

North Korea and the Limits of Multilateralism

By George Friedman

One of the main criticisms of the Bush administration's approach to Iraq has been that the United States undertook the war unilaterally, without consulting or working with allies and the international community. The criticism always overstated the United States' isolation among traditional allies: France and Germany opposed the 2003 invasion, but the United States had more support in NATO than did Paris and Berlin. Nevertheless, there was a principle embedded in U.S. policy that was real and could be challenged. George W. Bush took the view that the United States had to craft its own strategy after the 9/11 attacks -- and that, while it welcomed support, its actions would not be constrained by such considerations. The justification for a coalition was that it would enable U.S. policy; U.S. policy did not have to be justified by recourse to a coalition. This was a conceptual shift in U.S. foreign policy.

Alliance as Solution

A generation ago, there was a consensus about why World War II had happened, why the United States and Allied powers had won and how the Cold War should be prosecuted. In this reading, World War II was caused by the unwillingness of the international community to take action against Hitler early enough to prevent a war. The British and French, pursuing their own separate policies -- unwilling to join with the Soviet Union against the greater threat of a Nazi Germany and unable to use the moribund mechanism of the League of Nations -- failed to lead a decisive coalition against Hitler.

With war impossible to prevent, a coalition was created to fight Hitler and the Japanese. The coalition, under the rubric of the United Nations, involved a range of nations that were prepared to subordinate their particular national interests to the broader interest of defeating the Axis powers. Military success in the war rested on the ability of the coalition to hold together. And reading backward, had this coalition existed prior to the rise of Munich, World War II likely never would have happened. Maintaining global stability required a coalition of states that shared a mutual interest in stability and would suppress, as soon as possible, nations that would want to upset that stability.

The Cold War was fought on the same basis. Having accepted that the Soviets were a destabilizing power, the United States focused on creating a system of alliances to contain them. The Americans saw the rapid creation of an alliance against the Soviet Union as the foundation of a successful foreign policy; without it, the Soviets would be victorious.

Rhetoric aside, this made a great deal of sense. The Soviet Union emerged from World War II as the pre-eminent land power in Eurasia. The United States, by size and geography, could not unilaterally contain the Soviets. At best, it could engage in a catastrophic nuclear war with them. In order to have an effective conventional option, the United States had to have allies on the periphery of the Soviet Union. The alliance system made superb geopolitical sense.

Alliance as Stability

But the United States emerged from all of this with an obsession for alliance systems independent of purpose. The World War II coalition had a clear purpose: the defeat of the Axis powers. The Cold War coalition had a clear purpose as well: the defeat of the Soviet Union. However, what emerged in the 1990s was the idea of alliances as ends in themselves. The basic idea was that the system of alliances over which the United States presided during the Cold War would continue to exist -- not with the purpose of opposing the Soviets, but to maintain global stability. The only challenge this system would face, it was presumed, would be rogue powers -- which would be dealt with by an international community (a term extended to include Russia and China) that shared an equal interest in stability. Instead of opposing an enemy, the goal was in the positive: maintaining stability. If the goal was stability, and if everyone shared that goal, then simply having a coalition became the solution rather than the means to a solution.

The central assumption behind this approach was that all significant powers now shared a common interest -- stability -- and that the only destabilizing powers would be rogues, against which the international community would pool its forces. Desert Storm was the model: A broad coalition re-conquered Kuwait, with even nonparticipants in the war giving at least tacit approval. This principle was maintained until Kosovo.

Bush's policy on Iraq, therefore, became a battleground for those who argued that maintaining the alliance system had to take precedence over the unilateral pursuit of national interests. Leaving aside the important question of whether the invasion of Iraq made sense from the American point of view, one argument was that anything that alienates the coalition -- regardless of whether it is a good or bad idea -- is extremely dangerous because this alienation undermines international stability. More to the point, it undermines the foundations of what has been U.S. foreign policy since 1941 -- a foreign policy that was successful.

North Korea and Multilateralism

The counterargument, of course, is provided by history: Successful alliances are built for the purpose of dealing with threats. Alliances built around principles such as stability are doomed to fail, for a number of reasons. First, over time, the status quo appeals to some powers and not to others. Stability is another way of arguing that the international order should be maintained as it is, ignoring the fact that some powers are thereby placed at a great disadvantage. Apart from any moral argument, it follows that, with a universal commitment to stability, subordinate powers will permanently accept their positions, or leading powers will give up their positions quietly, without destabilizing the system. Thus, the idea of maintaining alliances for purposes of stability is built on an unlikely assumption: Stability is in the universal interest of the international community.

Which brings us to North Korea. The U.S. approach to North Korea -- and this includes that of the Bush administration -- consistently has been the polar opposite of its approach to Iraq. North Korea has provided the classic example of multilateralism in pursuit of stability as an end in itself. The United States does not want North Korea to get nuclear weapons because this could destabilize the international system. Whatever its rhetoric, however, Washington has taken no steps to try to destabilize North Korea, focusing instead on changing its behavior through a multilateral approach.

On North Korea, then, the United States has scrupulously followed traditional U.S. foreign policy. First, Washington has consistently accepted the idea that it has a primary responsibility to deal with North Korea, even if there are regional powers that are in a position to do so. The United States has followed the principle that, as the world's leading power, it has unique obligations and rights in dealing with destabilizing powers. Second, the United States has used its position not for unilateral action, but for multilateral action. Washington has been pressured by North Korea for talks, and criticized by others for refusing to engage Pyongyang directly. Rather, the United States has insisted on the principle of shared authority and responsibility, working within the framework of regional powers that have an interest in North Korea: South Korea, China, Russia and Japan. Finally, the United States has made clear that it will not take unilateral military action against North Korea.

However, the multilateral approach pursued under both the Clinton and Bush administrations has failed, if we regard the detonation of a small nuclear device as constituting a failure. This is an important event because it is the complete counterpoint to Iraq, where it has been argued that failure resulted from the Bush administration's unilateral approach. In one case, we wind up with an unmanageable war; in the other, with the potential for a regional nuclear threat.

Shared Responsibility and Inaction

The driving assumption in the case of North Korea was that all of the powers involved were committed to regional stability, understood the risks of inaction and were prepared to take risks to maintain stability and the status quo. But that just wasn't true. There were very different, competing ideas of stability; the idea of inaction seemed attractive and the assumption of risks did not. There was no multilateral action because the coalition was an illusion.

Let's go down the list:

- **South Korea:** Seoul does not want Pyongyang to have a nuclear device, but it also does not want the slightest chance of a war with North Korea -- South Korea's industrial heartland is too close to the border. Nor does Seoul want the regime in Pyongyang to fall; the idea of the South taking responsibility for rebuilding a shattered North Korea is not attractive. The South Koreans didn't want the North to acquire nuclear weapons, but they were not prepared to act to stop Pyongyang, or to destabilize the regime.
- **Japan:** Japan does not want North Korea to have a nuclear device, but it is prepared neither to take military action on its own nor to endorse U.S. military action in this regard. Japan has major domestic issues with waging war that would have to be worked out before it could make a move, and it is no hurry to solve those problems. Moreover, Tokyo has little interest in posing such an overt threat that the Koreans, its traditional enemy, would reunify (as an industrial giant) against Japan. The Japanese don't mind imposing sanctions, but they hope they won't work.
- **Russia:** Russia is about as worried about the prospect of a North Korean nuclear strike on its territory as the United States is about a French strike. The two countries may not like each other, but it isn't going to happen. Russia would smash North Korea and not worry about the fallout. But at the same time, Moscow wants to keep the United States tied up in knots. It has serious issues with the United States encroaching on the Russian sphere of influence in former Soviet territory. Russia is delighted to see the United States tied down in Iraq and struggling with Iran, and it is quite happy to have the Americans appear helpless over North Korea. The Russians will agree to some meaningless sanctions for show, but they are not going to make the United States appear statesmanlike.
- **China:** China has major internal problems, both economic and political. The Chinese do not want to anger the United States, but they do want the Americans to be dependent on them for something. The North Korea test blast gave China an opportunity to appear enormously helpful without actually doing anything meaningful. Put another way, if China actually wanted to stop the detonation, it clearly has no influence on North Korea. And if it does have influence -- which we suspect it does -- it managed to play a complex double game, appearing to oppose the blast while taking advantage of its ability to "help" the United States. China, along with Russia, has no interest in serious sanctions.

The issue here is not the fine points of the foreign policies of these nations, but the fact that none has an overarching interest in "doing something" about North Korea. Each of these states has internal and external problems that take precedence, in their eyes, over a North Korean nuclear capability. None of them is pursuing stability, in the sense of being prepared to subordinate national interests to the stabilization of the region. The result is that the diplomatic process has failed.

Multilateralism: Promise and Limitations

In this case, multilateralism was the problem. By bringing together a coalition of nations with enormously diverse natures and interests, the United States was guaranteed paralysis. There was no commitment to any overarching principle, and the particular national interests precluded decisive action both before and after the nuclear test. Multilateralism provided an illusion of effective action in a situation where inaction -- including inaction by the United States -- was the intent. No one did anything because no one wanted to do anything, and this was covered up with the busywork of multilateral diplomacy.

It is not that multilateral action is useless. To the contrary, it was the foundation of U.S. success in World War II and the Cold War. When a clear and overwhelming interest or fear is present, multilateral action is essential. But invoking multilateralism as a solution in and of itself misses the point that there must be a more pressing issue at stake than the abstract notion of stability.

Neither unilateralism nor multilateralism are moral principles. Each is a means of attaining the national interest. The U.S. disaster in Iraq derived less from pursuing unilateral ends than from catastrophic mismanagement of a war. The emergence of a nuclear North Korea results not from inherent weakness in a multilateral approach, but from using multilateralism as a substitute for a common interest.

If, for some, Iraq made the case against unilateralism, North Korea should raise serious questions about the limits of multilateralism.

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