

Recreating American foreign policy: Replacing unilateralist nationalism with inclusive multilateralism

By: Kristin O'Donoghue

President Biden assumed the presidency amidst several crises — the devastating COVID 19 pandemic, increasingly tense relations with China, and a persistent climate crisis. Each administration has confronted its own seemingly insurmountable challenges, and Biden's predecessors have all left in their wakes mistakes and successes which defined the tenability of their approaches. Trump's nationalism and America First doctrine wreaked havoc upon American foreign policy and have left foreign policy experts advocating for a return to American diplomacy and a restoration of our foreign policy. Though Biden's election was a pivotal first step toward revitalizing American foreign policy and reforming our reputation on the global stage, Trump's isolationist scars have not healed. Rather than a restoration, America is in desperate need of a newly constructed inclusive multilateral approach that involves historically suppressed actors from a variety of regions, civilian populations, and non-governmental organizations.

In making suggestions for Biden's foreign policy approach, one must not fall prey to the myth that the United States before Trump was consistently a gregarious multilateral actor, sacrificing its domestic interests for the global good. Wilsonian multilateralism stood in stark contrast against Nixon's unilateral retreat from Bretton Woods and Reagan's termination of UNESCO. Obama's retrenchment approach to foreign policy mirrored most closely those of Eisenhower and Nixon, which advocated a reduced commitment of U.S. resources and a greater share of the burden placed on allies. Any moral high ground that we possessed before Trump's nationalist approach, even if this perception was founded upon shaky ground, we have lost.

Wilsonian philosophy has recently been in decline, as illiberalism and increased nationalism render it useless. The post-Cold War era was defined by a return to liberal internationalism, though these days are similarly long gone. James D. Boys argued that President George H.W. Bush was “well-positioned to lead a multilateral coalition and maximize the historical timing associated with the collapse of the U.S.S. R¹.” In the same piece, Boys argued about the utility of a Clintonian Assertive Multilateralism².” A multilateralist approach embraced by the Biden team should be characterized less by its assertiveness and more by its inclusivity.

Biden must navigate a transition from Trump’s isolationist, America First policies while prioritizing the “three cs:” COVID-19, China, and climate change. The nature of these battles we confront are fundamentally transnational in scope and require international cooperation.

Lowering greenhouse gas emissions and upscaling sustainable practices globally requires collective action and accountability. Likewise, a unilateral US response to China is fundamentally impossible, given the role of both powers in global markets and the unavoidable entanglement of international politics with economics. “As wealthy and powerful nations, China and the United States share a common obligation to demonstrate to both our citizens and to the world the fairness and the value of international institutions,” Daniel Russel maintained³. The United States should also be leading the COVID-19 response, and future public health crises will inevitably demand an internationally coordinated response.

¹ Boys, James D. “A Lost Opportunity : The Flawed Implementation of Assertive Multilateralism (1991-1993).” *European Journal of American Studies* 7, no. 7–1 (January 2, 2012). <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.9924>.

² Ibid.

³ Asia Society. “Multilateralism vs. Unilateralism.” Accessed April 4, 2021. <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/multilateralism-vs-unilateralism>.

Richard Haas and Charles A. Kupchan recently made the case for a global concert, arguing that it offers “the best and most realistic way to advance great-power coordination, maintain international stability, and promote a rules-based order⁴.” A global concert is a promising vehicle for promoting good global governance, cooperation, and shared goals; however, the concert proposed by Haas and Kupchan maintains a hegemonic, European-centric system. A dichotomous international order composed of a coalition of democracies in opposition to the world’s autocracies will be unable respond to pressing global challenges including climate change, public health crises, and nuclear proliferation, while an approach that includes collaboration among actors across ideological divides will permit more comprehensive solutions to universal issues.

Biden’s multilateral foreign policy approach should include collaboration among a) under-represented nations from every region b) civilian populations, and c) non-governmental organizations. Pursuing a multilateral approach that uplifts historically suppressed groups and represents a diversity of perspectives will provide immense value to a truly cooperative and balanced international order. Civil society will need to be informed and educated about the foreign policy decisions being made by their governments, which will promote multilateral action in support of human rights.

If the United States becomes increasingly unilateral in its approach to foreign relations, the rest of the world will inevitably follow suit. An inclusive multilateralism will prove more fruitful and effective in all realms of foreign policy, while upholding the values and advocating for the interests of the United States.

⁴ Haass, Richard, and Charles A. Kupchan. “The New Concert of Powers,” March 26, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/world/2021-03-23/new-concert-powers>