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### Title

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# IGCC Policy Brief

## Democratizing Foreign Policy Part I of IV:

## A Little Help from Our Friends

**David A. Lake**

Moving from a bipolar to a multipolar world: Coalition-building, diplomacy, and executive action. *Full recommendations, page 4.*

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**Summary:** The American public has increasingly sought alternative signposts by which to navigate the perilous waters of the post-Cold War seas. One apparently appealing indicator has been multilateral cooperation. If other countries follow, then we are more likely to believe—for better or worse—that the president is leading in the right direction. But if we rely upon foreign

participation as our standard for judging presidential foreign policy initiatives, we must insist that all diplomatic deals be made openly and publicly. Otherwise, presidents thwart informed debate and deceive the people they were elected to serve. They also deprive themselves of an important check on their own propensity for error

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*IGCC is a multicampus research unit of the University of California, established in 1983 to conduct original research and inform public policy debate on the means of attenuating conflict and establishing cooperation in international relations. Policy Briefs provide recommendations based on the work of UC faculty and participants in institute programs. Authors' views are their own.*

## Foreign Policy in Flux

The end of the Cold War has freed American foreign policy from the shackles of superpower competition. The demise of bipolarity has created an unprecedented opportunity for the United States to reshape the international order to its own, long-term advantage. Yet this new-found freedom has also produced uncertainty over America's national interests and confusion over the appropriate means for achieving them. The struggle between Congress and the Clinton administration over goals in Somalia and Haiti; the long vacillation over Bosnia; and renewed calls for clear "principles" of American foreign policy all reflect this paradox of freedom and drift.

Soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Charles Krauthammer referred to the current era of change as America's "unipolar moment."<sup>1</sup> He is undoubtedly correct on both words. While no other country now possesses the international power of the United States, this fortuitous position will be temporary. The American economy has lost its competitive edge. Other countries, most notably Japan and Germany, can easily build greater military capabilities than they now possess. Russia remains a military giant—and with the difficulties of economic reform now generating renewed support for the communists, the former superpower may become more of a potential threat than partner. Unipolarity is inexorably evolving into multipolarity.

The policy choices made in this transition period will be critical in shaping the as-yet unknown and therefore un-named post-Cold War world. International orders are not given, they are created through the actions and reactions of great powers. As the remaining superpower, the United States must choose how to use its transient freedom carefully.

## Bipolarity to Unipolarity

The Cold War tightly constrained American foreign policy. Superpower competition demanded a defense second to none; a network of stable international alliances; economic accommodation with allies; and support for client regimes abroad. The threat from the Soviet Union severely hemmed in America's freedom of maneuver in foreign policy.

Domestically, these international constraints were reflected in the bipartisan foreign policy of the early postwar period. With the Soviet threat widely acknowledged, politics

stopped at the water's edge. The external constraints and resulting domestic consensus produced remarkable harmony in the foreign policy process and large delegations of authority to the executive. Voters recognized the limits of the international environment and agreed on the broad contours of policy. Sharing this consensus, Congress gave the President considerable discretion in foreign affairs. Acting within the limits of this consensus and discretion, the executive had a relatively free hand in the conduct of foreign policy. Voters, in turn, held the president chiefly responsible for foreign policy successes and failures—and acted accordingly at the ballot box. As would be expected, everyone played their part well. Most of the time, there was little struggle over the substance of foreign policy or the locus of decision-making.

This bipartisan foreign policy began to break down with the Vietnam War, as President Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the conflict exceeded the limits of what the public was willing to accept. Voters punished the President and, as a double-check on executive discretion, elected more assertive Congresses. The Gulf of Tonkin Resolution spawned the War Powers Act. Yet, elements of the domestic consensus endured. Although the Soviet Union's achievement of nuclear parity with the United States stimulated a change in strategy—as *détente*, arms control, and the opening to China softened the anti-communism of the earlier period—the Cold War remained the primary lens through which other international developments were viewed. The Soviet Union was still seen as the principal threat to American interests. A strong defense, healthy political and economic ties with allies, and support for clients in the developing world remained priorities.

The end of the Cold War has loosened the external constraints on American foreign policy. In turn, the domestic consensus has all but evaporated. As Anthony Lake, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, has observed, "there is no longer a consensus among the American people around why, and even whether, our nation should remain actively engaged in the world." A special survey by the *Los Angeles Times* of elite opinion makers found a striking lack of agreement on America's role in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Absent a clear and present danger, American foreign policy is now driven largely by the vagaries of domestic politics. Clinton's

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<sup>1</sup> "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, 1 (1990/91), pp. 23–33.

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<sup>2</sup> Text of remarks, "From Containment to Enlargement," Johns Hopkins University, School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, D.C., September 21, 1993.

foreign policy is an easy target for Republicans jockeying for position in 1996 because no one knows what the “right” policy is. Americans react emotionally to the tragic but not always unique “crises” CNN chooses to emphasize—providing a ready source of support for political hucksters demanding intervention as a means of advancing their own positions. Americans give voice to their beliefs in the innate superiority of their versions of democracy and capitalism, seeking once again to remake the world in their own image. Or voters choose to ignore foreign crises because the ones they face at home appear more important and pressing. Freed from its Cold War shackles, the United States is acting according to its own internal stimuli in setting foreign policy.

### **Unipolarity to Multipolarity**

The American public has increasingly sought alternative signposts by which to navigate the perilous waters of the post-Cold War seas. One apparently appealing indicator has been multilateral cooperation. Recent presidents have offered and we, the public, have readily accepted foreign participation in U.S. military adventures as evidence of the executive’s sound judgment in international affairs. We cannot follow the intricacies of Iraqi, Bosnian, or Haitian politics or assess the potential for military success. Yet we can correctly surmise that if other countries will not follow, the president is leading us down the wrong path. Conversely, if other countries follow, then we are more likely to believe—for better or worse—that the president is leading in the right direction. While the use of such proxies is standard in politics—particularly in an uncertain environment, as at present—this one is unique to the post-Cold War era. Unable to judge matters for ourselves, we now look to foreign participation as the litmus test of American and presidential leadership.<sup>3</sup>

This emphasis on multilateral diplomacy is an important innovation. While multilateralism has, of course, been central to elements of the postwar order, it has recently gained striking prominence. Even in our own backyard, in Haiti, the United States felt it necessary to wrap the mantle of multilateralism around its diplomatic and military efforts to force the junta from power.

### **Uses and Abuses of Coalitions**

Foreign participation can provide a standard for judging the wisdom of presidential

foreign policy initiatives. Joint action tempers American policy, increases the number of parties that can veto capricious conduct, and reduces the risk of erroneous commitments. In a world of pervasive uncertainty, it is easy to make foreign policy mistakes. We are often tempted to inflate our interests in distant regions of the globe and minimize the potential costs of military solutions to parochial problems. Multilateralism can be an effective signpost.

If manipulated by political leaders, however, foreign participation can also be a dangerous test for judging American foreign policy commitments. Although it is likely to diminish in the future, the president continues to possess considerable discretion in foreign policy delegated to him by Congress and the voters. Though luck and five months of intensive planning eventually redeemed him, President Bush acted unilaterally and, apparently, spontaneously when he set the United States on the course to war by declaring four days after the initial invasion that Iraq’s conquest of Kuwait “will not stand.” Without widespread public debate, Bush again acted unilaterally when he committed American troops to Somalia in the waning days of his administration; without articulating clear goals or a plan for withdrawal, other than vague references to a quick hand-off to the United Nations, he left his successor holding the bag. There is little to prevent President Clinton from undertaking similar unilateral and spontaneous foreign policy actions that place America’s reputation and prestige on the line—as he did in Haiti—before our celebrated system of domestic checks and balances forces him to reconsider.

Through hidden diplomatic bargains, on the other hand, presidents can consciously build international support and bias the public’s assessment of their policies. Motivated by campaign positions or personal concern, for instance, a president might offer greater aid to Russia if the former superpower endorses or at least does not block his foreign policy initiatives. More concretely, we still do not know—and may never know—the deals Bush made with the Soviet Union, China, the Arab states, Europe, and Japan in support of Kuwait. In addition to the “forgiving” of Egypt’s debt to the United States treasury, textile concessions and trade credits for Turkey, and other public payoffs, what under-the-table deals did the United States make in the Middle East? What expectations of future American performance were created in Paris and Tokyo? What concessions were granted to Moscow and Beijing for their acquiescence? Likewise, we do not know the full scope of the Clinton administration’s off-again, on-again negotiations with the Europeans and Russia over Bosnia or the Latin Americans over Haiti.

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<sup>3</sup> Doyle McManus, “America’s World Role: Divided We Stand,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1993, Section H, pp. 1–3.

Diplomatic side payments need not take the form of secret protocols or even explicit agreements. Rather, in cobbling together international coalitions, compromises are made and expectations created. “Diplomacy” is the grease of international action. Back room diplomatic deals, however, mislead the public, increase the odds of critical mistakes, and raise the costs of policy failures. If we rely upon foreign participation as our standard for judging presidential foreign policy initiatives—or any cue that relies upon the statements and actions of other states—we must insist that all diplomatic deals be made openly and publicly. Otherwise, presidents thwart informed debate and deceive the people they were elected to serve. They also deprive themselves of an important check on their own propensity for error.

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David A. Lake is IGCC’s research director for international relations and a professor of political science at the University of California, San Diego. For related reading, see IGCC Policy Paper No. 20, *Ethnic Fears and Global Engagement: the International Spread and Management of Ethnic Conflict* by David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild; as well as IGCC Policy Paper No. 12, *U.S. Intervention in Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Fred Wehling; IGCC Policy Paper No. 22, *The Moral Foundation of International Intervention* by Leonard Binder; IGCC Policy Paper No. 25, *Economic Globalization and the “New” Ethnic Strife*, by Ronnie Lipschutz and Beverly Crawford; and IGCC Policy Paper No. 27, *Preventive Diplomacy and Ethnic Conflict*, by Bruce W. Jentleson

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## Use Coalition-Building to Test Foreign Policy Wisdom:

- 1) Assume that if other countries will not follow, the president is leading us down the wrong path.
- 2) Just because other countries do follow, don’t assume that the president is leading us up the right path.
  - a) Insist that all diplomatic deals be made openly and publicly.
  - b) Be sure that real American interests are at stake.
  - c) Insist on informed debate.

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*p. 3: In cobbling together international coalitions, compromises are made and expectations created. Back room diplomatic deals increase the odds of critical mistakes.*

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