offers were made to share technology with allies. Russian indications of future interest in joining NATO were not rejected out of hand. Negotiations with North Korea were resumed. Troops remained in Bosnia.

**Unilateralism and multilateralism**

European critics of American unilateralism should at least make the effort occasionally to see Europe through American eyes. Michael Kelly noted in the *Washington Post* in June 2001 that ‘not a single EU nation has yet ratified the [Kyoto] accord.’ According to Fareed Zakaria, ‘while European nations criticize America for isolationism, they have become entirely absorbed in their own affairs over the past decade.’ Commenting on a European Union mission to North Korea, Zakaria complained: ‘When we do it, it’s unilateralism, when they do it, it’s diplomacy.’ From this perspective, free-riding Europeans still look to the US for leadership and ultimate security, despite efforts at integrating their own defences. They fail to vote adequate military budgets, and criticise the US for destroying international agreements about which the Europeans themselves are far from enthusiastic. It is a fairly common American view, too, that Europeans increasingly seek to define their own integration in opposition to the US; and indeed, 2001 was a year characterised by considerable transatlantic bad temper. Although by no means entirely unjustified, European opposition to US unilateralism undoubtedly partook of this bad temper.

Unilateralism is unquestionably an option available to a superpower. Arguably, only very powerful and very weak nations have the realistic option of acting unilaterally (the former may feel free to dispense with allies, the latter may have
the luxury of not being taken seriously). Many American rightists see unilateralism as the rational-choice foreign policy of a superpower. Most US presidents, even ones committed to multilateralism, have acted unilaterally on occasion. Jimmy Carter did so when he froze Iranian assets in 1980; George Bush senior when he ordered the invasion of Panama in 1989. (The term ‘unilateralism’ is used here to denote action or policy departures taken without consultation with allies, in pursuance of perceived US national interests. Presidential unilateralism is also characteristically declaratory, with a minimum of consultation with Congress.) Unilateralism, it may be argued, is a predictable function of the post-Cold War unipolar global system.

Some unilateralist arguments are reasonable. Fighting wars with multilateral militaries, for example, rarely makes strategic or tactical sense. The unilateralist case against arms control agreements is not without merit. Many such agreements are inherently unverifiable and unenforceable, arguably more suited to Cold War symbolism than to current geopolitical conditions. The American experience of multilateralist decision-making fora is also frequently one of frustration, delay and exposure to windy, rhetorical gusts of anti-Americanism. Perhaps the time had come in early 2001 to abandon Clinton’s ‘strategic ambiguity’ and to focus clearly on American interests, distinguishing foes from friends?

Europeans should at least make the effort to understand American unilateralism. The US does have particular, order-guaranteeing roles in the global order. ‘America Firsters’ may seek to restrict US international responsibilities, but even they generally recognise that, in the face of destabilising regional disorder, only the US can and will act. Is it realistic to expect the US, a country which in terms of its power and responsibilities is so unlike other nations, to subject itself to multilateralist discipline?

The best answer to this question was provided (in an interview published on 10 September 2001 by Secretary of State Powell himself: ‘You can’t be unilateralist. The world is too complicated.’ The case for multilateralism is very strong. Unilateralism swiftly becomes counterproductive. For example, US abstention from or contempt for UN (sub-Security Council) activities simply further weakens that organisation. Allies, actual and potential, are offended and co-operate to demonstrate their displeasure (as in the expulsion of the US from the UN Human Rights Commission). US insouciance towards international arms control agreements leads to a proliferation in weapons of mass destruction. Anti-American ‘blowback’ gains force. Disengagement from troubled regions brings destabilisation and humanitarian disaster.

Some American rightists have advocated a ‘velvet glove’ unilateralism: a unilateralism cosmeticised so as not to offend allies too gratuitously. A better policy would be to make a clear presumption, as the elder Bush did, in favour of multilateralism. After all, neither unilateralism nor multilateralism is an end in itself; rather, both are modes of power projection. Few ‘unilateralists’ actually wish the US to withdraw from the UN, NATO or the WTO. Policy options should be framed, not least for the sake of effective power projection, in terms of a privileging of multilateral modes. Attention should also be paid to the extent to which security and material interests are bound up with international democracy-promotion, rather than with a narrow philosophy of ‘America First’.

**Conclusion: the war on terrorism**

Most commentators after 11 September foresaw a move by the Bush administration in the direction of multilateralism. The world had come crashing in on the
United States. The case for allies, for intelligence-sharing, for the use of foreign airspace and facilities, and even for proxy fighters (like the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan) seemed overwhelming. The wooing of allies took US diplomats to some perhaps unlikely capitals—Isma-
bad and Ankara among them. Colin Powell remarked in October: ‘Nobody’s
calling us unilateral anymore. That’s kind
of gone away for the time being; we’re so
multilateral it keeps me up 24 hours a day
checking on everybody.’ At a tetchy
press conference on 26 February 2002,
Donald Rumsfeld patiently listed some
thirty-six nations that were helping the
war on terrorism in various ways, from
internal police work to diplomatic co-
operation. In the immediate aftermath
of 11 September, it was also predicted that
global terrorism might even replace the
Soviet threat as the adhesive in the Atlan-
tic alliance. A revived Atlantic alliance
might even become part of a new global
order, built around a new relationship
among the US, Europe, Russia and China.
Like the old Soviet-hater, Ronald Reagan,
in his second term, the younger Bush
appeared to be engaged in a U-turn.
By the early part of 2002, with the
Afghan War apparently largely won and
‘Phase 2’ of the war on terrorism in sight,
it seemed, however, that American uni-
lateralism was sound in wind and limb.
The US, of course, was not exclusively
unilateralist; that was never an option,
and was certainly not one after the 11 Sep-
tember attacks. Rather, the US under
Bush seemed committed to a new mix-
ture of unilateralism and multilateral-
ism—defined and pursued almost
entirely on America’s terms. The sidelin-
ing of NATO during the Afghanistan
conflict, despite that organisation’s
prompt invocation of mutual defence
under Article 5 of its founding treaty,
seemed emblematic. Bush’s presidential
directive, setting up military tribunals to
hear terrorist cases; the controversial
holding of Taleban and al-Qaeda suspects
at Camp X-Ray in Cuba; statements by
Rumsfeld to the effect that any coalition
against terror would not be allowed to
interfere with America’s freedom of
action; the failure to reverse, at least in
any convincing way, earlier policies on
world developmental and environmental
co-operation; the revelation of Wash-
tington’s intention, in any new arms deal
with Moscow, to store rather than scrap
discarded nuclear weapons; all these de-
vellopments excited European accusa-
tions that the US was, in the word of
European Union External Affairs Com-
missioner Chris Patten, on ‘unilateralist
overdrive’. The American establishment
of apparently semi-permanent bases in
central Asia seemed to reflect more a
desire to enhance the security of oil sup-
plies than a move to bring to justice the
perpetrators of the 11 September attacks.
The sense of national purpose engen-
dered by the attacks looked actually to
be strengthening America’s unilateralist
resolve. Moreover, Bush still remained
largely untroubled by internal checks on
his power. His popularity ratings—by
late February 2002, he had achieved ten
out of the fourteen highest ever recorded
by Gallup—were unprecedented.
Especially alarming to European anti-
hegemonists was the January 2002 State
of the Union Address. Consciously echo-
ing not only Reagan’s ‘evil empire’ re-
marks of 1983, but also President Franklin
Roosevelt’s 1941 ‘four freedoms’ speech,
Bush’s address identified an ‘axis of
evil’—Iraq, Iran, North Korea—‘aiming
to threaten the peace of the world’. Here
was an imperial President, apparently
seeking bipartisan sanction for sustained,
US-directed conflict. The editors of New
Republic commented: ‘“Let’s roll” is not
exactly Henry V, but it is the right and
splendid foreign policy.’
To many Europeans, the proposed
defence budget increases—$48 billion by
2003/4—were more alarming than reas-
suring. Some French commentators re-
ferred to a gigantisme militaire. The ‘axis
of evil’ seemed a newly crude and unilateralist version of the old ‘rogue states’ doctrine. What did North Korea really have in common with Iraq? How could military action against Iraq be contemplated without securing the quiet cooperation of Iran? Why had the war on terrorism suddenly become a war on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, involving nations with no clear link to the events of 11 September? The foreign ministers of France and Germany complained of American ‘simplism’ and of being ignored. Colin Powell accused Hubert Védrine of succumbing to a ‘fit of the vapours’. Bush’s imposition of steel import tariffs in March 2002 seemed to many Europeans to exemplify America’s unilateralist arrogance. Clearly, there are a great many Atlantic bridges for Tony Blair to build.

European critics of American unilateralism do have a point. The Bush administration does contain some rather extreme conservative, ‘America First’ ideologues. Will Hutton identifies the influence of conservative thinker Leo Strauss on these contemporary figures, in a doctrine combining ‘patriotism’, unilateralism, the celebration of inequality and the right of a moral elite to rule’. Unilateralism is not, as some ‘America Firsters’ maintain, simply a whingers’ term for responsible American leadership. George W. Bush’s rhetoric of exalted patriotism tends to disbar the frank acknowledgement of American interests—including access to oil supplies. The State of the Union Address also conspicuously failed to allow any obvious role for the United Nations. By contrast, the elder Bush, during the 1990–1 Gulf crisis and war, not only embraced the UN but also made it publicly clear that substantial oil interests were involved in his quarrel with Iraq.

European anti-hegemonists would, however, do well to note two vital points. First, American criticisms of Europe are often telling. The fact that the US defence budget may soon swell to around 40 per cent of world defence outlays may indeed be indicative of American gigantism; but it also reflects the weakness of Europe’s will to self-defence. The Atlantic gap in military technology is massive. Problems of interoperability, as much as American unilateralism, prevented NATO from taking a more active role in the 2001 Afghan conflict. The EU’s response to the 11 September attacks was predictably dire. Its military ambitions were exposed as poorly defined and vacuous. Again, one should try to see both sides of the argument. NATO’s uselessness should not be overstated. NATO airborne warning and control system aircraft, for example, were of use to the Americans. To be fair to the EU, its proposals for a Rapid Reaction Force were received in Washington with a puzzling mixture of contempt and simulated panic. The EU’s new space satellite technology has been opposed by Washington. What is clear is that if integrative Atlantic defence cooperation is to survive, new commitments to it must be made by both Washington and Europe.13

The second point for the attention of European anti-hegemonists is simply that Europe is vulnerable too. Anti-hegemonism easily slides into anti-Americanism, with its familiar combination of envy and condescension. It may even slide into the view that we are as threatened by American power as by international terrorism itself. Any such view is absurd.

Notes

3 The Times, 23 October 2001.