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## UNILATERALISM, POSSIBLY UNAVOIDABLE

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### The Almost Conventional Wisdom

The conventional academic interpretation of the Bush administration's foreign policy runs as follows: The administration has engaged in unilateral policies that are ultimately self-defeating. Before 9-11 the administration dissed the Kyoto Accord without offering an alternative and rejected and then unsigned the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court even though this precluded the United States from participating in ongoing discussions that would resolve critical open questions like defining the crime of aggression. And, most famously, the administration's National Security Strategy, argued that the United States ought to follow a strategy designed to prevent any other state from challenging American primacy and asserted that the United States had the right to take preemptive action against rogue states and terrorists.<sup>1</sup> (Granted there were many other sections of the document that fully endorsed multilateral strategies where they were consistent with the interests of the United States.)

The administration's strategy is regarded as not only aberrant but also wrong headed.

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1. United States, The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States* (September 2002), p. 15.

Some critics base this judgment on a constructivist assessment of the importance of international law and institutions. Even if multilateral commitment are initially aspirational they can over the long and medium term alter the behavior of states. Certainly, this is a view held by many in Europe and validated by the experience of European integration since the second world war. (How else could one explain the enthusiasm for the Kyoto Protocol which, if implemented, would have had very negative consequences for economic performance in a number of major states.)

A second critique, and a more compelling one, is that the United States cannot realize its own goals by pursuing a unilateral strategy. John Ikenberry has forcefully argued that any hegemon that hopes to establish a durable set of regimes must tie its own hands.<sup>2</sup> Unless the dominant power is willing to constrain itself, other states will not agree to international institutions that are pareto improving. By and large during the Cold War and the 1990s, the United States acted as a good neo-liberal should even though most decision makers could not have provided an adequate definition of a pareto improving Nash equilibrium even if they kept creating them.

Critics of the administration's policies accept that transnational terrorism coupled with weapons of mass destruction is the most important threat to the security of the United States, and the west more generally. They assert, however, that terrorism can only be combated with a multilateral strategy. There must be multilateral cooperation among police forces, joint efforts to obstruct terrorist financing, and international legitimacy (and money and personnel) for regime building in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries whose past policies have created conditions that spawn terrorists. The Bush administration's unilateralism is compromising the national

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2. John Ikenberry, *After Victory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

security of the United States; it is self defeating on its own terms.

### How Big is the Win Set?

The conventional critique of the Administration's foreign policy ignores the possibility that for some critical issues, perhaps the most critical issues, the multilateral win set may be empty. In some cases the optimal policy for the United States with regard to limiting the likelihood of attacks from terrorists or rogue states is to engage in military action. Military action is not, however, the optimal policy for other states. The United States is the most likely target of terrorism and a possible target of rogue states (e.g. North Korea) and the use of force can, although will not necessarily, reduce that risk. Our knowledge of the effect of military actions on terror is very very far from perfect. While military action could have a positive impact by, for instance, denying terrorists the use of a safe haven as was the case in Afghanistan, it could also have a negative one: terrorism might increase; innocents could be killed; resentment toward the United States could grow; cooperation with other states could be undermined. Because the United States is the most likely target of terrorism these risks are worth taking; that is, taking the option of unilateral military action has a higher expected utility for the United States than pursuing a multilateral path that would preclude the use of force. For other states, the expected utility of American unilateral use of force is negative, given that they were less likely to be the target of terrorist attacks in the first place, and that American actions may exacerbate terrorism, they would be better off ex ante if the use of force were only pursued in a multilateral context; i.e. if they were in a position to veto American initiatives.

A similar logic can arise with respect to the actions of rogue states involving either the sale of weapons of mass destruction to a terrorist organization or even the use of such weapons

by a rogue state against the United States. With regard to North Korea there is an obvious multilateral strategy which is now being pursued by the American administration. China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States all have an interest in denuclearizing North Korea. China is in the best position to pressure the North Koreans. If a multilateral strategy is successful, then all four countries gain.

Things could, however, also go awry. American relations with South Korea are now extremely strained. Many South Korean observers attribute this tension to the unilateralism of the Bush administration and expect that under a different president relations would be more congenial. This assessment, which emphasizes political choice as opposed to structural constraints, ignores fundamental differences in the security concerns of the United States and South Korea. The Sunshine Policy was a key aspect of Kim Dae Jung political agenda and it has been endorsed by his successor, Roh Moo Hyun, as well. South Korea has consistently pressed for a policy of accommodation despite the North Korean decision to build nuclear weapons. The South Koreans would no doubt be happier if the North had pursued a different course, but these weapons have little impact on South Korea's security or the lack thereof. Any war on the peninsula would be tremendously damaging for the South. It is hard to imagine a scenario in which the North would have an interest in using nuclear weapons against the South, except as a last ditch effort to deter or defend against an invasion or attack by the United States

Moreover, a collapse of the North Korean regime would leave the South with no good options. The population of the north could not be absorbed. Just keeping the population of the North alive would be a substantial drain on the South's resources. The Republic of Korea would have to decide on the extent to which the border would be opened or closed. It would have to decide whether it wanted to exercise de jure or de facto control over the North. A collapsed

regime in North Korea is not in the short or medium run interest of the South. The decision by the South to subsidize and not challenge the North is perfectly rational.

The security calculus of the United States is very different. As long as the multilateral strategy appears to be making progress; i.e. joint pressure from China, Japan, South Korea, and the United States to get Kim Jong Il to give up his nuclear weapons, any tension between the U.S. and other players can be managed. If this strategy fails, however, differences in interest would be stark. It is not difficult to imagine scenarios that would put the security interests of the United States directly at risk; for instance, the North Koreans could sell nuclear weapons to Al Qaeda. Any American policy maker under these circumstances would have to consider an attack on North Korea. Such an attack would could easily result in artillery shelling of Seoul that could kill many thousands of people. The North Korean regime might also collapse. This difference in security interests between the United States and South Korea is not going to disappear.

While it is hard to imagine a scenario in which Kim Jong Il would use nuclear weapons against one of his neighbors; it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which material inducements were high enough to lead him to provide such weapons to those who might use them against the United States. North Korea has sold its missiles to a number of countries including Iran. There is no guarantee that Kim Jong Il will not sell fissile material as well.

Similar differences in interests between the United States and other major countries exist with regard to combating terrorism. There are at least two plausible theories for explaining terrorist strategies and the United States is the most promising target in both accounts. The first is that terrorism is a rational strategy. Pape argues that the 188 suicide attacks that occurred between 1980 and 2001 were directed against democracies. The attacks have been part of an ongoing campaign. They have often been successful. Suicide attacks work because they

demonstrate resolve, break taboos, and signal the possibility of future escalation. And this success, for instance, the withdrawal of American forces from Lebanon, has provided empirical evidence that the strategy does work. Suicide bombing is less effective when a state's security is directly at risk, which is the case for Israel.<sup>3</sup>

The United States now has more than a hundred thousand troops in the Islamic world. They are not going to be leaving any time soon. If Pape is right then the US is a prime target for additional attacks. It could remove the incentive to attack by withdrawing. This is not likely to happen in the short or medium term even if things go very well in Afghanistan and Iraq. A strictly reactive policy is not going to prevent attacks. Those opposed to American initiatives are not susceptible to being bought off; they want America out of the Islamic world. In Afghanistan the choice to go in in the first place was relatively easy and the United States was able to work multilaterally. In Iraq the choice was not as obvious (although we must remember that the alternative was essentially leaving Saddam to operate unimpeded with substantial resources at his disposal), and there was substantial opposition to the Administration's policies. Now that we are where we are, the moderation that would be imposed by a commitment to multilateralism is not an optimal strategy for the U.S., although it is the preferred policy of other decision makers in some other major states. Chirac has advocated a speedy renewal of full sovereignty to Iraq and the withdrawal of American forces. This may be a right policy for France; it is not a policy that would maximize the expected utility of the United States given that the Iraq that might emerge if France's preferred policy were adopted could be a state that would support or tolerate terrorist attacks against the United States.

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3. Robert A. Pape, "The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 97, 3 (August 2003).

A second explanation for terrorism focuses on the tension between liberalism and something else. In one accounting the something else is traditional ascriptive clientelist societies. The values, social status and economic well being of people in such societies, all of which depend on personal relations and familial ties, are threatened by liberalism and the market. Liberalism allocates resources on the basis of markets rather than personal relationships. It accords status to those that have demonstrated individual accomplishment rather than position in a traditional family or clan. Those embedded in a clientelist networks will fight back against market liberalism, using terrorism as one tool, because the triumph of the market would not only reduce their status and material well being but drain away their very identity.<sup>4</sup>

On this accounting the United States, the ur source of market liberalism, could not avoid being a target of terrorism even if the administration decided tomorrow to throw in the towel and withdraw completely from the Middle East. The reach of the market is inexorable. The pressure on clientelist societies would not abate.

The only option that could alter American vulnerability over the long term would be to promote market liberalism and democracy. This is no small challenge. It is not a challenge that western Europe or Japan has any possibility of rising to. Continental Europe is it too regional, too inexperienced, and perhaps too cynical. And Japan is too timid. Altering domestic political regimes in repressive, failed, and failing states is the challenge of our time. The historical track record is not promising. To say that our academic theories are inadequate is too kind since we hardly have any well grounded theoretical propositions at all. However, in pursuing this goal, it would hardly seem wise to take any tools off the table including the unilateral use of military

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4. Michael Mousseau, "Market Civilization and Its Clash with Terror," *International Security* 27 (Winter 02-03)

force.

### Conclusion

The world really is in uncharted waters. The severing of the tie between underlying power resources and the ability to kill thousands or millions of people is an unprecedented historical development. Neither defense nor deterrence will work against transnational terrorists. Given the inherent differences between the United States and the next tier of actors (western Europe, Japan, perhaps China and India) with regard to both capabilities and susceptibility to terrorism, the cooperative win set with regard to the use of force may, in some cases, be empty. The expected utility of unilateral military action would be positive for the United States but negative for other countries. And the alternative of not acting without multilateral support, which could result in no action at all, would have a lower expected utility than acting alone.