

The Role of America: An Analysis of Multilateralism in the 21st Century

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“To expect states of any sort to rest reliably at peace in a condition of anarchy would require the uniform and enduring perfection of all of them.”

- Kenneth Waltz²

While the aspects and variables of a global dimension are not specifically unique to the 21st century, at no other time in history has the interconnectedness of the international community progressed to the level of exponential complexity as the present age. Modern technology has accelerated the rate at which information, trade, funds, and ideas travel; enabling the intricate intersection of social, cultural and economic dynamics across the international community. Global public health, international markets, climate concerns and international terrorist organizations transverse and supersede established state boundaries and force modern states to develop collaborative solutions to international problems. While the concept of a global government to solve these issues is unrealistic, a model of global governance, paired with regional institutions and mutual benefiting alliances, enables countries, like the United States, to establish a form of security and stability, through aligned interests within the international “condition of anarchy.” Geographically, economically and militarily, one could defend a thesis that the United States does not need allies. However, based on the historical concept of American exceptionalism, paired with the demand for international solutions in the age of globalization, America needs allies in order to extend policy influence, increase foreign trade and project military capabilities worldwide.

This article will specifically discuss the variables unique to the 21st century that affect U.S. foreign policy relating to alliances, U.S. historical relationships with major allies and ultimately aim to answer the question, “does the U.S. need allies in the 21st century?” Throughout the analysis, a specific stress will be placed on U.S. national interests and national security. The article will be structured to begin with an overview of globalization focusing on the variables that affect U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century, transition to the concept of American exceptionalism, unilateralism and multilateralism, introduce major intergovernmental organizations (IGO) such as North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations (UN), and conclude with an analysis based on U.S. grand strategy and international relations theory.

Globalization in the 21st Century

“If you want to understand the post-Cold War world you have to start by understanding that a new international system has succeeded it – globalization.”

- Thomas Friedman³

The 21st century is marked by diverse challenges that demand international solutions. The “butterfly-effect” of global reactions, in addition to the “Vegas dilemma,” now internationalize challenges in all sectors of foreign policy. In a world where Islamic extremists can coordinate large-scale attacks on the United States utilizing internet cafés in their home countries, weapons of mass destruction are becoming more available and less traceable, international trade accounts for a large percentage of states’ GDPs and environmental challenges affect entire regions, it is an absolute necessity for states to cooperate to maintain security.

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2. Kenneth Waltz. *Man, the State, and War: A Theoretical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001. eBook), 9.

3. Jentleson, Bruce W. *American Foreign Policy: The Dynamics of Choice in the 21st Century* (5th Ed.) (New York: Norton, 2014), 332.

In this environment, when U.S. national security is at stake, the U.S. president has a responsibility to act, with or without the support of other governments. However, in an increasingly interconnected and dangerous world, where the power gap between the U.S. and emerging powers is narrowing, Washington needs friends and partners.⁴

The intended end-state of this cooperative foreign policy is stable security, further enabling the state's society to progress. Similar to Maslow's hierarchy at the individual level, states feel as though they cannot focus on developing their ideal society until security is assured. Once security has been established, a civil society can begin, develop and flourish.⁵The principal difference in the 21st century is that a state, even the U.S., cannot fully assure security without establishing alliances and adopting a multilateral approach to foreign policy. Cooperation through alliances and partnerships can take many forms, but always intend to achieve mutually benefitting policies and agreements. Regions throughout the world are not merely strengthening their alliances, but deepening them, not only as a matter of economic relations but also through regional security institutions.⁶The most common forms of this cooperation are bilateral agreements, regional institutions (such as NATO and the EU), and international institutions (such as the UN). While bilateral partnerships (such as United States and Israel) attempt to satisfy mutual state interests, regional and international institutions strive to combat the inherent concept of anarchy that promotes conflict in the global community, while balancing power as a whole to provide collective security and deterrence for regional aggression.

The United Nations Development Program - Human Development Report, published in 1999, specifically called for the commitment of the international community to cooperate in the form of global governance in order to augment policies that are applicable in a world of international globalization. The report stated that "governance signifies a diverse range of cooperative problem-solving arrangements, state and non-state, to manage collective affairs...not alone, but in association with one another."⁷ International problems require international solutions, demanding cooperation and communication. Additionally, whoever takes the lead in these cooperative institutions can often influence the environment to shape and align with their national interests through the concept of "soft" power.

American Exceptionalism in Foreign Policy

"We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest to our hearts – for democracy, for the right of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own government, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right..."

- Woodrow Wilson⁸

The concepts of American exceptionalism and democratic idealism have been rooted in U.S. foreign policy since the colonial period. American exceptionalism is the idea that, as stated in a poem by David Humphreys, a protégé of George Washington, that America would serve "humanity's extended cause."⁹ Loren Baritz, in the book *City on a Hill*, stated that American exceptionalism was simply the idea that "not only celebrates the uniqueness and special virtues of the U.S., but also elevates America to a higher moral plane than other countries."¹⁰The city on a hill concept became the foundation for colonial American values, which were underpinned on the basis of biblical scripture that encouraged a positive example, domestically and abroad. While many of these concepts seem outdated, they are very much alive and integrated into historical and current U.S. foreign policy. The foundation of this exceptionalism is the idea that America pursues peace and principles *in addition* to power, separating itself from previous imperialistic powers and global empires.¹¹

4. Ian Bremmer, *Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World* (New York: N.Y., Penguin, 2015), 46.

5. John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens. *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*. 7th Ed. ed. (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2017), 108.

6. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 298.

7. United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report 1999* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 276.

8. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 16.

9. *Ibid.*, 109.

10. *Ibid.*, 109.

11. *Ibid.*, 288.

The concepts of exceptionalism translate directly into democratic idealism at home, supported by a constitutional republic, stipulated by liberties and a separation of power. Internationally these ideals translate to the U.S. grand strategy of interventionism, multilateral leadership and democratic promotion strategies. The U.S. has always expected itself to lead within the international community, and has adopted domestic and international policies that support multilateral leadership through individual international and regional alliances.

While the U.S. could be classified as strategically neutral during periods of domestic emphasis, such as pre-WWI, strict isolationist sentiments have never prevailed in the U.S. Although unilateral and multilateral policies have shifted by administration, the U.S. has always sought to maximize trade deals through global partnerships, with roughly 30% of the current U.S. GDP consisting of global trade.¹² While the currency of security is power, a component of state power is derived directly from economic strength, a dimension of historical emphasis throughout U.S. foreign policy application. U.S. alliances often favor influence, security and strategic access to geographically advantageous locations in exchange for favorable trade terms. The fundamental effort being mutually benefitting relationships. Many states value the United States' framework of state power, alliances and managed consortiums of international states which enable the U.S. to project strategic power worldwide. Whether it is trade access into exclusive geographical locations, as demonstrated by the U.S. securing trade lanes to utilize the Panama Canal, intelligence sharing with European allies, or the launching of drones from United Arab Emirates territory, deliberate alliances and strategic foreign policy weave a complex web of interconnectedness that enhances the United States' global leadership position and reinforces the ideology of American exceptionalism.

Multilateralism and the Application of Soft Power

“Peace has been most durable when the victors in war and the most powerful states have used their position and power to foster international order based on shared interest.”

- John Ikenberry, *After Victory*¹³

Recognizing the unique role that the U.S. pursues within the international community, it is not surprising that the U.S. has increased diplomatic activity as global activities have accelerated. Globalization cannot be stopped or reversed, but the U.S. has demonstrated that it can be shaped, and influenced. Recognizing that the rules of the game have changed, and that security and economy can quickly be affected by infinitesimal events continents away, the U.S. has had to shift from unilateral policies of the past and adopt a primarily multilateral approach to foreign policy. Whatever freedom of action is given up through multilateralism, it is outweighed by the capacity gained to achieve shared objectives and serve national interests in ways that are less-possible unilaterally.¹⁴

The key concept to this application is that U.S. leadership must maintain the discipline to restrict policy to only what aligns with U.S. national interest, while also holding allies responsible for their commitments. In line with this idea, Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice states, “There is nothing wrong with doing something that benefits all humanity, but that is, in a sense, a second-order effect of pursuing the national interest.”¹⁵ The U.S. is consistently able to leverage military strength, foreign aid and deterrence in exchange for free trade agreements that further enhance the U.S. economy. The White House adequately summarizes this concept in Pillar IV of the 2017 National Security Strategy: “Some of the greatest triumphs of America statecraft resulted from helping fragile and developing countries become successful societies.

These successes, in turn, created profitable markets for American businesses, allies to help achieve favorable regional balances of power, and coalition partners to share burdens and address a variety of problems around the world. Over time, the United States has helped create a network of states that advance our common interests and values.”¹⁶ It is absolutely imperative that leaders conduct calculated analysis of the second and third order effects before designing, implementing, and committing to foreign policy with allies and partners. It can often have a very positive effect, such as international aid gaining the U.S. access to a strategic geographic location or favorable trade agreements, as noted by Condoleezza Rice.

12. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 336.

13. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

14. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 296.

15. *Ibid.*, 288.

16. The White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, December, 2017), 48.

One key case study of the negative effects is the international response to Libya in 2011, when NATO effectively destabilized the country and created a safe haven for terrorism after facilitating a regime change. The Libya crisis, while it was a problem, "was not a threat to the US anywhere. He (Qaddafi) was a threat to his own people, and that was about it" as stated by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.¹⁷

The most important concept to analyze in the U.S.'s' global role in international institutions and foreign policy of reinforcing alliances and partnerships, is the concept of soft power. Harvard University professor Joseph Nye coined the term "soft power" and in its simplest terms is the description of an unquantifiable amount of influence. Professor Nye was noted for saying that soft power promotes the idea that "if I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want to do."¹⁸The U.S. is part of many prominent, but not all, international institutions. These alliances are commonly accepted and promoted as an opportunity to "provide information, reduce transaction costs, make commitments more credible, establish focal points for coordination and, in general, facilitate the operation of reciprocity," as described by Robert Keohane and Lisa Martin.¹⁹

The two most noteworthy institutions are NATO and the UN, and while both have their challenges, they do serve a predominately positive role in the international community. The U.S. is the chief financier of both NATO and the UN, a point that has been criticized heavily during the past several U.S. elections. What this funding, and willingness to lead, does provide the U.S. is massive amounts of soft power influence worldwide. Within NATO, the U.S. permanently serves the role of senior military leadership, leading Allied Command Operations and filling the seat of the Supreme Headquarters – Allied Powers Europe commander, while also leading many of the subordinate commands. The simple fact that the U.S. backs Europe's security offers an insurmountable amount of leverage for the U.S. when working with European allies.

The U.S. hosts the UN headquarters in Manhattan N.Y. and has a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. While the UN presents many challenges for the U.S., it provides another venue for state leadership and prosperity to translate to power and influence. Additionally, the reinforcement of international institutions enables a power balance that contributes to global stability. However, the U.S. recognizes that the international community, within these two organizations, plays a disproportionately lower supporting role, as most recently condemned by Donald Trump and previously criticized by Barack Obama. During a speech to the UN assembly in 2009, President Obama stated: "Those who used to chastise America for acting alone in the world cannot now stand by and wait for America to solve the world's problems alone. We have sought – in word and deed – a new era of engagement with the world. Now is the time for all of us to take our share of responsibility for a global response to global challenges"²⁰

Conclusion

"International cooperation will be vital for building security in the next century because many of the challenges America faces cannot be addressed by a single nation. Many U.S. security objectives are best achieved – or can only be achieved – by leveraging our influence and capabilities through international organizations, our alliances, or as a leader of an ad hoc coalition formed around a specific objective. Leadership in the UN and other international organizations, are durable relationships with allies and friendly nations, are critical to our security."

- Bill Clinton²¹

While these alliances enable the U.S. to maintain and project influence worldwide, it is imperative for executive and legislative leadership to constantly realign U.S. foreign policy to coincide with national interests. While our allies often benefit from our partnership more than we benefit from theirs, the U.S. gains more in the 21st century through multilateralism (than through unilateralism and isolationist tendencies) as long as the U.S. prioritizes national interests throughout the application of foreign policy. In 2017, when the UN disregarded the United States' recommendation and formally acknowledged Israeli holy sites as Palestinian, the U.S. pulled all funding for UNESCO.

17. Jo Becker and Scott Shane, "Libya Today: From Arab Spring to Failed State" (*Al Jazeera*, May 2017).

18. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 288.

19. *Ibid.*, 295.

20. Josh Rogin. "Full Text of Obama's Speech at the United Nations," *Foreign Policy*, 2009.

21. Bruce W. Jentleson, *American Foreign Policy*, 292.

In late 2017, when the U.S. formally recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the UN condemned and voted against the U.S., again resulting in a reduction of funds by the U.S. Similarly, shortly after Donald Trump was elected president of the U.S., NATO allies were placed in the cross-hairs of U.S. foreign policy for repeatedly failing to meet their commitment of 2% gross domestic product (GDP) contributions to NATO. This demand for accountability resulted in many NATO countries immediately increasing their contributions to levels that satisfied the commitment they made to be part of the collective security agreement.

This point is introduced to reinforce the concept of hard-lined accountability. Alliances and partnerships are simply liabilities if we do not hold our allies accountable to our agreements. Additionally, it is the United States' responsibility to ensure the agreements are truly in line with national interests, relative to the international strategic landscape. When foreign policy is made that does not align with national interest, and our leadership does not attempt to hold other countries accountable to our agreements, the U.S. demonstrates to its allies that it can be taken advantage of and manipulated. America needs to constantly and consistently conduct deliberate analysis to understand the cost of these alliances. As stated by Ian Bremmer in his book *Superpower*, "beware of those who talk of responsibilities but never price tags. Measure the costs of their foreign policy promises in American schools, homes, and hospitals – and in money that might have stayed in the taxpayer's pocket. Reject those who claim that America can afford to police the world."²²

The U.S. could survive without its allies, but through alliances and partnerships, both individual and regional, the U.S. is better positioned to thrive. The U.S. capability to oppose regional aggression through collective security has successfully demonstrated a more stable international community in the 21st century. U.S. leadership in prominent international organization continues to facilitate the practice of funding leveraged for regional influence. The U.S. support for democratic values and free trade ideologies continues to demonstrate fruitful economic arrangements that further U.S. peace and prosperity.

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22. Ian Bremmer, *Superpower: Three Choices for America's Role in the World*, 55.