Effective Multilateralism: A US Perspective

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For some Americans, there has never been, never can be and never should be such a thing as effective multilateralism. For others there has been, can and should be more. Providing a US perspective requires discussing both of these views, their political dynamics as well as substantive arguments, and of course, points on the spectrum in between.

The first part of the chapter traces the historical pattern of these ‘mixed messages’. The second part explains the pattern in terms of a functionalist tension between the ‘policy enhancement’ and ‘prerogative encroachment’ views of multilateralism. Part three turns to the contemporary international system and its principal characteristics as a ‘global era’ that makes for a profound need for effective multilateralism. The final section focuses within this framework on East Asia and the challenges ahead.

Historical context: Mixed messages

American leaders were foremost among twentieth century champions of multilateral institutions. ‘There is only one power to put behind the liberation of mankind’, President Woodrow Wilson exhorted, ‘and that is the power of mankind. It is the power of the united moral forces of the world, and in the Covenant of the League of Nations the moral forces of the world are mobilized’.¹ The grand hope for the United Nations, as articulated by Cordell Hull, Secretary of State for much of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency, was that ‘there would no longer be need for spheres of influence, for alliances, for balance of power, or any other special arrangements through which, in the unhappy past, nations strove to safeguard their security or promote their interests’.² The Cold War got in the way of this grand vision, to understate it, making the UN both less
central and a venue for competition more than cooperation. At the end of the Cold War, President George H.W. Bush joined with other world leaders at the first-ever summit of the heads of state of the UN Security Council calling for ‘strengthening the capacity of the United Nations’ as an integral part of ‘a new world order’.

Yet strong opposition to such multilateralist bullishness have made for what Edward Luck calls ‘mixed messages’. The 1919 defeat of the Treaty of Versailles in the US Senate ratification process was one of the most devastating foreign policy politics setbacks an American president ever suffered. Moreover, it was followed by a period of isolationism that found support on both the left and the right. As World War II brewed in Europe, conservatives such as Robert E. Wood, chairman of Sears, Roebuck and head of the America First Committee, argued that entry into the war against Hitler would give FDR the opportunity to ‘turn the New Deal into a permanent socialist dictatorship’. Socialists such as Norman Thomas feared that war would provide justification for repression that ‘would bring fascist dictatorship to America’. In 1936, Congress even came very close to passing the Ludlow amendment that would have required a national referendum before any decision to go to war.

While following World War II, support was very strong for joining the UN, even then it had its limits. Although Roosevelt and Truman administration officials had helped write the UN Charter provision for a standing military force (Article 43), many in Congress saw it as a step too far toward ‘world government’. Congress demonstrated similar reticence with the Genocide Convention and universal Declaration of Human Rights (both 1948). The goals of preventing genocide and promoting human rights were unobjectionable, but the US Senate refused for years to ratify either treaty because they ostensibly risked giving the UN and international courts jurisdiction over American domestic affairs in a manner that threatened American sovereignty.

In the 1970s, the American political message became even more mixed. Whereas in 1960, polls showed 65% of the American public seeing the UN as doing a good job and only 8% as doing a bad job; by 1975, the graphs were marked by steep changes to only 33% good job and 53% bad job. This was, in part, a reaction to such issues as the UN General Assembly’s Zionism = racism resolution and the North-South economic tensions manifested in the 1974 Declaration of a New International Economic Order. But, it wasn’t just about the UN. The 1971 ‘Nixon shock’ unilaterally devaluing the dollar, suspending its convertibility to gold and imposing a special 10% tariff on