

US unilateralism - full steam ahead?

By Paul Rogers,

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Prior to the 11 September attacks last year, there was a widespread perception in Europe that the Republican administration of George W. Bush was demonstrating a pronounced unilateralist stance on a range of international treaties and agreements. This had not been expected – indeed many commentators had taken the view that the narrowness of Bush's victory the previous November would encourage his administration to seek consensus in most areas of policy, including foreign affairs.

After 11 September a similar view was expressed in this new and troubling context. If the Bush administration was to gain widespread international support for its "war on terror", then once again it would have to recognise the need for multilateral considerations.

Once again, expectations were not fulfilled. As an [earlier article](#) [0] in this series discussed, all the indications were that the unilateralist view remained predominant and that the United States would seek co-operation where necessary, but was fully determined to go it alone if necessary. Tensions with some sectors of the European political leadership were palpable, but there were few indications of any moderation of policy.

A consistent unilateralism?

Where are we after another four months? The war in Afghanistan continues, with the guerrilla forces becoming increasingly difficult to target; there have been further attacks including bombs killing diplomats in Islamabad, and German visitors to a synagogue in Tunis. In addition, last week's suicide bombing of the bus in Karachi killed French specialists working for the Pakistani navy on a submarine project. Powell's journeys to Israel and its neighbours failed to have a significant impact on Ariel Sharon and though the violence may have eased, it is likely to prove temporary.

Faced with these continuing foreign and security policy problems, what has been the attitude of the Bush administration? As it happens, three events in the past few days serve to throw light on the mood of the administration, but it is first worth mentioning the range of issues in which an independent or unilateral line has been taken.

Prior to George Bush's election, Republicans in Congress had opposed moves to ratify the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), and voiced opposition to the continued adherence to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and to negotiations on an anti-personnel landmine ban and an international criminal court.

Since its election, the US Government has announced the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, maintained opposition to the CTBT and refused to support the protocol to strengthen the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention. There has been a reluctance to engage in UN negotiations on the control of light arms transfers, or to participate in talks aimed at limiting weapons in space. On climate change, withdrawal from the Kyoto Protocols proposals has been

accompanied by domestic measures which include a fifty per cent cut in funding for research into renewable energy sources, and a five hundred million dollar cut in the budget of the Environmental Protection Agency.

All of these examples have supported the view that the administration sees little purpose in international agreements, but is such an analysis supported by recent events?

The first indication is that last week the United States rescinded its signing of the charter for the International Criminal Court. This had been approved by Bill Clinton as one of his last acts as President, but with the known opposition of Republicans in Congress, and there was little prospect of Congress ratifying it and thereby bringing it into force for the United States. But the Bush administration has gone much further, in that it has actually reversed the decision of the previous administration, even though the establishment of the International Criminal Court has proved successful, with the sixty signatures necessary for its implementation now comfortably passed.

On the other hand, this week has seen the agreement between the United States and Russia to codify the process of cuts in strategic nuclear arsenals. This at least suggests that the US is still interested in treaties, at least those that are bilateral.

One point to make is that there is ample evidence that the current US government is prepared to maintain treaty obligations when there is no evidence that they might limit future freedom of action. This does seem to be the case in this US/Russian agreement. But it is a treaty that is radically different from the SALT, START and INF treaties of the Cold War era, which had considerable detail embodied in them with clearly defined verification provisions.

There might yet be such provisions in the new agreement, but it is clear that it does not place any limits on existing US plans for its nuclear forces. A substantial proportion of the warheads that are withdrawn will simply be put into storage and can be returned to service later. There are no limits on the modernising of existing systems, nor are there limits on developing and building new types of warheads.

In short, the US-Russian agreement does make official some of the cuts that are already taking place, and this is certainly to be welcomed. At the same time, it gives an impression of progress. But put alongside the recent US Nuclear Posture Review, it allows unrestricted development of all the programmes that are now being investigated.

A widening axis

Perhaps the clearest indication of a forceful security policy came from a recent lecture to the Heritage Foundation by John Bolton of the State Department, a notably hardline member of the inner security circle in Washington.

Bolton was absolutely clear in making the connection between terrorism and those unacceptable states believed to be developing weapons of mass destruction. To put it bluntly, they will not be allowed to do so:

“States that sponsor terror and pursue WMD must stop. States that renounce terror and abandon WMD can become part of our effort. But those that do not can expect to become our targets.”

Bolton went on to extend the “axis of evil” to three additional states defined by him to be “sponsors of terrorism that are pursuing or that have the potential to pursue weapons of mass destruction or have the capability to do so in violation of their treaty obligations.”

Bolton cited Syria and Libya in this category, with strong comments on each. But the surprise came in the inclusion of Cuba, partly on the basis that Cuba has an advanced biomedical industry and supplies pharmaceuticals and vaccines to countries throughout the South. It therefore has the capability to spread dual-use technologies that could aid the development of biological weapons, and Bolton cited unnamed analysts and Cuban defectors who are suspicious of the Cuban bio-medical industry.

The speech caused concern in many quarters, and his comments on Cuba were partially eclipsed by Jimmy Carter’s subsequent visit. At the same time, the message was clear – the axis of evil is not restricted to Iraq, Iran and North Korea; it is in the process of being extended and Cuba as now a part of it.

In overall terms, the mood within the Bush administration remains forcefully in the direction of a long-lasting war on terror. Iraq may remain the key state, but others are beginning to come into the picture, the clear surprise being Cuba.

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