

Unilateralism as 21st Century Threat to International Order

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Abstract

Today, the world is facing more complicated situation than ever. Unilateralism is one of non-traditional threats to the international security other than traditional threat. The U.S. retreating from several international organizations like WHO and UNESCO marks that unilateralism is gradually changing the international world order built since 1945. This report firstly will discuss the theory of unilateralism, then the summary of historical and current U.S. foreign policy due to its key role and influence in world order. Finally, there will be recommendations for foreign policy of great powers, especially the U.S. and predictions on future biggest threat.

Keywords

Unilateralism, security threat, foreign policy.

1. Multilateralism Under Attack

In an anarchic world of international environment, autonomous self-interested states have an incentive to make unconstrained independent decision based on their own interests. States consider every option available to them and make their choices independently in order to maximize their own returns [1].

While there're situations in which individualistic self-interested calculation leads states to prefer joint decision making because independent self-interested behavior can result in undesirable outcomes. In response to the challenges of coordination and collaboration problems through concerted decision making, multilateral institutions are uniquely equipped. They can coordinate among multiple states and can be found in institutional arrangements to define and stabilize the international property rights of states, to manage coordination problems, and to resolve collaboration problems [2]. Thus the multilateralism refers to coordinating relations among three or more states in accordance with certain principles.

Since 1945, America's democratic allies around the world have relied on the United States to champion and defend an open, rules-based international system, grounded in liberal values and multilateralism. However the multilateral order to which the world has become accustomed is being "attacked". U.S. President Donald Trump has repudiated this role and tended to implement unilateral policy. Though as the lynchpin of creating and upholding the multilateral order, America's commitment to multilateralism is a voluntary self-constraint on its own power. This makes considerable concerns over future international order framed around changing U.S. rhetoric and policy under the Trump administration, which shows the trend towards unilateralism to enact American First sentiment, protect nation's interest and defend its leadership in the world.

Before diving into current Trump foreign policy, there will be a review of American historical foreign policy since post cold war era. And there're things we have to rethink about unilateralism as going through the history part. Typically majority of international relations scholars assume that the costs are very high. It will spark or hasten counterbalancing by other

major powers according to the balance-of-power theory. Or it will reduce efficiency gains that can be realized from institutionalized cooperation. Unilateral policy does pose threat to international world. Nevertheless, we need to distinguish unilateral policies whether they're based on procedure or substance. International relations scholars tend to criticize the procedure of unilateral policy, but different unilateral policies have different substances. We cannot simply criticize them regardless of their substances.

2. History of American Foreign Policy

In every historical era, the United States has shown a willingness to act unilaterally—to reject treaties, violate rules, ignore allies, and use military force on its own, and in many cases, the U.S. acts with a unilateral substance while following a multilateral procedure.

2.1. General Understanding

“Why quit our own to stand upon foreign grounds? ... It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” As said by George Washington in his Farewell Address, the U.S. foreign policy has an origin of isolationism, which is a sort of unilateralism. Such isolationistic foreign policy remained dominant until the eruption of WWI and President Wilson came to power. His proposition on foreign policy, Wilsonianism, marks a sharp opposition to isolationism and set the tone of American liberal internationalism [3]. Wilson's advocacy is usually defined multilateral, but the author deems it unilateral based on substance. Some presidents between the two World Wars, including President Hoover, casted doubt on the theory of collective security, and resumed pursuing isolationism.

The demise of isolationism occurred in the interval between WWII and the Cold War, and soon a U.S.-led liberal hegemonic order emerged [4]. Since then, liberal internationalism ascended from a collective security system in which states would cooperate with each other to a mutual protection society, and the U.S. acted as a stronghold of the liberal world.

In the post-cold war world, confronted with the brand new global situation, the Clinton administration carried out a set of multilateral foreign policy, including embracing the NAFTA, which would come to its end in summer 2020.

2.2. Specific Understanding of Different President

The U.S. foreign policy is constantly changing, so taking a good look at recent U.S. presidents should give deeper understanding of the role played by unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy.

2.2.1. Bush Foreign Policy

Foreign policy, especially the part in the Middle East, of the Bush Administration is strongly affected by neoconservatives. Different from their paleo-counterparts, neoconservatives advocate the promotion of democracy and interventionism in international affairs, both of which are with distinctive unilateral characteristics.

In the 1970s, a vast movement waged by neo-conservatism had risen, and it had exerted influence over public during the following decades, including the election of President Reagan. Although Reagan himself is not a neoconservative, his doctrine encouraged domestic neo-conservatism, giving them chance to gather their strength.

George W. Bush, a presidential nominee defining himself as a “compassionate conservative”, won the 2000 presidential campaign with the help of neoconservatives. After coming to power, Bush pursued a set of strong unilateral foreign policy—He withdrew from the Kyoto Protocol and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, identified the “axis of evil”, and most significantly, rallied the coalition forces to invade Iraq.

Early in the 1990s, concerned about the stability in Iraq, neoconservatives called for a change of regime in that country, and they believed that waging war on Iraq would push the Iraqis to

do so. The September 11 attack testified their concern. The Bush Administration adopted the neoconservative agenda on foreign policy after attack, which caused the decision to invade Iraq and completion of the Bush Doctrine [5]. In neoconservatives' view, the U.S. is too strong to be affected by the logic of balance-of-power, and American leadership is a prerequisite for an orderly and peaceful world [6]. Corresponding to this, the Bush Doctrine emphasizes on keeping overwhelming military power and preemptive use of weapon. In other words, neoconservative theories provided the base of the Bush Doctrine, and Bush's unilateral policies derive from such base.

2.2.2. Obama Foreign Policy

Obama's administration processed a rather complex system of foreign policies. President Obama was elected partially due to his supportive attitude to the multilateralism, and European countries once believed that United States will become more multilateralism in solving the global issues; however, Obama's administration actually failed to process the multilateralism as they supposed to be due to both domestic and international reasons. Domestically, the U.S. citizens were lack of willingness to process multilateralism since they thought it would hurt the fundamental interests of U.S. citizens. And the lack of great power existence decreased presidents' authority in the congress so domestic interest groups along with the congress and public opinions stopped president Obama and his administrations to process multilateralism. Internationally, other states weren't rely on America so they didn't want to have hegemonic prerogatives, which is unattractive to the United States because this might constrain United States' actions in international order; Moreover, rival like China wanted to take the leadership, which might threat liberal world order proposed by U.S.

The reasons listed above forced president Obama and his government to become unable to satisfy the expectations of those multilateralists. As a result, U.S. allies in Europe became disappointed. Once they thought U.S. choosing multilateralism means they would have more discussion on solving those global issues, however they actually found that America decided what to do in the global affairs without discussion with their Europe allies. In conclusion, though said to be multilateralism, U.S. foreign policy tended towards unilateral during Obama administration.

3. Future impacts of Unilateralism

None knows exactly what the future will be, but with a look into the present and history, we can make speculation about the future.

3.1. Trump Foreign Policy

Although both Bush and Trump are conservatives, both of them try to withdraw the U.S from the world, and both challenge the liberal international order, Trump behaves much more nationalistically, as he defined himself as a "total nationalist."

With a signature issue of immigration, his foreign policy is focused on securing narrow material gains for the United States [7]. Trump's policy on trade is risky and protectionistic, different from that of Bush, a supporter of free trade. In order to reduce the U.S. trade deficit, he ended the former policy of free trade and replaced it with a set of bilateral, even unilateral trade policies. He imposed a series of tariffs, also known as the Trump tariffs, which led into a trade war between the U.S. and its rival China.

3.2. Responses of Other Powers

Since Trump's behaviors are so unexpected and unprecedented, many great powers around the world are shocked. How would they respond to the unilateral foreign policy of the U.S.?

3.2.1. Rival'S Response

As the largest rival of U.S., China recently proposes a neo-authoritarian world which means authorizations controls the world, trying to obtain a more peaceful world through limiting the liberality of the citizens. This is totally against the liberal world order supported by the America. The Trump administration will likely believe more than ever that the world is safe only under its leadership and carry out a series of more unilateral actions. This will make America's already unilateral foreign policies implemented by Trump go a step further. As a result, China will likely retaliate, which in turn makes U.S. become more unilateralism. This interaction between two powers will form a vicious spiral. In the future they might compete for the world leadership, their own power security and economic stability as well.

3.2.2. Allies' Response

Given President Trump's doubt towards the reliability of U.S. alliance commitments and unpredictability of its policy implementation, it poses a unique and difficult challenge for Washington's democratic allies because of Trump's "America First" foreign policy. Its Asian allies and other nations maintained alliances with Washington because of its role as leader of liberal international order, which ensured both the security and prosperity of its allies. Now that leadership is in jeopardy, some of them would begin hedging their bets between the United States and the most relevant regional power, like China in Asia.

In Asia, if U.S. continues to withhold security guarantees unless allies pay more for their own defense, then hedging against U.S. unreliability will change the regional security order. Japan and South Korea might seek to create some sort of regional security organization in which both the United States and China would be members but in which neither would dominate [7]. Moreover, they may distance themselves from Washington and acquiesce in organizing the region based on China's security and economic preferences.

As for NATO, there are major divisions between it and the United States about the alliance's strategy now. Trump believes that United States has decreasingly shared interests with its allies and European leaders have little reason to see their national interests as aligned with those of the United States. Without joint interests, they have no common challenges to direct their increased spending. NATO members would hedge in response to this weaker tie. It's possible that they will likely increase their defense spending and security cooperation internally and become a new balancer between the United States and Russia.

4. Recommendations for US

Firstly, for leadership and rule-maker competition, U.S. needs to correctly assess the risk presented by China, taking the strong power and vulnerabilities of China into account, and build up common understanding about geo-strategic environment. Secondly for U.S interests' competition with China, U.S needs new strategies and tools to influence the way China pursue its own interest, so each side can protect their own interests. Finally for the system and ideology clash, U.S. needs to find a new equilibrium with China.

For allies, alliances cannot be simply valued by dollars and cents since they're not mercenaries. Trump inaccurately described them as free rider ignoring the contributions of its allies. They can magnify U.S. power, extend American influence and form the backbone of global security. The Trump administration should incrementally demand a more moderate increasing in defense spending rather than asking for unrealistic massive increases to secure regional peace.

5. Conclusion

This article explains the theory of unilateralism at first, and after a summary of historical and current U.S. foreign policy, there're recommendations on U.S. foreign policy. The hegemonic

power is enacting unilateral foreign policy under president Trump regardless of its related costs. As the report mentioned before, though it's necessary to distinguish the procedure and substance of unilateral policies, the costs of it are still very high. It will spark or hasten counterbalancing by other major powers. Cooperation under multilateral institutions is a typical way to address geopolitical challenges, through which the great power conflict can be mitigated. Since now it's under attack and the shift towards competition, the emerging unilateralism does pose a big threat to future international security. As U.S. going farther in unilateralism, China stands as a counterbalancing power and the competition between two countries gets fiercer; many traditional U.S. allies still supporting multilateralism will probably adopt hedging strategy and they'll either form a cooperation internally becoming a new counterbalancing power or stand along with China. The biggest threat to international security is what unilateralism brings--increasing frictions between powers and its unpredictability of the future 21st century power distribution--who is leading, who are allies, and who will end up the winners and losers.

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