AMERICA IN AN UNCERTAIN AGE: IN A POST-BUSH ERA, HOW SHOULD THE U.S. GO ABOUT BUILDING ALLIANCES TO SOLVE PROBLEMS?

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America in an Uncertain Age: In a post-Bush Era, How Should the U.S. Go About Building Alliances to Solve Problems?

By John C. Hulsman

Most foreign policy analysts are presently trying to chase the intellectual equivalent of the Holy Grail; they are trying to be the next George Kennan, to both make sense of the post-9/11 world and devise a workable formula for living in it. A recent article by Robert Kagan and Ivo Daalder is the latest to join the crusade; sadly it falls far short of Kennan. Kagan and Daalder call for an 'Alliance of Democracies' as the new central *modus operandi* for forming alliances to settle problems in the post-Bush era. Daalder, a foreign policy adviser to Barack Obama, is the Wilsonian portion of this interestingly-paired double act. From a Wilsonian perspective, a case is made that international intervention, particularly over humanitarian crises, can not be wholly determined by the United Nations, given its doleful record over Rwanda, Kosovo, Darfur, North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. To break the gordion knot of global impotence, while still conferring international legitimacy upon humanitarian interventions, a grouping of the world's democracies is viewed as the next-best solution.

For some Wilsonians, a grouping of states all founded on the principle of the censent of the governed would intrinsically possess legitimacy with the rest of the world. Second, in policy terms, Wilsonians believe that democratic states' assessment of human rights flows from a common democratic philosophical position. As such, Kagan and Daalder stress that democracies are likely to take a common view of when humanitarian interventions would be justified. While an alliance of the world's democracies must not preclude either going to the UN or the ability for states to act on their own, these choices no longer suffice. A league of democracies would signal a new international grouping able to act more often than the UN, while retaining something of its moral authority.

However, the Wilsonians, as well as the neoconservatives they loath, are both living in the past, not the future. For America, the era of easy dominance is over. Power

has already begun to shift into the hands of today's "BRICs" (Brazil, Russia, India and China). In the current international system, the situation that confronts the US is one of increasing multipolarity – a reality that is lost on most Neocons, who think of the US as the dominant superpower (a delusion that many Democrats apparently share).

This is the basic problem with the Daalder position on a new alliance of democracies; it is the misgauging of power realities that are never directly referred to, but underlie the whole effort. For Wilsonians want an American-led alliance of democracies, as if the last eight years of the Bush administration never happened, as if the sub-prime mortgage crisis and American economic decline (certainly relative to the rising BRIC countries) were not now part of the narrative, and as if the clearly emerging multipolarity of the world were not discernible. America will remain first among equals, and chairman of the global board, but there are other and disparate board members, whatever the issue. The last decade cannot be simply wished away, tempting though such a prospect is. That world is gone; merely reforming the structures that represented it, will not work.

Second, the overly-sanguine view that democracies are likely to commonly agree when to militarily intervene in another country flies in the face of all empirical evidence of the past few years. Germany, France, and Turkey are all recognizable democracies; all opposed American action in Iraq. Contrary to President Bush's dreamy view, democratic outcomes are not always necessarily pro-American outcomes. The historical record simply does not back the authors' grandiose claims that common democratic ties lead to common policy outputs. Differing national interests cannot be wished away, either; recent history illustrates that they trump a supposedly common democratic philosophy.

Third, there has been less traction for the league of democracies idea on the left than on the right; Kagan's neoconservative supporters and Republican presidential nomineee John McCain have rushed to embrace the proposal while Wilsonians have remained uneasy. The Democratic rank-and-file is right to be worried. Most of the neoconserative right sees the league of democracies as a way to finally unshackle the U.S. from the ineffectual (and increasingly anti-American) UN, support of which is a

cornerstone of Wilsonian thinking. Rather than a league of democracies augmenting the international order as Wilsonians hope, for neoconservatives the idea is a way to radically reshape the institutional landscape, by rendering the UN unimportant. This fundamental difference in political aim is what scuttles the chances that this idea will ever become the locus of some sort of grand bipartisan initiative.

Shoot First and Ask Questions Later

Neoconservatism's simplistic response to the crisis following 9/11 was to advocate 'toughness' through military action, a one-note policy prescription for waging righteous war against the rest of the ungrateful world.

The neoconservative approach is built around the strategically-reckless notion that risk can be eliminated from life altogether through the relentless – and if necessary, preemptive – use of violence.

America's Iraq debacle is one of choice rather than strategic necessity. As has been true with empires since the beginning of time, the rash instinct to use military power to solve structural problems merely hastens a great power's decline.

After Iraq, even the most ardent neoconservatives realize another form of alliance management is necessary. Clustered around John McCain, they have been the strongest supporters of the alliance of democracies notion, precisely as a way to make American action easier. While stressing that the U.S. must listen and respect the views of its democratic allies, Senator McCain makes it clear he still favors an activist American foreign policy; a league of democracies would 'act when the UN fails to, bypassing gridlock there' (read undemocratic Russia and China). For the Senator this would amount to an international institution that works, based on common values. Envisoning the organization as akin to the G-8, with a small secretariat hosting regular meetings but with no standing military forces, McCain stresses the league is there for mostly non-military solutions to strategic problems, involving sanctions, trade, and public diplomacy. But, critically, he does not rule out common military action. Given the historical pedigree of

many of his supporters, such as Bill Kristol, Robert Kagan, and those clustered around the American Enterprise Institute (remember these are the people who brought us Iraq), this is an important omission.

McCain proclaims that he will call for a summit of democracies during his first year in office to 'act when the UN fails to act,' as though action of some sort were the only choice. McCain and the neoconservatives have yet to learn the key strategic lesson for America of the past decade—even superpowers have limits. To fail to recognize this seminal historical truth can only hasten imperial overstretch and decline.

Second, neconservatives have yet to grasp how power really works. To simply ignore Russia and China follows in the footsteps of the Bush administration's moronic determination not to engage non-democratic countries who disagree with America, as though diplomacy with Canada were all that matters. Power is and will remain a central fact of the international system; a large portion of it will continue to be wielded by non-democratic states. To get things done they should be worked with, when our common interests allow, as was the case with China over North Korea.

The present Iranian crisis is also instructive. Here a coalition of democracies-principally the U.S., Germany, France, and Britain—is trying to coordinate diplomacy in such a way as to dissauade Tehran from producing nuclear weapons. Short of bombing, the other major diplomatic stick being discussed is an investment freeze directed against the Islamic Republic, should talks break down. As the demographic bulge in the Iranian population remains, with around half a million new jobs needing to be created every year, such a restriction of further foreign direct investment could quickly bring the Iranian economy to its knees.

It is true that democratic countries such as Germany and Italy, with their tradition of economic involvement in Iran, would be central to such a policy. The first objection raised by every German banker I've met is...'Yes, of course, we would go along with such a policy, but only if others did not swoop in to benefit from the investments our

countries refrained from.' When pressed, 'others' always means the same thing—the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Russia...and especially China. None of these countries is particularly known for its democratic tradition. Yet without their active support, the only tangible alternative to either bombing Iran or allowing the mullahs to acquire nuclear weapons ceases to exist. In terms of real world policy-making, solving problems and maintaining democratic purity swiftly come into conflict. China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia are vital to any medium-term global stability, like it or not. They would surely see a league of democracies as a coalition directed against them, and would accordingly join together as a counterweight. Throwing Russia into China's arms does not make much geopolitical sense.

Third, it is not clear who would choose which countries can actually be termed democratic. Does Iraq get in and Iran remain outside? What are we to do with Russia, which has a number of democratic attributes, yet is trending toward a more authoritarian approach? The fear has to be that the neoconservatives have not worried much about this because for them the answer is self-evident; the U.S. administration will decide. This has public diplomacy disaster written all over it. The last thing a U.S. in need of friends ought to be doing is pontificating as to which states are worthy to be classified 'democratic'; after the Bush years the world has simply had enough of arrogance of this kind, an arrogance increasingly at odds with geopolitical and geoeconomic realities. If America makes itself 'the decider,' in the inelegant words of our current President, it is reaping the whirl-wind, and merely confirming for the rest of the world what they have feared in the past years about the present administration. The last thing America needs is to draw new artifical lines between 'us' and 'them.'

This yearning for the moral clarity that America's past dominance had given it will lead to its downfall. If we cannot begin to comprehend that the era that made our military strategy possible has come to an end and will be blinded by a militant moralism bereft of strategic insight, we will prove an easy target for our foes. In place of understanding the world, the neocons based their strategy on accosting it; the world striking back, as happened in Iraq, is an obvious conclusion.

The Realist

The strategy that can ultimately save the US and equip it for coping with multipolarity comes from realism, out of fashion but never out of date.

Applied to the league of democracies question, realists are aware that on an ad-hoc basis democratic states often work together, as proved true for the U.S., Japan, Australia, and India over the tsunami. Yet there are dangers in formalizing this approach. Instead a real effort should be made to augment these democratic ties by in parallel reaching out to the rising Great Powers of the world, particularly the spectacularly successful BRIC economies. While in many cases there simply would be no common position reached, truthfully is this very different from the Euro-Atlantic relationship of the past twenty years?

Practitioners of such a bold, new approach would have two distinct global interests in common from which to build on, one an opportunity and one a danger. Strikingly, all the major powers in the world today practice capitalism in one form or another. Further economic integration, from slowly pressing the rising powers to live up to the already agreed-to terms of the WTO, to increased foreign direct investment, could, over time, prove far more important for fostering common action than an artificial divide between democracies and non-democracies. Whether the great day ever dawns of a democratic world order is a matter of some dispute; that we are all today already integrated into a capitalist system is not. This is the greatest unused carrot the West possesses to engage the rising powers, the very people who have recently benefited the most from capitalism's success.

Second, the threat of radical Islam, an anarchic worldview that recognizes no authority but its own, unites the rising powers with the United States. Increasing coordination over this virulent problem will make it apparent over time that the present global order has this vital security interest in common. The carrot of capitalism and the

stick of al-Qaeda provide an unarguable diplomatic opening to expanding cooperation with the rising Great Powers of today.

Third, and in tandem with this Great Power approach, realists understand that, no matter how strong its military or how savvy its diplomats, the US will not succeed in the multipolar environment ahead unless it learns to take better care of its allies.

The realist intuitively grasps the value of friends and the role that reciprocity plays in retaining their support for future crises. In this view, alliances are a foundation of American power and there is constant need to tend this "base" of support, not only with big players like Britain and France but with small players like Bulgaria and Romania. Even small allies could potentially prove crucial in "tipping the scales" to America's advantage, once multipolarity is in full swing. Relearning the lost art of alliance management will be necessary if Washington is to regain the confidence of its older friends.

Conclusion: Creating a New Order

The US should also take steps to adjust the institutional playing field to its advantage on a more fundamental, long-term basis. Where liberals see institutions as essentially static edifices that act as a source of power in their own right and neoconservatives see them as needless hindrances to be bypassed, realists see institutions for what they truly are: conduits of influence that "reflect and ratify" but do not supplant deeper power realities.

In anticipating and preparing the way for the emergence of the BRICs in the years ahead, Washington should pursue, as a matter of overriding strategic priority, the rethinking and expansion of the Bretton Woods system as a first step towards incorporating the BRICs into a rules-based American world. Such an effort at preemptive institutional regrouping, with decision-making predicated on new global power realities, is vital if America's new peer competitors are to eschew the temptation to position

themselves as revolutionary powers in the new system. Doing so now, while the transition from the old system to multipolarity is still underway and before the wet cement of the new order has hardened, could help to ensure that, while it no longer enjoys the privileged status of hegemon, America is able to position itself as the next best thing: primus inter pares – "first among equals." Daalder and Kagan certainly fail in the quest to emulate George Kennan with their league of democracies notion; but their very mistakes inspire a truly innovative realist foreign policy approach for explaining and thriving in the confusing world we now find ourselves in.