

“America is Back” as it should be

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American multilateralism has swung on a pendulum since the birth of our nation. The question of whether to put America “first” or cooperate with other countries has always racked our foreign policy. From our involvement in foreign wars to our adoption of protectionist laws, the United States’ patterns of cooperation with global partners have had extraordinary ramifications on the whole world. While unilateralism has helped secure U.S. interests in some respects, multilateralism is the only way the current administration can effectively implement foreign policy in the modern globalized world. The future of America’s foreign policy should embrace multilateralism for several reasons. First, the U.S. is surrendering its share of global power and requires allies to support its policies. Second, the globalized economy compels political cooperation to reflect economic partnerships. Third, the U.S. must act in conjunction with other countries to tackle global issues.

First, while the U.S. may have been able to strongman other nations into acquiescence in the past, the U.S. no longer has the same political and economic capital. Similar to our experience with the Soviet Union in the Cold War, we face a rising superpower that seeks to assert its influence where the U.S. has fallen behind. If China succeeds in winning allies in the Global South, the U.S. will not be able to unilaterally challenge and overcome that influence. The U.S. should focus on strengthening ties with countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America to build a stronger front. An example of the success of this strategy in the past is the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Despite the U.S. emerging as a clear superpower from World War II, President Truman recognized the critical nature of regional cooperation. Rather than circumnavigate Europe to directly confront the Soviet Union, the Truman administration built cooperative

networks with the European leaders to form a united front. NATO successfully deterred USSR encroachment but also enabled the U.S. to assert a firm positive presence even across the ocean¹. This alliance, along with the recovery program led by Secretary of State Marshall², rebuilt the European nations such that they could stand firm for democratic principles, siding with the United States. Contrast this experience with the series of unilateral initiatives to halt communism in the latter half of the 20th century. Having come to believe that the U.S. was a world savior, later administrations believed they could achieve anything by tinkering with regional politics. This hubris led to disasters such as the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. American leadership should have recognized that our nation's strength came from its ability to lead and bring together other nations, not single-handedly take on foreign polities. Second, the U.S. cannot unilaterally act in defiance of trade partners without experiencing severe economic repercussions. In the globalized economy, Americans exchange goods and services with people in every corner of the world. National economies are so interconnected that one nation cannot lash out against an enemy without feeling the sting of the whip itself. The U.S. has suffered immensely from initiating a trade war with China but also inflicted damage on its allies by refusing to coordinate with them³. If the U.S. continues to disregard its economic partnerships, it will lose the trust of the international community and suffer domestically. No nation can solely look out for itself when isolation means self-destruction. A clear example of the negative consequences of having such an attitude is the Great Depression.

¹ "North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), 1949." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed March 28, 2021. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/nato>.

² "Marshall Plan, 1948." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed March 28, 2021. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1945-1952/marshall-plan>.

³ Hass, Ryan, and Abraham Denmark. "More Pain than Gain: How the US-China Trade War Hurt America." Brookings. Brookings, August 25, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/08/07/more-pain-than-gain-how-the-us-china-trade-war-hurt-america/>.

Historians widely agree that the Hoover administration's isolation of the American economy prolonged the Great Depression⁴. The Smoot-Hawley tariffs, encouraged by President Hoover, were met with immediate retaliation by other countries. Food prices skyrocketed, the stock market crashed, and American interests greatly suffered⁵. By contrast, the earlier decade, led by President Coolidge, enjoyed a period of prosperity and globalization. In order to maintain the benefits of free trade for the future, the U.S. must work with its allies to stabilize international agreements and protect itself from economic fallout created by political turmoil.

Third, global issues demand coordinated global action. With climate change posing a serious threat to every nation, the only way the U.S. can hope to tackle the issue is in conjunction with other countries. Under the Obama administration, joining the Paris Accords enabled the U.S. to start down that path⁶. The Biden administration must renew the U.S. commitment to that agreement through domestic action. By doing so, it would reaffirm its commitment to multilateralism and set an example for other nations. If it defies global expectations, the repercussions on the entire world could be severe. For example, the unilateral U.S. involvement in the Yom Kippur War led to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil embargo that ravaged the global economy.

Rather than attempt to revitalize the United Nations-brokered peace, the Nixon administration directly authorized aid to be given to Israel, leading to OPEC's response. The embargo not only caused price gouging, rationing, and shortages in the U.S. but for our allies throughout the world as well⁷.

⁴ Amadeo, Kimberly. "Those Who Don't Learn From Smoot-Hawley Are Doomed to Repeat It." The Balance, November 20, 2020. <https://www.thebalance.com/smoot-hawley-tariff-lessons-today-4136667>

⁵Ibid.

⁶ Mai, H.J. "U.S. Officially Rejoins Paris Agreement On Climate Change." NPR. NPR, February 19, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/19/969387323/u-s-officially-rejoins-paris-agreement-on-climate-change>.

⁷ "Oil Embargo, 1973–1974." U.S. Department of State. U.S. Department of State. Accessed March 29, 2021. <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1969-1976/oil-embargo>.

When met with this global issue, the U.S. was only able to resolve it by coordinating multilateral peace talks with Israel and its Arab neighbors. This example further illustrates the weakness of the U.S. in initiating unwelcome unilateral intervention but also its strength in bringing players together on the global stage.

The U.S. still has a critical role to play as a world leader. However, it must recognize its predominant duty to serve as a preserver of peace and cooperation. The global issues of this century demand that nations work together to protect the world and each others' interests. As the U.S. potentially faces off against the rising power of China, it cannot jeopardize its relations with other countries by continuing to single-mindedly defy them. America's power will come from its ability to facilitate cooperation and bridge the divides between nations. Therefore, the U.S. should celebrate multilateralism in its foreign policy in the future.