CONCEPT PAPER

ASP American Security Project

Toward a Policy of Modular Multilateralism

The Future Of Alliances And Multilateralism In A Fragmenting Global System

Dr. Seyom Brown

September 2012

Since World War II, and especially during the Cold War, the United States has pursued its international interests as much as possible through alliances and multilateral organizations and arrangements -- many of them owing their existence to U.S. imagination and leadership. But the resulting system of alliances and multilateral institutions is in trouble.

It is not adapting well to the tension between the world's deepening material interdependence and its cultural and political fragmentation. The underlying cause is a volatile pattern of shifting and cross-cutting alignments and antagonisms that are incongruent with some of the inherited alliance and multilateral structures and their decision-making processes.

The result has been a serious inhibition of important collective security operations and cooperative initiatives that are in the U.S. interest and are also international public goods, including arms control, a well-functioning world economy, a moderate global climate, and protections against gross violations of human rights.

How, then, should the United States adjust its foreign policy to bring its alliances and multilateral commitments into better match with U.S. interests and the emergent geopolitical realities?

Dr Seyom Brown is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the American Security Porject

First are three temptations to be avoided: a return to the kind of go-it-alone unilateralism that was exhibited at the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom; or a pass-the-buck type of deference to international organizations with cumbersome decision-making rules that discourage timely action, as was needed to stanch the Rwanda genocide; or a reversion to outdated efforts to mobilize global or regional balances of power against great-power rivals, such as Russia in Central Asia or China in the Asia-Pacific.

Next the United States needs to develop a flexible and modular approach to the utilization of multilateral institutions and processes that will be congruent with the contemporary world's complex and fluctuating relationships.

The basic challenge is to build mutual accountability processes and institutions into the emergent system.

The effort should be to maximize the principal benefits of multilateralism – legitimation of global norms and rules, and sanctions for their violation; and international burden sharing –while minimizing the tendency of multilateral institutions to slow down or inhibit timely and decisive action.

Beyond the Polarity Paradigm

To assure that the alliance and multilateral arrangements to which the United States commits itself do indeed serve the country's interests, U.S. foreign policy will need to be freed from conceiving of the world in terms of the paradigm and jargon of *polarity*—whether "uni", "bi", or even "multi."

Although the United States and China each have unmatched economic and military power relative to others in the system, there is no global pattern of alignment with one or the other which approaches the bipolar configuration of the Cold War. Thus while the Philippines and Vietnam, contesting China's aggressive claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea, welcome the U.S. Navy's increased military deployments in the region under America's "pivot" or "rebalancing" toward the Asia-Pacific region, they have no intention of becoming part of a full-blown anti-Beijing and pro-U.S. alliance.

The term most used to characterize this post-bipolar (or post-unipolar) world is *multipolarity*—connoting a number of spheres of influence each under the sway of a polar power, or hegemon. But this too is an inappropriate conceptualization, which can distort analysis and policymaking.

In South and East Asia, for example, neither India, Japan, or China will be granted that role by the other two, nor are their immediate neighbors (except perhaps North Korea vis-à-vis China) willing to be consigned to the role of client states.

Certainly in the Middle East no country is regarded by most of the others as the region's leader, although Iran might try to be regarded as such by its neighbors, Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria. Saudi Arabia, determined to counterbalance any Iranian bid for regional hegemony, has allies for that purpose in the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council; but even though the Saudis can make deals around the world on the basis of the kingdom's great oil-based financial wealth, Riyadh does not command any definable international coalition to speak of.

Turkey, increasingly active in international diplomacy, particularly as an interlocutor between the Islamic world and the West, is influential primarily as an "honest broker" rather than a leader of the region.

In Africa, Nigeria and South Africa might each aspire to be the region's polar power, but are not accorded that status by the rest of continent. The same holds in Latin America for Brazil, whose assertiveness is opposed by Argentina, Chile, and others.

Cognizant of these complexities, some prominent analysts –notably Richard Haass and Niall Ferguson – have begun to characterize the emergent international system, despite the nearly ubiquitous prominence and rivalry of the United States and China, as "apolar," "nonpolar," or "unpolar." These labels are perhaps useful in telling us what the system is *not*; but they fail to convey what it *is*.

A more useful descriptor, which can perhaps serve as the name of the needed post-polarity paradigm of world politics, is *polyarchy.* (Although political scientist Robert Dahl coined the term polyarchy to describe a basically peaceful form of domestic pluralism, I apply it -- consistent with its etymological base: *rule by many* -–– to the evolving world system, without presuming that the so-named system is benign or normatively desirable.)

The Role of Alliances and Multilateralism in the Emergent Global System

While the United States and China, and a few other great powers, can get their way more easily than others, the emergent global polyarchy features a wide field of assertive actors: some 196 nation- states; thousands of subnational and transnational ethnic groups, religious communities, and political movements; possibly more than 150 major terrorist organizations and networks; over 60,000 multinational enterprises and countless non-governmental special-interest organizations that have branches in numerous countries.

The world's bilateral and multilateral alliances and other inter-governmental associations and institutions – including those that have some degree of supranational power -- operate basically at the mercy of the insistently sovereign nation-states, a dozen or so of which remain the most powerful actors in the global system. Even the great powers, however, are increasingly influenced in their policies by the demands of the system's non-governmental actors.

Moreover, the creation, maintenance, and behavior of alliances and other multilateral associations is strongly affected by the fact that in this emergent polyarchy hardly any countries or political movements are unidirectionally aligned in their major international relationships, either with one another or with the United States or China.

In Asia, for example, even with rising tensions, key U.S. treaty partners of long-standing—Japan, South Korea, Australia –are not at all eager to have the region polarize. Like professedly nonaligned India and Indonesia, they too are very much a part of and hope to thrive in the emergent global polyarchy, which includes China.

The cross-pressures to which countries, great and small, are subject in the polyarchy produce complex, often multi-directional, and at times seemingly self-contradictory alignments and antagonisms. Allies on one issue

may be adversaries on another issue; today's close partner may well be tomorrow's determined rival and vice versa, depending on the matter at hand.

In Central Asia the various "Stans", in manipulating the triangular rivalries among Russia, China, and the United States over base rights and petroleum pipelines, are simply employing the polyarchy-induced strategy of diversifying one's international partnerships in order to maximize one's bargaining power.

Given the multiplicity and cross-cutting dimensions of relationships in the emergent polyarchy, the United Nations, NATO, and other broad -membership organizations on the model of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank are finding it increasingly difficult to formulate, let alone provide effective oversight and operationalization of the policies and programs required to rescue failing states, stabilize shaky economies, and generate sustainable growth.

In the peace and security field, strategies that rely on existing collective security institutions (such as the United Nations Security Council or NATO), or loose regional groupings (such as ASEAN) to counter aggression or enforce peace are likely to prove problematic for both U.S. national security and a strengthened global order.

So too is the tendency of the United States, working through the UN, to outsource counter-terrorism and "Responsibility to Protect" tasks to regional proxies (such as the African Union or the Organization of American States) who are ill-structured for countering levels of anarchic chaos and violence –as in the Sudan and Haiti-- that can paralyze markets and produce humanitarian disasters.

Occasionally, as with NATO's role in Kosovo, the ISAF operation in Afghanistan, or the intervention against Gaddafi in Libya, a regional or continent-wide organization may turn out to be an appropriate aegis, even though operational effectiveness may be hampered by difficulties in forging a consensus, national caveats, and the lack of strict unity of command. Often, as was the case in Afghanistan, even in limited-membership multilateral operations, the critical actions will have to be restricted to a still-smaller subgroup of participants who regard the stakes as worth the risks, while other actors opt out of such actions.

The experience of these collective security operations and various peacekeeping missions around the world need to be analytically revisited so as to distill from them guidance on the kind of multilateralism that -- in the context of a polyarchic world -- will best serve U.S. geopolitical and economic interests and humanitarian values.

That guidance should spell out the practical implications for the development, enhancement, organization, and provisioning of multilateral operations the United States will want to commit to in the future.

The Concept of Modular Multilateralism

It can be expected that such fresh analysis will find that to deal effectively with the range of contingencies affecting U.S. interests, and also to provide leadership in developing a more peaceful and just world order, the United States does need to re-commit itself, despite the frustrations, to the enhancement of multilateral processes and institutions. But this re-commitment will prove hollow and embarrassingly difficult to implement unless its central feature is creative flexibility.

While renewed and increased mutual accountability is imperative, a pitfall to be avoided in its pursuit is excessive and cumbersome institutionalization incongruent with the world's complex and volatile pattern of alignments and antagonisms.

Accordingly, the new multilateralism will have to be *modular*—based on the realization that sometimes U.S. interests will be better served through functionally-specific arrangements, sometimes through multi-purpose organizations, sometimes only bilaterally or trilaterally, sometimes through universal-membership organizations, and sometimes through ad hoc and informal gatherings. From among these, particular modes of multilateral action should be cultivated with appropriate partners to facilitate the cooperation most desirable in any particular international domain.

If the thicker and more universal modes of mutual accountability are not working out, because of the conflicting national stakes in an operation, it should be made relatively easy to switch to less sovereignty-constraining and more ad hoc arrangements with selected partners.

Under such a modular approach the United States would still strive to gain the broadest endorsement possible for its major international actions –especially if they involve the use of force—but not at the cost of having to substantially dilute, constrict, or forego strategies that are in its national interest. Thus when either the requisite U.N. Security Council resolutions or NATO authorizations cannot be obtained, the United States should not shy away from assembling the appropriate specialized and limited-member coalitions.

Even with U.N. and/or NATO support, however, commanders of multilateral military operations need to be free to flexibly implement mandates received from the parent organization without having to continually return for guidance. Lessons can be drawn from Desert Storm, the Kosovo campaign, Afghanistan, and Libya, for procedures that need to be institutionalized.

The NATO operations in Afghanistan and Libya also should be reviewed for guidance on how to institute the modularity required to maintain unity-of-command imperatives in multilateral military campaigns when various of the participating countries are issuing their own caveats delineating under what circumstances and

how they will use force.

A modular multilateralism approach, outside of ASEAN, would appear to be particularly appropriate for developing both political and military responses to China's power-plays in the South China Sea. ASEAN in the summer of 2012 showed itself to be an inappropriate political forum even for developing and issuing a code of conduct for the nations involved in the disputes over the islands and the minerals surrounding them.

China, having already rejected dealing with the issues multilaterally instead of through bilateral negotiations, is not a member of ASEAN, but its ally, Cambodia, is, and because ASEAN decides by consensus procedures, was able to veto the initiative. Other, more robust, multilateral challenges to China could be issued by a subset of ASEAN's members (plus Vietnam and Australia), focused specifically on need to resolve the competing claims peacefully, perhaps backed up by symbolic deployments of naval force (possibly including U.S. vessels) to deter any Chinese military moves.

This is not to recommend the contemplated scenario, but only to indicate that any such robust moves or threats are beyond ASEAN's capacity. If they are to be part of the countries' and U.S. contingency planning, the deliberations and preparations would have to be undertaken in a modular, in this case, largely ad hoc mode.

In short, what is called for at this stage of the evolution of world society is not a fully-worked-out system of global governance, or a system of regional economic and security communities based on the anachronistic and unworkable concept of multipolarity. Nor, given the sluggishness of the largest collective security institutions, must U.S. foreign policy and the international community be resigned to the return of traditional alliances and balance of power diplomacy.

None of these strategies are congruent with the complex geopolitics of polyarchy. Rather, an effective response to the polyarchic world (dis)order can be built on a reassertion of U.S. commitments to multilateral processes and institutions, but in a flexible mode adaptive to the volatility of contemporary international relationships.

This will not happen by default.

It is imperative that detailed analyses be undertaken to provide the needed conceptual and practical guidance for integrating such modular multilateralism into U.S. grand strategy and foreign policy.

Dr. Seyom Brown has taught at numerous universities, including: Harvard, Brandeis, SAIS, Columbia, Chicago, UCLA, and SMU, and has been a senior policy analyst at RAND, Brookings, and the Carnegie Endowment. He is an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the American Security Porject.

Building a New American Arsenal

The American Security Project (ASP) is a nonpartisan initiative to educate the American public about the changing nature of national security in the 21st century.

Gone are the days when a nation's strength could be measured by bombers and battleships. Security in this new era requires a New American Arsenal harnessing all of America's strengths: the force of our diplomacy; the might of our military; the vigor of our economy; and the power of our ideals.

We believe that America must lead other nations in the pursuit of our common goals and shared security. We must confront international challenges with all the tools at our disposal. We must address emerging problems before they become security crises. And to do this, we must forge a new bipartisan consensus at home.

ASP brings together prominent American leaders, current and former members of Congress, retired military officers, and former government officials. Staff direct research on a broad range of issues and engages and empowers the American public by taking its findings directly to them.

We live in a time when the threats to our security are as complex and diverse as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, climate change, failed and failing states, disease, and pandemics. The same-old solutions and partisan bickering won't do. America needs an honest dialogue about security that is as robust as it is realistic.

ASP exists to promote that dialogue, to forge consensus, and to spur constructive action so that America meets the challenges to its security while seizing the opportunities the new century offers.

ASP

American Security Project

www.americansecurityproject.org