

Gulliver unbound

The future of American power

By Tobias Harris

“At what point does asymmetrical multilateralism cease being multilateral and become the mediocre acting to restrain the supremely capable?”

As the Bush administration made its final preparations for war following the failure to secure a new Security Council resolution, Senate minority leader Tom Daschle (D-SD) issued a repartee typical of much of the flak received during the lead-in to Operation Iraqi Freedom. “I’m saddened,” he said, “saddened that this president failed so miserably at diplomacy that we’re now forced to war.” This view, often repeated by various members of the Democratic Party, the *New York Times* editorial page, the European press and the various foreign policy “experts” in Hollywood, is reflective of an attitude towards the exercise of power that achieved unprecedented prominence in the wake of the cold war. During the cold war, it was acknowledged both within the American foreign policy establishment and among America’s allies that American power was the bulwark of the Free World. The United States secured the sphere of liberal democracies from Soviet aggression, allowing for a stable trading system and the peaceful mediation of disputes by a host of international organizations, while resisting communism elsewhere in the world, whether by dispatching its military or providing aid along the lines of the Truman or Reagan doctrines. With the end of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, many intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic came to regard power as superfluous. The real challenges were “soft” challenges, challenges like global warming, international financial crises, trade liberalization and the spread of AIDS which necessitated multilateral cooperation in international fora. Even security issues such as the break-up of Yugoslavia and the containment of Iraq were seen as the concern of the international community; the rest of the world deserved the right to adjudicate on the appropriate course of action, although the United States would be bearing the brunt of the responsibility. The Clinton administration acquiesced to demands for multilateralism at the dawn of the unipolar moment, advocating “assertive multilateralism” that would seek a consensus on the use of force. Thus at a time of unprecedented American power, America embraced a foreign policy that, while not actually altering power disparities, called for America’s submission to the international community. In the immediate post-cold war world, the United States could afford the luxury of a foreign policy not driven by national interest. Democratization and liberalization, its major foreign policy aims, could be achieved adequately through multilateral institutions.

September 11th raised the stakes of multilateralism considerably. The disparate but related problems of Islamist terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction among rogue states could no longer be handled with the kid gloves of the Clinton administration. Urgency demanded the mailed fist. And as the Bush administration acquired new faith in the many possibilities inherent in American power, the multilateralists of the 1990s recoiled in horror. Gulliver was snapping the multilateral bonds he had so graciously accepted during more pacific times. Lilliputians saw the need to restrain him become more pressing as the Bush administration signaled its intention to destroy the regime of Saddam Hussein in order to remove a major rogue state while

simultaneously enforcing a long string of UN Security Council resolutions. Despite the emergence of the Paris-Berlin-Moscow axis of Lilliputians, the United States launched an attack without UN sanction but with a multitude of allies (the “coalition of the willing”), quickly reaching Baghdad and destroying the Hussein regime, with the war in its mopping-up phase at the time of this writing.

The Iraq incident marks a clear departure in international politics from post-cold war to post-post-cold war, with the United States restoring national interest to its proper place as the key motivator of American foreign policy. America has reached the limits of unipolar multilateralism, and indeed stands at the crossroads of the unipolar moment. If the Bush administration and hawks in the Democratic Party unite to acknowledge the inadequacies of multilateralism in providing for American security, and institutionalize a long-term foreign policy based on the robust use of American power to alter the international security environment in America’s favor, the United States can extend the unipolar moment into a unipolar era lasting well into the foreseeable future. As the 2002 National Security Strategy declares, “We will maintain the forces sufficient to support our obligations, and to defend freedom. Our forces will be strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States.”

Before downgrading multilateralism as an element of American foreign policy, however, it is necessary to assess both its possibilities and drawbacks for the United States. Multilateralism is applicable in a variety of policy areas, including but not limited to security affairs, the environment, trade and international finance. The much-maligned WTO, with its predecessor GATT, is perhaps the world’s most successful multilateral body, as WTO/GATT has succeeded in lowering industrial tariffs, and, since the creation of the WTO’s Dispute Settlement Body, providing legal recourse for the victims of unilaterally-imposed discriminatory trade practices. America participates fully in these organizations and, contrary to the claims of environmentalists, is party to a variety of multilateral environmental agreements and was the major instigator of the Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer. Multilateralism clearly contains unmitigated benefits for the United States in these realms, as it allows America to reap the many gains associated with institutionalization, including lower transaction costs and more certain guarantees that promised actions will be performed.

Multilateralism becomes more problematic in the security realm, when lesser powers demand that the United States considers and accedes to their demands when pondering the use of force to achieve a desired outcome. A considerable part of the problem is technical. Due to post-cold war defense budgets that far exceeded those of the rest of the world, especially in research and development, which is currently roughly 85% of the world’s total, the United States enjoys an unassailable advantage in military technology, from various fighting platforms to the C⁴ISR (Command, Control, Communications, Computing, Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) technology that allow American units to dominate the battlefield. Accordingly, security multilateralism is increasingly asymmetrical, with the United States forced to respect the input of nations that do not even possess the technology that would allow them to share the battlefield

with the United States military. At what point does asymmetrical multilateralism cease being multilateral and become the mediocre acting to restrain the supremely capable?

Beyond the gross inequality of capabilities, however, lies the political challenge of security multilateralism. During the 1990s, the use of force, even multilateral force, became increasingly unpopular in the international community. International efforts were organized, but for more limited objectives than during the cold war. International security initiatives in the Balkans, for example, were purely reactive. Rather than clearly identifying the threat posed by Slobodan Milosevic and acting decisively to eliminate that threat, the international community dithered, and when it did act in Bosnia and Kosovo, it merely sought to bring Milosevic back to the negotiating table. The Iraq crisis shows how deep-seated the aversion to power is within the international community. Various governments and their citizenries, despite being presented with a vast array of evidence of Iraqi proliferative activities in violation of more than a dozen UN Security Council resolutions issued since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, adamantly opposed any use of force in response to Hussein's recalcitrance. The most extreme case was Germany, which unilaterally declared that it would not support the use of force against Iraq even if sanctioned by the United Nations. The protests that crowded the streets of the world's major cities demonstrated the extent to which the international community has come to disdain the use of force in international relations.

There are several possible explanations as to why force (or hard power) has become so objectionable to international opinion. Among these explanations is the development of an international norm against the aggressive use of force; a reply based on the impotency of much of the world in the face of America's overwhelming military superiority; and anti-Americanism that has accompanied the unipolar moment, signifying that opposition is more to the American unilateral use of force rather than to any use of force per se. Reality probably lies somewhere in the midst of these options. Clearly the rise of legalized institutions within the Free World since the end of World War II has delegitimized the use of force, as nations have come to view institutions as more capable of resolving international disputes than force-of-arms. Force has become *bête noire* especially among the nations of Europe, who, through the European Union, have seen the supposed bounty of institutionalized multilateral cooperation. To them, force is the bluntest tool in the foreign policy toolbox, often causing more problems than it solves. Engagement and discussion are seen as softer tools that ensure an equitable outcome for those involved, forestalling war and its attendant train of miseries, including civilian casualties, refugee flows and economic disruption. The international community and many Americans view the associated costs of war as far outweighing any benefits of military action, and thus nations must go to great length to avoid international conflict. In short, multilateralism is Europeanism writ large, as pointed out by Robert Kagan in *Of Paradise and Power*. It is consensus-driven because, after all, consensus means no one loses. But consensus precludes the possibility of firm moral positions, as decisions reflect the lowest-common denominator among actors. American foreign policy has long had a moralistic strain that seeks to improve the world, by force if necessary. Decisions are not made between two relatively equivalent choices but between what is right and wrong. Thus unless America can convince the international community to accept the virtues of

its moral stances, multilateralism necessarily entails moral equivocation and watered-down positions.

The relative weakness of the rest of the world and the anti-Americanism that seems to accompany it reveals the more venomous side of multilateralism. As Kagan writes, “Because they are relatively weak, Europeans have a deep interest in devaluing and eventually eradicating the brutal laws of an anarchic Hobbesian world where power is the ultimate determinant of national security and success.” The nations of the world are weak and thus demand a system based on law that deemphasizes force and tolerates their weakness. They want to *matter*, to be capable of altering their circumstances and with the United States so overwhelmingly dominant in military affairs, it seems natural that the international community would aspire to get a hand on the steering wheel of America’s various military ventures. This vindictive envy, born of frailty, precipitates new and bolsters existing anti-Americanism throughout the world. Anti-Americanism is an ad hoc response to American power that seeks to undermine the moral foundation for America’s use of force. If anti-American intellectuals can successfully tar the United States as “imperialist,” “racist,” “greedy,” “capitalist,” “arrogant” or any other slur currently in vogue, they strengthen the case for multilateral supervision of American might. If and when the international community accepts a distorted image of America as a bloodthirsty tyrant, the desire to restrain Gulliver grows because he purportedly cannot be trusted to help the world. And should Gulliver strain against his bonds, he will be tarred with a new slur, “unilateralist,” thus strengthening the hand of the anti-American horde. This is the world America faces today. The international community has embraced a vision of the United States as the “true rogue nation” and President Bush as Adolf Hitler, vile smears that seem ubiquitous at recent anti-war protests (and UN conferences, for that matter), and thus wants stronger multilateral institutions (which happen to empower real dictators like Muammar Qadhafi) to restrain the supposed American tyrant. This seems to be the true face of multilateralism. America’s character is distorted, its motives are questioned and its noble values are sullied, all to make it easier for its enemies to prevent it from exercising its might and making the world a better place. There is no discussion of the comparative virtues of American aims versus international aims, no exchange of thoughts based on fact, only defamation. Accordingly, the United Nations is more a cosmopolitan snake pit than a body worthy of managing international security in a morally coherent and responsible manner.

With the pitfalls of multilateralism exposed following the jaunt into the United Nations prior to the Iraq war, what should be the new structure of America’s foreign and national security policy? As President Bush has made painstakingly clear, the world is rife with states that aspire (and conspire) to harm the United States and its global interests. This is by no means a new development, as the machinations of various rogue states during the 1990s revealed. The robust use of American power must remain the foundation upon which American foreign policy is based. The renunciation of power is not a possibility, as the Carter administration demonstrated. Ex-President Carter desired a world in which human rights were respected, but he foreswore the forceful exertion of American might that is the most certain means with which to guarantee human freedom worldwide. The failure to use the American military to challenge the Iranian revolution at its inception,

and the simultaneous degradation of the military's capabilities led America to the nadir of its influence during the cold war, as the success of Ayatollah Khomeini and the renewed wave of Soviet expansion revealed the extent of American decline. Clearly, then, the abnegation of force by the United States merely encourages America's foes and potential challengers for hegemony. Any foreign policy that seeks to extend the unipolar moment must rest on the use of force to destroy or discourage apparent and rising threats. If the world is unwilling to stomach American power, then security multilateralism must be downgraded. American security must take precedence over the feelings of the international community.

The National Security Strategy suggests the appropriate course for American foreign policy following Operation Iraqi Freedom:

In exercising our leadership, we will respect the values, judgment, and interests of our friends and partners. Still, we will be prepared to act apart when our interests and unique responsibilities require. When we disagree on particulars, we will explain forthrightly the grounds for our concerns and strive to forge viable alternatives. We will not allow such disagreements to obscure our determination to secure together, with our allies and our friends, our shared fundamental interests and values.

The President's decision to follow through on this principle may prove to be as fateful as the decision to embrace a global role for the United States made by the Truman administration during the early years of the cold war. By recognizing the imperative of resisting the Soviet Union, Truman laid the foundation for a bipartisan cold war strategy that, while varying in strategy from president to president, led the United States to ultimate victory over the Eastern bloc. President Bush may be directing American foreign policy on a similar course; after all, national security is a Democratic concern too. Should hawkish Democrats like Joe Liebermann win the battle for the soul of the Democratic Party, America may be committed to a foreign policy that recognizes a limited role for multilateral organizations like the United Nations in determining the United States' actions. The United States should not withdraw from such organizations, but it should recognize, as President Bush does, that they do not act out of concern for American or international security. They may provide useful fora for elaborating American motives and defending American values, but they are not panaceas for world peace. The United States, the greatest beacon of hope in world history, remains the most powerful force for good in the world, which is why the hopes of the downtrodden peoples of the world rest with Washington, not the General Assembly of the United Nations. It was the United States military, after all, that freed Baghdad, not the international community.