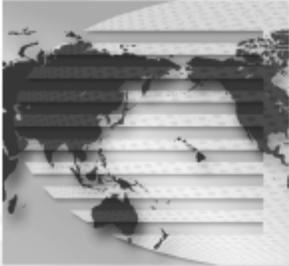




Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies



SPECIAL ASSESSMENT

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The Asia-Pacific and the United States 2004–2005

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Asian Views of the United States and Multilateralism 2004–2005: Mixed Messages Sent, Mixed Messages Received

J I M R O L F E

K E Y F I N D I N G S

- The United States' approach to multilateral international relations continues to be at odds with the practices and desires of most of its Asian partners.
- The United States emphasizes effectiveness and good outcomes (as defined by the U.S.) rather than process. For most Asian states the processes of multilateralism are as important.
- Throughout 2004, Asian governments and private commentators called on the U.S. to renounce its unilateralism, mostly on the grounds that unilateralism is a thinly disguised hegemony and is destroying the multilateral international system as developed in the second half of the twentieth century.
- If the United States continues to emphasize national self-interest at the expense of the international community and of multilateral relationships it will continue to be criticized, and may not be able to achieve its desired policy outcomes because other multilateral groupings will block it.
- The United States, Asian commentators argue, needs to adapt to the new international environment. A simple solution would be to accept the multilateral norms and rules of the international community, shape them where it can, but conform to them even when it cannot shape them.

Asia's reactions to U.S. foreign policy began and ended the year on similar notes: generally but not unanimously emphasizing the unilateral nature of America's engagement with the world. In January, following President Bush's State of the Union address, editorial comment throughout Asia focused on the "unilateralist" tendencies within U.S. policy. At year's end, following President Bush's re-election, the thrust remained although, as former Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted in December, that did not mean that national leaders in Asia (if not commentators) wished for President Bush to be defeated.

Public comment from Asia's governments on the United States' approach to foreign policy in 2004 was restrained, but a desire for the U.S. to be "more inclusive" and to "enhance its international cooperation" also figured in official statements. For its part, the United States emphasized its theme of some years that multilateral cooperation was not an end in itself but a process that had to be "effective" if it were to have value.

International reaction to America's multilateralist philosophies in 2004 has its roots most recently in the series of decisions made by the administration in the period following the 2000 presidential election. In the space of a few months the administration withdrew from, rejected or renounced a series of international initiatives it considered to be unworkable or not in the United States' national interests. These included the Kyoto protocol on global warming, the International Criminal Court, the international land mines convention, the biological and toxin weapons convention, the international plan for cleaner energy and the anti-ballistic missile treaty. For each decision the United States had, at least, an arguable case (backed by Congress's refusal to ratify some if not all of these pacts). However, these decisions led much of Asia and the rest of the world to argue that the U.S. had rejected multilateral approaches to world affairs in favor of an American unilateralism. These perceptions were reinforced for many by the decision to go to war in Iraq in March 2003 without, according to the critics, a proper multilateral (that is to say, United Nations) mandate.

In his January 2004 State of the Union address (to the extent that multilateralism was addressed at all), the President set the scene for the U.S. approach to multilateralism when he emphasized the coalition nature of America's efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq and rejected the critics who "said our duties in Iraq must be internationalized." President Bush pointed to the "vital contributions" of the more than 30 countries with troops committed to Iraq. But, he said, this kind of multilateral cooperation has its limits: "[t]here is a difference, however, between leading a coalition of many nations, and submitting to the objections of a few."

GENERAL CRITIQUES

This formulation of America's approach drew criticism in both East and South Asia as being the "model of a 'unilateral' superpower with overwhelming power forming relationships with 'all the rest' in the international community." Unilateralism, the general conclusion went, "will continue to guide American policy." The *Asahi Shimbun* in Japan noted that the "rhetoric about international cooperation inevitably sounds hollow" given the lack of a clear mandate from the U.N. for war.

That kind of critique set the scene for much of the analysis of U.S. multilateralism for the rest of the year. Some, such as Malaysian Prime Minister Badawi at his speech to the

U.N. General Assembly in September, emphasized the importance of multilateralism, which “is the path to implement ... decisions related to the security and peace of the world” and argued that the big powers needed to demonstrate “[a] sincere commitment towards multilateralism.” If that was an oblique criticism of the United States, more explicit critiques of the U.S. and the U.N. were made in India with the head of a prominent defense studies research institute arguing that “[u]nilateralism by the U.S. in its Iraq policy led to the marginalization of the United Nations,” and in Japan by the head of Japan’s International Cooperation Agency, who noted that “however important these bodies’ [the U.N. and other international agencies] decisions may be, the United States will always make up its own mind.” Going even further than that position, Japan’s recently retired vice finance minister for international affairs, Eisuke Sakakibara, argued in September that the United States, with its unilateral actions in Afghanistan and Iraq, had ignored “the shift of the economic center of gravity to Asia” and that “its unilateralism has generated an adverse effect on its power.”

In an attempt to move from commentary to analysis, American think tank The Asia Foundation spent all of 2004 assessing U.S.-Asia relations in its “America’s Role in Asia” project. This involved a comprehensive series of closed workshops with policy makers and scholars from both the United States and from Asia. Two reports were released in November 2004, one by the American grouping and one by the Asian. The views were wide-ranging, covering all areas of America’s relations with Northeast, Southeast and South Asia. The Asia group recommended, when discussing Northeast Asia, that:

the U.S. must be extremely careful of not letting its penchant for unilateralism undermine or damage its alliance with its traditional allies Japan and South Korea. Continued unilateralism can create the impression that the U.S. is contemptuous of Japan and other “friends” and “allies.”

The Asian working group report noted that it would be wrong to assume that Japan and Korea could never “move away” from the United States, presumably under circumstances in which those countries felt that the United States was acting alone and in its own interests rather than consulting the group interests. For Southeast Asia, the working group argued that America “should expand its cooperation with countries in Southeast Asia” and that working “multilaterally through ASEAN could enable the U.S. to reap more benefits in attaining stronger cooperation [in combating terrorism and other transnational crimes].” The theme was continued in the discussion of America’s role in South Asia, a region which is “not comfortable with the unilateralism that is promoted by the U.S. in international affairs, in particular its frequent marginalization of the U.N. and other international institutions, as well as multilateral agreements and protocols.”

The American working group was overall more sanguine in its assessment of the country’s multilateral credentials: “the United States should **remain** [emphasis added] committed to a combination of multilateralism and bilateralism” and it “should begin developing a more multilateral approach in Southeast Asia.” The second point however was not to criticize any perceived unilateral approach, but to emphasize the balkanization” of America’s bilateral relationships with the region.

Not all analysis was directly or even indirectly critical of U.S. approaches, although even supportive statements generally managed to sound a note of warning. Australia’s 2003 government foreign affairs and trade policy statement, *Advancing the National*

Interest, noted that the United States “is reluctant to sacrifice the option of unilateral action entirely, but recognizes that there are issues on which cooperation with others is worth pursuing and sometimes even necessary ... [and that] Australia will often have strong interests in persuading the United States to work with others.” In a critique of this government paper, Australia’s Senate noted that the United States’ “increased pursuit of unilateral approaches ... have sometimes not been in line with international community expectations” and that to the extent that U.S. unilateralist tendencies raise tensions between that country and other major powers—such that international institutions are weakened—“there are potentially important and adverse implications for a middle power such as Australia which has significant interests in the effectiveness of these institutions.” At least one commentary in late 2004 ran against the mainstream in that it was positively effusive in its support of American rejection of the processes of and philosophies underlying several international institutions. Indian strategic analyst Raja Mohan argued in December that the Indian establishment shares “the Bush administration’s contempt for the U.N. when it comes to the maintenance of international security.” India, he argued, also “finds itself with the Bush administration in the global debate on the International Criminal Court.” Mohan urged Bush, in defining a new world order, “to move away from the traditional American emphasis on the Euro-Atlantic world and recognize the power shift to Asia ... that takes into account the return of India to the center state of global affairs.” Mohan’s views on America’s approach to world affairs, if not on the importance of Asia and India, seem to be outside the mainstream in Asia.

The essential central role of the United Nations rather than the United States in international multilateral cooperative efforts was emphasized by a number of Asian governmental commentators during the year. At a January 2004 conference on the “United Nations, Multilateralism and International Security,” Shri K.C. Pant, deputy chairman of India’s Planning Commission, noted the U.N.’s active involvement in a range of transnational criminal issues and called for increased cooperation in this area. At the U.N. General Assembly meeting in September the point was reinforced. Foreign ministers and prime ministers from throughout Asia emphasized the need for “multilateralism with the U.N. at its centre” in the words of Thai Foreign Minister Surakiart Sathirathai. His words were reinforced by Indonesia’s Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda, who called for the U.N. to be empowered “to serve as the effective tool of multilateralism that it has always been meant to be.” Other ministers took the same line.

THE U.S. AND MULTILATERALISM

The United States itself rejected any international criticism of its multilateralist credentials. In late 2003 the United States and Great Britain issued a *Joint Statement on Multilateralism* which emphasized that “[e]ffective multilateralism, and neither unilateralism nor international paralysis, will guide our approach.” The theme of effectiveness was reiterated in 2004. At the United Nations in October 2004, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control Stephen Rademaker noted that “pursuing objectives in a multilateral setting takes longer and requires more effort ... [but] that is a reasonable price to pay for gaining widespread support in the international community for meaningful actions on key questions.” Rademaker went on to argue that “it would defy

logic, however, to expect states to continue to rely on multilateral processes if doing so has the effect of preventing all action.” He noted that Iraq and Kosovo were, respectively, a controversial and relatively non-controversial illustration of the principle.

Practical examples of America’s multilateral impulses were laid out in an October 2004 speech by Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Mark Lagon. He argued that “multilateral diplomacy is an important tool of U.S. foreign policy” and he pointed to the way that the United States had taken the lead on multilateral efforts to provide food aid to needy countries through the World Food Program, on resolving global health problems such as HIV/AIDS and in assisting refugees. Lagon also noted that when the U.S. has promoted solutions that have not been accepted by a majority of states—for example on the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, when the U.S. called for strong action to stop human rights abuses in Sudan but was outvoted—it has not been called “unilateralist” in any derogatory sense by the human rights movement. Perhaps “unilateralism” is not always bad.

At the end of 2004 President Bush re-stated the United States’ fundamental position on multilateralism:

Multilateral organizations can do great good in the world. Yet the success of multilateralism is measured not merely by following a process, but by achieving results. The objective of the U.N. and other institutions must be collective security, not endless debate ... My country is determined to work as far as possible within the framework of international organizations and we’re hoping that other nations will work with us to make those institutions relevant and effective in meeting the unique threats of our time.

That point was reinforced by Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Lincoln Bloomfield in a speech in Britain in December in which he argued that the U.S. stand on multilateralism and the role of international organizations is based on “sober calculations about realities in the world.” He argued that “the price of a multilateral approach that fails to advance security is higher than the political cost of criticism for declining to lend support to that approach.”

One supporter for the U.S. view in 2004 was Japanese scholar (and one-time ambassador to the U.N. Conference on Disarmament) Kuniko Inoguchi, who refuses “to view the United States as a unilateral country.” She sees the U.S. as strongly committed to an “effective multilateralism” that is “more results-oriented.” The United States, she says, “does not have the patience to deal with process-oriented multilateralism. It wants to see things that make an immediate difference, or even a long-term meaningful difference, in containing and discouraging terrorism.” In other areas, such as disarmament, she argues that the U.S. understands that it has to work within a multilateral setting and is willing to do so “with countries that are results-oriented.” This is a minority opinion and hardly a ringing endorsement of any general acceptance of multilateralism by the United States.

A dramatic example of the U.S. approach to multilateralism outside the formal institutions was given as the year ended with a huge earthquake and tsunami affecting much of South and Southeast Asia. As part of its response the U.S. announced that it would spearhead a “coalition” or “core group” of four countries (later six, mostly “traditional” U.S. allies) to coordinate the relief effort. Immediately, pointed comment

from much of the region insisted that the United Nations was the appropriate body to coordinate such an effort. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan welcomed President Bush's announcement but asserted U.N. pre-eminence when he stated that the coalition would "support the U.N. effort." By early 2005, following an international conference, the core-group had been formally folded into general U.N.-organized relief efforts.

The United States has not been effective in convincing many outside America of the merits of its position. Indeed, it also has not convinced conservative media commentators in the U.S. itself. These commentators argue not that the U.S. is too unilateral but that it is too multilateral, that multilateral processes do not work—in the words of a *New York Times* op-ed piece "[t]he air was filled with nuanced obfuscations, technocratic jargon and the amoral blandness of multilateral deliberation"—and that therefore the U.S. should be more unilateral.

CRITICISM RENEWED

Following the November 2004 election, editorial writers and opinion leaders throughout Asia again focused on American unilateralism as a significant issue. Pakistan's *Lahore Daily Times* noted in an editorial that the president had to "realise that unilateralism has only increased the problems for the U.S. and its allies," and the *Times of India*, in an op-ed column, called for "a course correction in the U.S. strategy of absolute unilateralism ... [although] one does not expect the U.S. to give up unilateralism altogether." A columnist in Bangladesh's *Daily Star* reinforced the point in noting that "the USA will have to understand that unilateralism in its own way can be self-defeating." Even in Singapore, not noted for criticism of the U.S., one senior analyst noted that "in world affairs, perception is an important reality with important consequences" and that:

even if the charge of unilateralism ... is exaggerated, a deep impression has been created in significant parts of the world that the Bush administration is dismissive of the views of others on important international issues and is determined to go its own way.

One Chinese commentary, in the *People's Daily Online*, argued that America's unilateralism is not so much a rejection of international cooperation as a rejection of formal international organizations. This, according to the commentary, "is a new form of multilateralism, which is based on the interest of the United States." America's aim, in this formulation, is to "reorganize the international order, so that this world order can help maintain the U.S. hegemonic position while better reflecting its interest." China's response to this, according to a number of commentaries, should be to promote multilateral cooperation within Asia and thus restrict the United States' ability to act unilaterally.

In their public messages on President Bush's re-election, a number of Asian governments, whilst not criticizing America's approach to multilateral engagement directly, expressed the wish that "cooperation" and "constructive relations" could be the hallmark of relations for the Bush Administration's second term.

The replacement of Secretary of State Colin Powell with National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, announced two weeks after the presidential election, gave editorialists

yet another opportunity to discuss American approaches to international relations. Throughout East and South Asia commentary was almost uniform in the expectation that the new Secretary of State's appointment would represent "an intensification of hawkish forces, as well as the notion of unilateralism," and that "the colour of unilateralism in U.S. foreign policy will also be more obvious." One unnamed Japanese Foreign Ministry official quoted in the *Asahi Shimbun* feared that "the voices of hardliners who advocate unilateralism will grow stronger." The linkage of a "hawkish" foreign policy with a "unilateralist" approach to practicing foreign policy appeared in many commentaries.

WHAT DOES IT ALL MEAN?

Clearly, there is a strong dissonance between mainstream Asian views of the United States' approach to international affairs and the views held by the administration itself. At the heart of the difference is a belief on the one hand that states should cooperate formally, normally through the United Nations, and that the will of the majority should prevail, and on the other that multilateralism is a tool to achieve ends, normally those ends desired by the United States—certainly in cases where the U.S. considers its national interests to be at stake.

At the very least this will mean that the U.S. will face continuing criticism of its foreign policy practices and continuing demands to resolve the issues through the U.N. In the short term, and for some issues, that will not matter. The U.S. will do what it wants to do because it believes that what it is doing is right, can get support from sufficient countries to give an aura of international respectability to its actions and, most importantly, because it has the strength (either through coercion or persuasion) to achieve its goals. This is true for most of the headline issues related to the United States' "rejection" of "multilateral" solutions.

In the longer term this situation may not prevail. Increasingly there are signs that American strength will not be sufficient to persuade even a fig-leaf worth of states that the United States' preferred solutions should be adopted. One straw lies in the clear signs that Europe is preparing to lift its arms embargo on China. There is little sense in Europe that it should support the U.S. indefinitely in its desires to keep China militarily weak. Europe's position is probably stronger in relation to the rest of the world as a result of perceived U.S. unilateralism in the last several years than it would otherwise have been. More significantly, throughout the region alternative power centers are rising and multilateral solutions are being adopted without the United States. Southeast Asia's regional grouping ASEAN, not a significant force in international affairs, is allying economically with the powerhouse economies of Northeast Asia. China, America's putative rival, is a central player in the processes and is developing close links with all its Asian neighbors as a result. Once an East Asian (perhaps even including India) economic community is developed, within 15 years perhaps, a true political community could follow. In that event the United States will have little influence over a multilateral grouping that is larger, wealthier, and perhaps militarily more powerful than itself. A similar, albeit nascent, community is developing in South America, again excluding the United States. As these states work multilaterally and develop solid institutional links, their group strength could counter the United States in achieving its own objectives.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES

In a 1948 paper, George Kennan of the State Department noted the disparity of wealth to population, “between ourselves and the peoples of Asia.” It should be the United States’ prime task, he argued, to “devise a pattern of relationships which will permit us to maintain this position of disparity without positive detriment to our national security.” Universal solutions to particular problems would “prevent this country from taking vigorous and incisive measures for its own defense and for the defense of concepts of international relations which might be of vital importance to world stability as a whole.” In regard to the United Nations he noted that “by and large it has created more problems than it has solved” and that “in our efforts to use the U.N. majority for major political purposes we are playing with a dangerous weapon which may some day turn against us.” The sentiments underlying these statements have remained at the core of U.S. policy. The international environment has changed, however, and assertive unilateralism no longer works in a world with nearly four times as many states, with alternative centers of influence and in which memories of the United States’ dominant role as liberator in the world war have all but disappeared.

Given that the world has changed and will change more, especially in Asia, the United States is being challenged to adapt its approaches. Multilateral relationships and institutions are a fact of life in the international community, whether or not that is sensible, effective, or efficient. This means that independence of action for all states, even for the United States, is going to be compromised to some extent.

Much of the world wants to work with the United States, but it wants to do so within specific and well-understood rules relating to the use of military force, the ways states deal with each other and how international trade works. The thrust of arguments from Asia is that the U.S. should work with the international community to have its preferred rules adopted and applied as widely as possible. They argue also that if the U.S. cannot persuade other states of the merits of its position, it should acquiesce rather than adopt a unilateral or coalition-of-the-willing approach. In this way multilateralism will become effective but it will be effective because all participants are working to the same set of rules, not just because the outcomes meet the United States’ short-term needs.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of APCSS, U.S. Pacific Command, the U.S. Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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